

# Public transport just the ticket

Australia should not miss the bus (or the train) on overcoming the fuel crisis, writes **Chris Hale**

**I**T TOOK four weeks of discussion about petrol prices for a politician to identify the obvious. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has led the pack by nominating public transport as the most viable option moving forward. It's not clear why no one else at state or federal level recognised this reality earlier.

It may just be that public transport has a bad name. While many cities around the world enjoy the daily delights of an efficient rail network, residents of Australian capitals are left, all too often, waiting for the bus. We should learn from other major cities. Fuel price rises are not as significant an issue in locations with attractive public transport.

Recent fumbles with the implementation of smartcard ticketing are symptoms of our inability to make public transport work. The smartcard is a smart idea — in places like Singapore and London it works effectively in moving people around the city without the need to understand the fare system in great detail.

The better smartcard systems automatically calculate the best deal for passengers, based on their transport choices during the previous day or week. There is no "penalty" for taking the wrong option, and the customer always wins by using the smartcard instead of paper tickets.

It's not clear why this aspect of service has not been included in Queensland's smartcard system — we are the Smart State after all. It seems odd that the transport officers studying the way they work overseas could have come up with a system that seems to be failing the initial public reaction test. It's too late now, though — we have to make Go Card work, because effective ticketing systems are required for 21st-century transit networks.

Convenience, ease-of-use, legibility and orientation are all important concepts in good public transport systems. We can't assume that every public transport rider is familiar with



the network and the ticketing system. In coming years, large numbers of people will begin riding transit to work on a daily basis for the first time. These people need to be welcomed and encouraged with customer-friendly approaches. They'll also need network maps that encourage transfers from bus-to-bus, from bus-to-rail and from rail-to-rail.

This important "networking" aspect is absent in southeast Queensland, and few transit journeys involve transfers — because doing so is inconvenient, time-wasting and confusing.

It is opportune that Rudd is visiting Japan at the very moment he has placed urban public transport on the national political agenda. Japanese cities are recognised for their excellent rail-based public transport systems. A city like Tokyo could never function as an economic colossus without the quality subway system it enjoys.

Their systems are not perfect either — and an old-fashioned ticketing system lets Tokyo down. Its massive and complicated network is difficult for first-timers to negotiate without at least some basic Japanese language skills. In this sense, the orientation and ticketing aspects of Japanese systems also could be improved.

Further afield, we find Japanese cities which could serve as potential models for future transport planning, as we look for new infrastructure ideas to implement in Australia. Cities like Kyoto and Nagoya represent small-to-medium-sized cities in which quality subway systems play an important role. Kyoto offers a mix of bus services, regional rail and a cruciform subway system — all in a city of under two million. One of the world's great cycling cities, it is noted as an outstanding example of durable city planning — having functioned on the same grid pattern for some 1200 years.

While Nagoya is slightly bigger, its

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comprehensive and efficient subway network is possibly the best in the world for a mid-sized city — demonstrating that places like Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane are candidates for growth in underground rail.

While Japan is noted in the Australian consciousness for its automobile

manufacturing, its rail industry is the other shining transport light that's laid the foundations for the country's "economic miracle" period and beyond. Its private rail operators have proven that rail can be operated profitably, especially where retail, residential and office development is co-ordinated with the construction of new lines.

High-performance Shinkansen services set the standard for inter-city travel. In the inner-urban areas, transport systems function with clockwork precision using a mix of bus and metro rail configurations.

Cities with easy-to-use, customer-friendly public transport systems seem to require less subsidy to operate their networks. It's clear that Australian cities need to look hard at infrastructure and customer service as we face a world without cheap motoring.

Rudd should talk to Japan's successful rail chiefs as well as their car bosses. Australia should be seen as a growth market for high-quality rail systems, and Japan could be an investor-of-choice for Australian cities hoping to make a generational leap into a better transport future.

**Chris Hale is an urban economist with UQ's Centre for Transport Strategy. He is in Japan.**