

## OPINION

### Obsession with car sending us the way of the DODO

*Frank Fisher, The Age, 8 May 2008*

THE many recent environmental supplements in *The Age* and its broad range of articles on the sustainability crisis are heartening. Efficiency and technical change, however, are the "low-hanging fruit" of sustainability. Above looms the tree of social understanding that gives rise to the activities we're trying to make more efficient. Reconstructing it with an eye to sustainability will transform its fruits so that they are no longer unsustainable. This means exposing contradictions and misrepresentations that become apparent once we begin looking at the world through sustainability-sensitive lenses. Once identified, these contradictions can be changed. Here are a few examples from urban life.

Most of us use cars to move around Melbourne. Car engines convert 15% of the energy available in their petrol to motion. The rest is heat, which is part of the reason cities are warmer than the countryside. Few want to ride engines. Engines push cars and together they are some 15 times heavier than drivers; so only one part of that 15% moves the driver; 14 move the car. Beyond that, energy is the energy required to make, maintain and dismantle cars after their dash is done. Still further is the energy to make the infrastructures cars drive in, and to repair the damage they cause us and to the environment. So, for urban commuting, the energetics of the car are very poor. And still we drive.

A similar calculus can be used for the time taken to travel by car. Including the time taken to earn the money to buy, register, insure, maintain, recycle and make good the damage it causes and then dividing this into the number of kilometres actually driven annually, an average speed less than crawling speed is attained. How/why do we overlook these contradictions? And, in the light of other options such as commuting by bicycle and train (bike-rail), which is faster, cheaper, healthier and environmentally sounder, why, still, do we persist?

We persist because the contradictions are invisible. Nothing in our schooling or in our public education (advertising, government publications, media) offers us the intellectual lenses that would enable us to look at what we do in terms of its wider contexts. Disciplines, professions and trades are isolated and general system theory little recognised and even less taught. In the light of sustainability, many conventional policy settings at all levels, from personal to national, constitute nasty sets of contradictions called perverse incentives. Obvious ones are frequent flyer points and fringe benefits tax. Most are more subtle.

Consider the urban commuter car or DODO (Driver Only Driver Owned car). The first DO comes about because we are relatively wealthy and expect that having our car beside us gives us flexibility, security and comfort. All three of these are narrowly determined. There is no recognition of the comfort to be gained from the fitness that walking or cycling delivers. There is no recognition that the armouring provided by a 4WD is part of an "armours-race" ending in the Hummer and prompting small car owners to wonder if the 4WD isn't just a robust vehicle for a fragile ego. As far as flexibility goes, the best means of getting around Melbourne is bike-rail. One

Tuesday evening I left Collingwood Town Hall at 6.15pm, cycled to Richmond station, trained to Box Hill, cycled up Doncaster hill to Manningham Town Hall and was in my meeting there promptly at 7pm.

The second DO refers to the idea that access to a car is best when it is part of us, wholly owned! Once acquired and maintained like that, we would be mad not to use it, fuel being a relatively minor cost. So car ownership militates against using other means of transport.

On the other hand:

■Entry to public transport comes via "validated" tickets. Without one we are excluded from the system by physical and human barriers. The costs of ticketing including repeated new systems, barriers, evasions, concessions and the income forgone in those financial black holes called unstaffed stations surely outweigh the revenue raised. Along with the cost of alienation from the system caused by ticketing and its policing, what might have been done with the billions of dollars spent on ticketing systems had they been used for system improvements is almost too painful to contemplate. A "free" system or one partially paid for by a Medicare-like levy, would transform this dismal equation — as *The Sunday Age* tried to say a couple of years ago.

■Environmental accounting is often absent or misrepresented. Cancer research is funded by car raffles. Meanwhile it was reported in *The Age* motoring section that the Australian Greenhouse Office says cars produce 8% of greenhouse gas emissions but that electricity is the worst offender. This understatement is grossly unfair to the electricity industry. Cars have to be made and maintained, and were these energy uses along with the energy costs of cars' infrastructures attributed to cars instead of power stations, we would have a much more useful tool with which to assess our commuting demands.

Finally, applying this approach to our coffee cup, how do we make our own mug (the most sustainable container in the long run) acceptable to the local coffee bar in the face of possible legal action should you think the bar's brew made you sick? The action involves being clear about what the Food Act (1984) actually requires, and erecting some mutually acceptable mechanism to ensure that clients and providers both understand their responsibilities in this little transaction. The Food Act, incidentally, is up for review and environmental considerations can now be brought to bear on it — a challenging opportunity for us all and part of the bigger game of investigating and reversing perverse incentives to sustainability.

Perverse incentives create confusion, and confusion results in persistence with old ways. We can do better than that.

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