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Realistically, when you need to move 100,000 people or so in a very short time from a point in a city, only rail can do it. Yes, people might connect to other modes of transport after a rail journey or other modes of transport might help move some of the people initially, and those transport modes are essential, but for large-scale people movement, it has to be rail.

I was pondering this as I looked out from the conference facilities at the Melbourne Cricket Ground across the vast empty rows of seats. I was attending the 2015 Annual Forum of the Australian Logistics Council. You cannot help but imagine an AFL Grand Final when viewing that site. People in the transport industry then ponder the logistical question of just how do you move all those people – the MCG can seat 95,000 and have standing room for another 5,000.

A quick look at the map provides the answer: Richmond Railway Station and Jolimont Railway Station are right next to the MCG. From Richmond you can travel to the far eastern edge of the city. Jolimont can take you north and south of the city and some way to the west, but not enough. There is no rail from the airport to the city in Melbourne and in general the west is not well served.

Melbourne's transport system and the balance between road and rail became a hot topic at the ALC Forum. The debate highlighted some of the flaws with provision of infrastructure in Australia.

In particular, the recent difficulties and reversals relating to the East-West Link road in Melbourne became the focus of discussion. The previous Coalition Government in Victoria signed contracts for the construction of the first stage of the East-West Link road just before the State election and the Federal Coalition provided \$1.2 billion in funding for it. The then Labor Opposition said if elected it would not go ahead with the project because it wanted the money to go to public transport, particularly rail.

Since winning office Victorian Labor has said it will legislate to minimise any compensation that the consortiums which signed up might seek.

The Federal Assistant Minister for Infrastructure, Jamie Briggs, told the Forum that any legislation along these lines could put Australia's investment reputation at risk. The Labor State Minister for Transport, Luke Donnellan, also addressed the Forum.

He was critical of his predecessors and the Federal Government for signing the deal and funding it without a publicly available cost-benefit analysis.

The result has probably been unnecessary. If a full strategic economic analysis had been done of all the options and made available to the public, this predicament could have been avoided.

This case highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to infrastructure spending. Such an approach would include an analysis all transport modes and the provision of a well argued publically available case for the infrastructure spend.

Many industry and independent speakers at the ALC Forum stressed the need for a longer-term view of infrastructure provision, especially the need for publicly available cost-benefit analyses before commitments are made to major projects. They stressed that if this is done and the research supports a case, the public will support it and governments would then find it harder to either stop or significantly change a project for short-term political gain. Conversely, if this became the normal way of doing things, the public would be deeply suspicious of any project which did not have a detailed, independent, public cost-benefit analysis

ACRI strongly supports the need for independent, publicly available research, strategic and economic analysis for major infrastructure projects and for the setting of priorities for those projects.

It is not a question of saying that rail and public transport take priority, but of doing the detailed research to work out spending priorities for all modes of transport that provide the best result for the money available.