

UNPLANNING AUCKLAND: FROM VOGELISM TO THE AUTOMOBILE CITY

Chris Harris argues the case that the differences between Wellington and Auckland's transport infrastructures are linked to wider changes in state land-use planning, post-World War II.

It is surely a paradox of New Zealand's urban history that Wellington, a much smaller city, should have better transport infrastructure than Auckland. Greater Auckland's population has exploded from 330,000 to 1.2 million in the last 50 years. Yet, at the turn of the millennium, there had been no net investment in Auckland public transport since the 1930s.

Since then, there has been a considerable transport investment to cater for an Auckland's expansion, but much of this has been directed since that date into roads in ways that, arguably, have largely ruined the human environment without solving the problem of congestion during the morning and afternoon commuter peaks (Figure 1, right).

Both the appearance and reality of Auckland contrast starkly with Wellington, in part because in Wellington's electrified suburban railway system and electric trolley buses deliver much higher levels of transit service. It is as hard to imagine Wellington without its trains, trolley buses and car-free downtown environs as it would be to imagine Auckland without its motorway flyovers, inhuman streetscapes and rain-induced gridlock¹.

It has often been claimed that greater reliance on motorways in Auckland is a rational response to a low density of population in post-war suburbia². There is some truth to this,

yet the density of Wellington's railway suburbs is not greatly different from that of Auckland's motorway suburbs. And, even if there were real differences, the contention would be vulnerable to the chicken and egg argument: do Aucklanders drive more because they are more keen to experience congestion? Or because there are fewer alternatives? The two

cities are after all in the same country, with the same sorts of people and even with a similar, maritime geography.

Sensing this, some historians have argued, more plausibly, that the result is an historical accident. Auckland local body politicians (so it is argued) should have been a bit smarter in the 1950s, when Wellington's railways were nearing



Figure 1: Auckland Street Scenes, early 2000s (author's photographs).

Figure 2: Corridor Plan for Auckland, from Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives (1946), section D-3, report of the Ministry of Works.

completion and the Government of the day forced them to choose between a similar railway upgrade and motorways. Some 35 years ago Professor Graham Bush observed that:

"Had railways been preferred [by Auckland politicians], the proliferation of the motor-car would have forced the government to build motorways regardless. Wellington is a good example. But the converse, as Auckland has ruefully realized ... does not hold good."
(Bush, 1971, p.424)

But even this begs the question: why did the post-War state withdraw from railway development entirely? Why was a more mixed policy not pursued? Why, if "mistakes" were made, did they go on being made for decades after they had become evident to urban policy analysts like Bush?

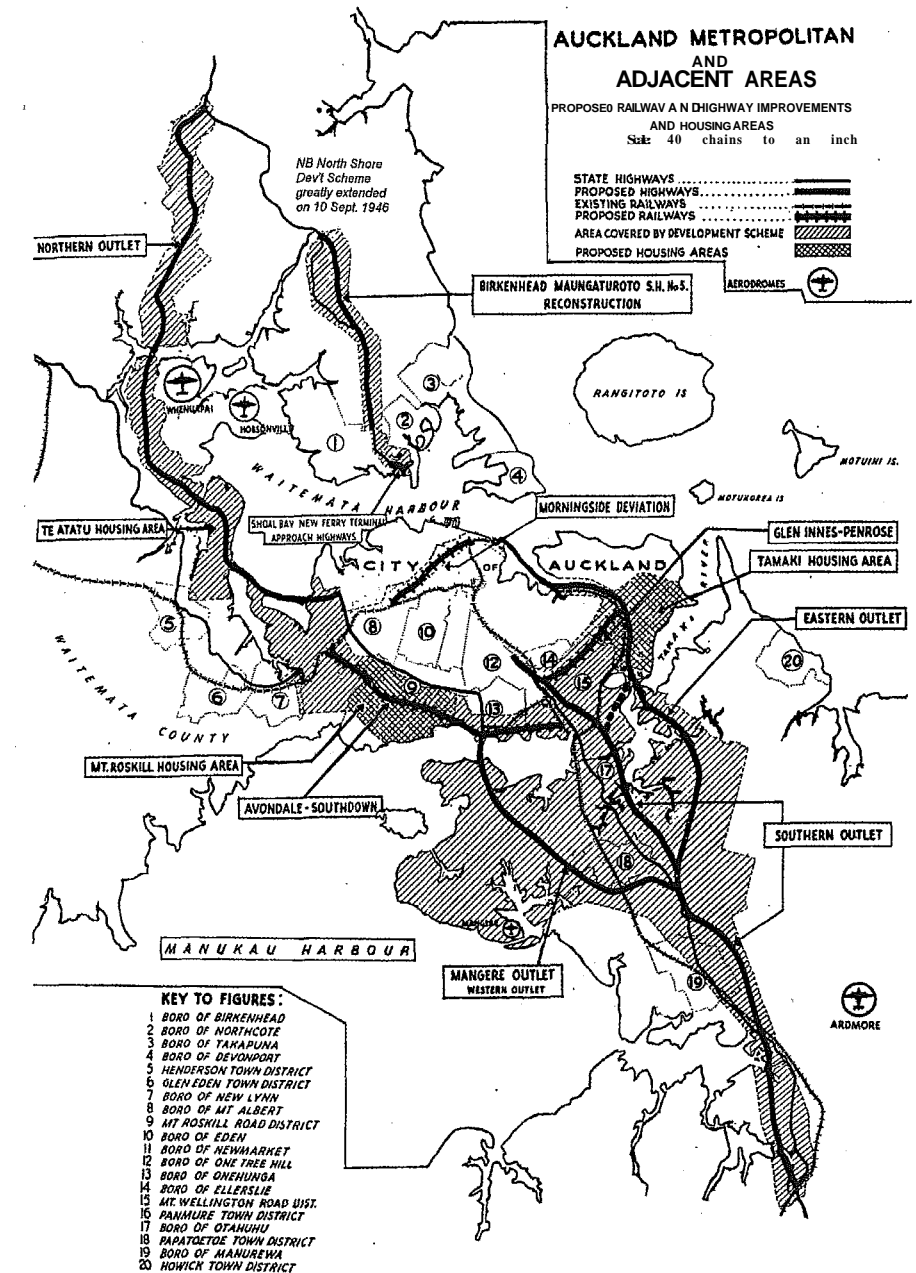
In this brief article, I will argue that the differences between Wellington and Auckland are linked to wider changes in state land-use planning after World War II. Withdrawal of the state from an historical responsibility for land development after that date destroyed the financial basis of capital-intensive investment in transit.

"Planning" became forever divorced from "infrastructure", to the detriment of both. Wellington got its transit infrastructure in before the policy shift. Auckland was too late.

Urban Railways and the Nation-Building State

The starting point for any historical analysis of the New Zealand city is the observation that, from 1870 on, the New Zealand state accepted primary responsibility for opening up lands for settlement by means of roads, railways and telegraph on the basis that it was to be paid for the proceeds of land development.

This policy was known as "Vogelism" after its most influential proponent, Sir Julius Vogel,



who was at various times Colonial Treasurer and Premier in the 1860s and 1870s (Sinclair, 2000).

Vogelism predated the rise of the city in New Zealand, but it provided a template that would be followed as New Zealand's cities began to develop beyond walking or bicycling scale in the 1920s.

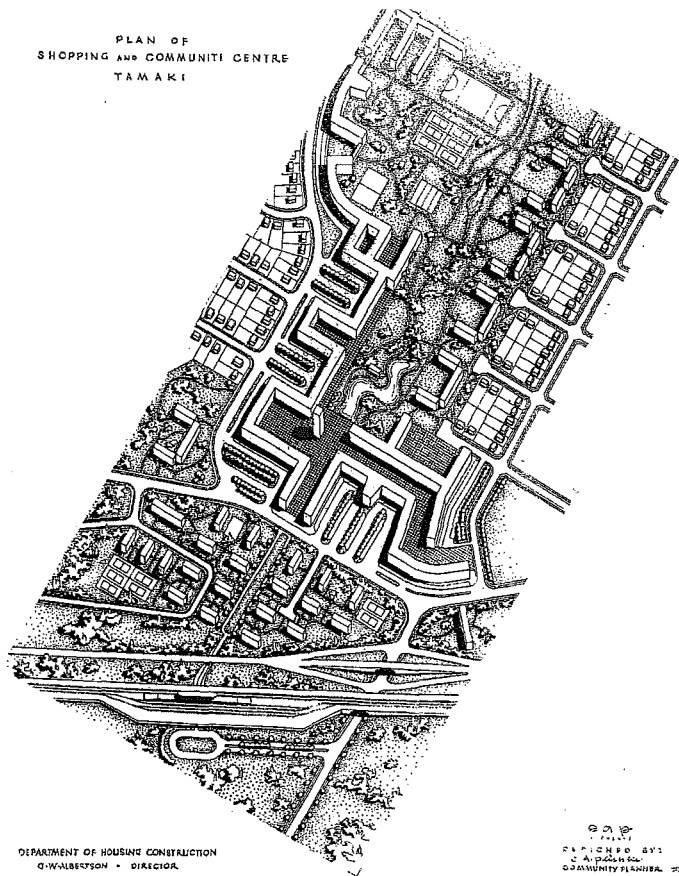
Perhaps the most significant event in the emergence of a specifically urban Vogelism was the *Hutt Valley Lands Settlement Act* 1925. This act provided for a new town of 681 acres in Lower Hutt, outside Wellington. The land development gains

were to pay for the costs of the scheme, including a new commuter railway to inner-city Wellington, with the remainder accruing to the state.

Over the next thirty years the Wellington region (perhaps not coincidentally the seat of the New Zealand state) would see:

- two additional railway lines built out to the site of projected future settlement;
- five and a half kilometres of tunnels bored to link railway suburbs more directly to the CBD; new towns in the Hutt Valley and Porirua

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- ③ SPORTS GROUND
- ④ HEALTH SERVICE
- ⑤ COMMUNITY AND RECREATION CENTRE
- ⑥ PARKING
- ⑦ SHOPPING BUSINESS CENTRE
- ⑧ CINEMA
- ⑨ MUNICIPAL SQUARE
- ⑩ FLATS
- ⑪ MULTI-UNITS AND FLATS
- ⑫ RAILWAY STATION
- ⑬ HIGHWAY AND RAILWAY CROSSING
- ⑭ BOTANICAL GARDENS
- ⑮ MULTI-UNITS

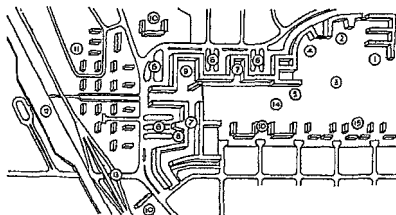
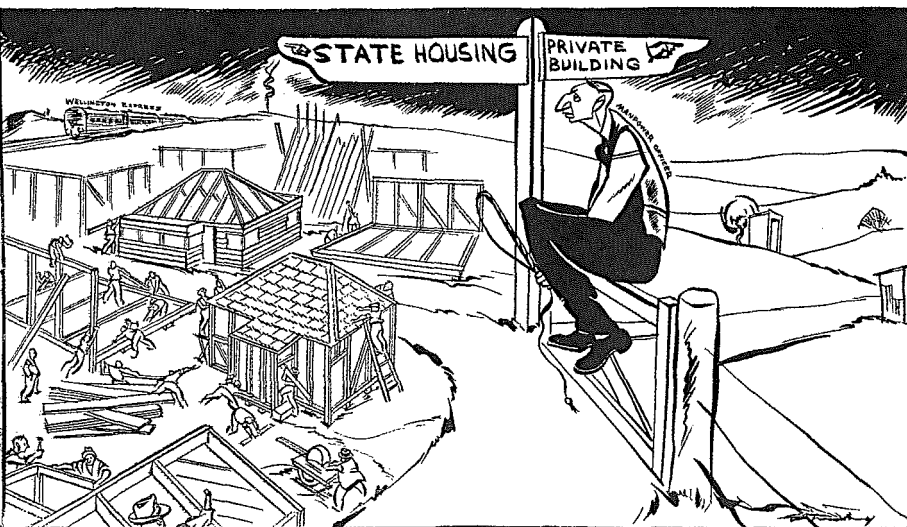


Figure 3 (top left):: Design for Glen Innes by Ernst Piischke, published in Firth and Wilson (1949). Reproduced with permission of the Housing New Zealand Corporation.

Figure 4 (below left):: Cartoon from Building Progress, March 1944, critical of restrictions on private building in New Zealand.



physically planned and, in part constructed, by the Railways Department and the Ministry of Works (MOW); and all suburban railway lines electrified.

In the case of the city's roads there was an alternative source of revenue, still latent in the 1920s but significant by the 1950s. It is a matter of record that both railway-building and state land revenue declined in significance after the passage of the National Roads Act 1953, which applied taxes on car registration and fuel to road-building. The reasons for this change have never been critically explored in New Zealand.

The view that the shift to a highway-focused system was a passive, instrumental response to increasing car numbers prevails by default. But was there a choice? Could the state have decided to maintain the Vogelite policy? What motivations really drove the switch? What would Auckland have looked like if a different course had been pursued?

Alternative Auctlands: from Vogelism to the Highway Fund

Soon after the end of World War II, the New Zealand Government announced plans for a massive transit upgrade in Auckland. This was in reality a joint infrastructure and land development programme on the Auckland urban fringe, to be carried out by MOW. Often confused with the older Public Works Department (PWD), MOW was in reality a regional planning agency whose philosophy is summed verbally as follows:

"Housing [is] to become a Public Utility, the right to live in a decent dwelling being regarded as on the same level as the right to education, sanitation, to good and abundant water, to an adequate road system and to a certain amount of medical care. Probably it would be true to say that this promise has now gained fairly wide acceptance ... In these days, physically speaking,

Figure 5 (right): Corridor Plan for Auckland, from Jones (1969), at p. 10.6. Reproduced with the permission of the Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand.

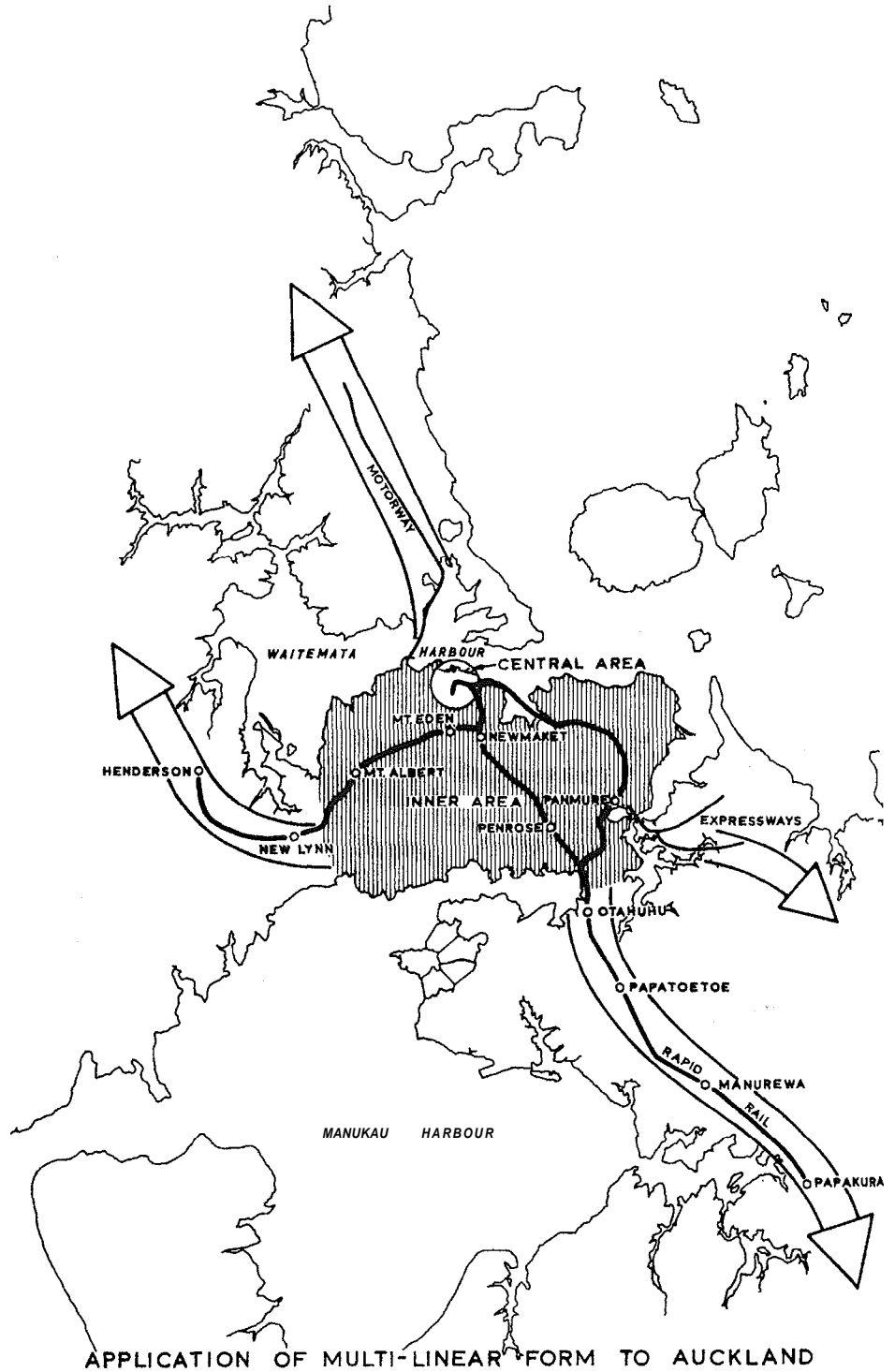
the house is a kind of knot in a network ... with larger and more complicated knots for shopping centres and other community facilities - all of which are necessary if people are to carry out easily the wide variety of activities that are our conception of civilized life." (Firth and Wilson, 1949, p. 7-8)

A map of MOWSAuckland scheme is shown here as Figure 2 (see previous spread). A 50 percent land-value betterment tax was to be applied in the cross-hatched areas, also subject to statutory land price controls (Thompson, 1991). The fully hatched areas show zones of proposed state housing development. These ran along nested circular railway routes, to distribute commuters evenly between the Penrose and Queen Street. Figure 3 (left) indicates the quality of the new town centres that were to be built by MOW.

Although such ideas could trace their pedigree from Vogel and later 19th century liberals such as Ballance and Seddon, Ben Schrader has lately pointed out that such state schemes created a perception that private development was being crowded out (Schrader, 2005).

Figure 4, from the March 1944 issue of the trade publication *Building Progress* (left), expresses this concern very concisely. Three features of this cartoon stand out. The first is the close relationship between "State Housing" and the "Wellington Express". The second is the idea of a tyrannical planning state, an idea that would gradually move to occupy the centre of New Zealand's political discourse. The third, more of a corrective, is the fact that all state housing was in fact privately built at the time. "Private building" should therefore read "private land subdivision":

At the end of the 1940s the government thus stood accused of "Russianising New Zealand" (Gustafson, 1986). After some years of indecision, the corridor plan of Figure 3 was abandoned in favour of the annual application of petrol tax to urban motorway extension via a National Roads Fund, into which road taxes were to be paid. 1953's



Town and Country Planning Act also repealed the 50 percent betterment tax, introduced by the 1926 Town Planning Act.

This background suggests that the shift from urban Vogelism to a system of highway-based development was not merely an instrumental reaction to rising car numbers, but also a response to pressure-group politics. A modus vivendi could

not be found that would allow urban Vogelism to survive in a healthy state alongside private development. State housing and public transport were both transformed into residual services for the poor. In this respect New Zealand today is similar to the USA. By contrast, urban Vogelism was more like the policy of European countries, where public transport is institutionally linked

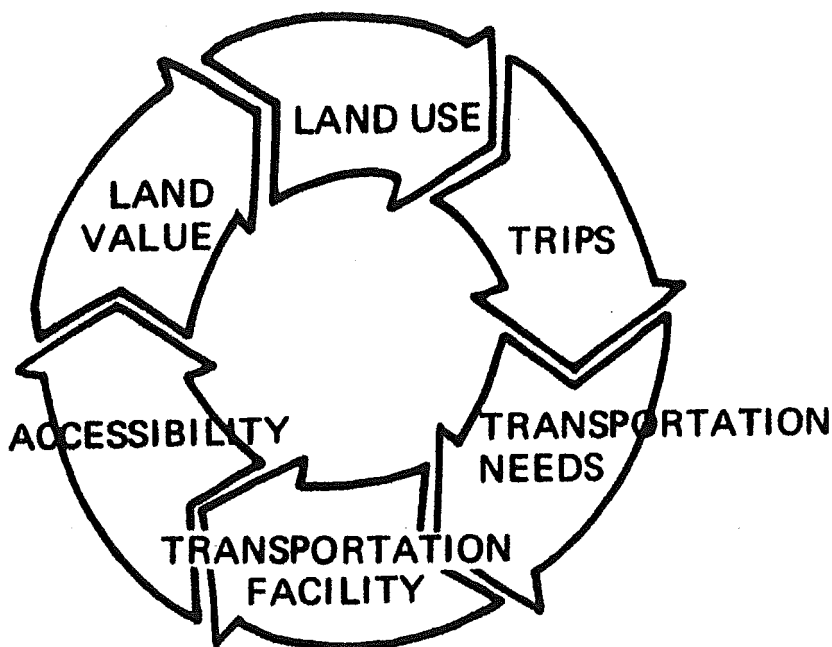


Figure 6.: Cycle diagram from Marks (1971), atp. 8. Reproduced with the permission of the [US] National Academy of Sciences.

to municipal land development programmes (Cervero, 1999).

The idea that political conflict lies behind Auckland's transit failure is reinforced by the fate of a revival of urban Vogelism in the years 1965-1975. This revival found expression in Sir Dove-Myer Robinson's rapid rail scheme and in the adoption of a new corridor plan by the Auckland Regional Authority, forerunner of today's ARC (Figure 5 - see previous page).

At a 1969 conference, MOWS Auckland District Commissioner of Works also presented a hand-drawn version of the diagram shown here as Figure 6 (above), to show how the system might pay for itself (Abey, 1969, p. 7.5). A similar, but eventually much more famous, corridor plan would be adopted at almost the same time by Perth, Western Australia.

The return to urban Vogelism gathered momentum with the joint enactment of the

Housing Corporation Act and the New Zealand Superannuation Act in 1974. The Housing Corporation Act set up a (state) housing corporation with extensive powers of urban renewal. The Superannuation Act provided for an eventual eight per cent of wages to be compulsorily banked, partly in state land acquisitions.

These ideas were polemically criticised by long-serving Auckland University geography department head, Kenneth Cumberland:

"To be cheap - and otherwise attractive - it [transit] must be heavily subsidised. But who subsidises who? The ratepayer the commuter? One taxpayer another taxpayer? Thenon-user the user? ... This is of course an argument for the maintenance of bridge tolls and for an even heavier imposition of petrol tax to pay for motorways, though not to subsidise local authority roading. It is also an argument against taxpayer subsidising of the capital's rail commuters [i.e. in Wellington]. The only

ultimate but fair and reasonable solution is that the user should pay. If so, public passenger transport can apparently today not stand on its own feet - or roll on its own wheels... A far-flung fringe of low-density suburban development - so long scorned by planners, popular press and public alike - will, in this pollution-conscious age, become increasingly preferable as one form of urban development... all within an hour's run, say 50 or 60 miles, of almost any part of the metropolitan complex and nightly dull and depressing core of otherwise unrelieved urban pressures and neuroses." (Cumberland, 1971, p. 10)

For Cumberland such schemes were an irrational, ad-hoc intervention in the market. But, in reality, the idea of repaying fixed transit costs from land value is quite sound (Vickrey, 1977). It was perhaps more economically irrational to observe relentless growth in Auckland land values (Moran, 1976) without applying any of these funds to infrastructure; but that is what happened. Indeed, a notorious but effective campaign advertisement in the general election of 1975 represented the return to Vogelism as a red tide sweeping over New Zealand⁴.

All these schemes collapsed after Robert Muldoon's electoral victory in that latter year. Ironically, Muldoon would soon be condemned in similar terms. Playing the Red card for a third time, reformers of the 1980s charged virtually all Governments since 1870, and Muldoon in particular, with running New Zealand like an "Polish shipyard". A new era of the "withering of the state" was proclaimed (Upton, 1987).

In Australia, meanwhile, the more pro-active planning of the early 1970s would survive and be implemented in progressively more transit-oriented terms during the 1980s (Gleeson and Coiacetto, 2005). Perth's electrification of its corridor-plan railways in the 1990s allowed Auckland to acquire its diesel railcars. This

allowed decisions about transit investment to be postponed, albeit at the expense of making Auckland look like a city where survival of the transport system is at the mercy of the second-hand market.

W(h)ither the State?

A recent report estimates that 100,000 new apartments are needed in Auckland by 2016 (DTZ, 2005). The report however doubts the ability of the private sector to deliver such a project entirely without some kind of large-scale state planning assistance. In the face of such a challenge, a Vogel of today might well amass land in Auckland's largely derelict railway corridors, and invest in a complementary infrastructural upgrade at the same time.

A New Zealand Superannuation Fund (revived in 2002) might be used to seed such a scheme. But will this happen? Or will it be seen as "impossibly

radical" and "nobusiness of the government"?

To sum up, the collapse of Vogelism is partly explained not only by the car but also partly by the rise of a polarised and polemical form of politics. Fearing that they were being crowded out, private developers identified Vogelism with communism, a form of rhetoric that acquired on a life of its own. A relatively unplanned and automobile-orientated form of development soon became the only game in town.

The reality however is that a city like Auckland is big enough for both forms of development. It also needs both – that is to say, a predominantly social form of development in a network of transit corridors, in which capital gains are used to underwrite railway electrification and other investments. And something closer to Cumberland's ideal in more remote areas. In this way there will be something for everyone. And in any case, it

is hard to see what else can make a future Auckland work.

The author, Chris Harris, has a PhD in environmental planning, and has worked for the last five years in the Auckland urban public transport sector.

Notes

1. Heavy rain reduces the safe following capacity of a motorway lane from 1,800 vehicles per hour to only 900. This is perhaps the most locally-specific of reasons why it is unwise to put all Auckland's transport eggs in the motorway basket.
2. For more on this and other arguments in this paper, see Harris (2005).
3. It is perhaps remarkable that people were worrying about this in 1944.
4. See election campaign advertisements on <http://www.elections.govt.nz>

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