

Re-railing ailing CityRail

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Meet Rebecca. Her story and her recently acquired nickname, 'Captain Commuter', are known throughout the CityRail network and beyond. Who is she? She is 24-year old Rebecca Turner who organised a civil disobedience campaign which eventually led to Bob Carr declaring a fare-free day on Sydney's rail network on Monday.

Rebecca's story resembles that of many others in Sydney, not necessarily the fine details, but in the way that her life requires a reasonable amount of juggling to keep all the balls in the air.

Currently working as a legal secretary, Rebecca catches the 7:03am train each morning from Beecroft station to her job in the city. Because she is trying to save up money to go to university next year, she also has a second job as a casual shelf-packer at Coles on as many nights as she is able. So after work, several times a week, she catches a train from the city to her home so that she can get to Coles by 8pm. So far, so good. The story starts to get a bit more complex when Rebecca says that she is late for her shifts on average twice a week due to the unreliability of the CityRail network. In fact, because of her repeated lateness, she is not being offered as many shifts as she once was. That means she is not meeting her savings target.

Other commuters tend to be echoing similar experiences. One commuter interviewed commented that "I usually have to leave half an hour early to be sure I am not late for work." Another said, "I'm working part-time from 10am to 4pm and it's becoming more and more difficult to get home and pick up my kids from day care." "The delays are shocking – people are losing jobs, people are being fired, people are being stuck on the dole. It's ruining people's lives," Rebecca added.

The Sydney rail network. According to CityRail the New South Wales rail network is one of the world's most complex. It involves the operation of 2,900 services to carry over 900,000 passengers to and from 306 stations daily. The radial nature of the network itself makes the task of moving this number of people to and from work a real challenge.

Every day CityRail operates a fleet of more than 1,500 carriages over 2,060kms of track controlled by over 2,500 signals. CityRail aims to ensure that, on average at least 99 out of every 100 peak services run; and at least 92 out of every 100 peak services arrive within three minutes 59 seconds of their scheduled arrival time (five minutes 59 seconds for Intercity services). There are 261 morning peak trains and 188 afternoon peak trains.

The problem. Nobody can seem to agree on what is going wrong with this network.

- Is lack of money preventing the smooth, reliable performance? Would funnelling more money at the system 'fix' the problems? If the solution is more money, where should this money come from? Should fares be increased? Or should the existing government subsidy be increased, and if so, should the State government pay for this rise by cutting spending elsewhere, or by raising taxes?? (The fare-free day on Monday reportedly cost CityRail \$2 million.)
- Is there an industrial relations problem? Does the prospect of overtime entice drivers and their unions to keep driver numbers low? Following the major upset of rail services in February, a group of rebel drivers was blamed for refusing to work overtime—crucial in a system that is short of drivers. In another incident earlier in the year Hornsby drivers were accused of deliberately taking sickies. However, individual drivers obviously don't have any control over their numbers, and some will surely need to refuse overtime if too much is being asked of them.
- Is it a problem with rail network infrastructure? According to *The Daily Telegraph*, most CityRail delays are caused by ageing and unreliable trains constantly in need of repair, rather than by the work practices of drivers (as the Government claims). RailCorp's chief executive officer, Vince Graham, says the two greatest handicaps

afflicting CityRail are the train timetable and the daily barrage of incidents that strike the network.

- Is a culture of blame and buck-passing hindering real efforts toward change? Tension has been reported between Premier Carr and Transport Services Minister Michael Costa. Unions NSW is reported as saying that drivers are tired of being made scapegoats by RailCorp management and the State Government. Rail workers are reporting physical assaults and verbal abuse from passengers. Rail unions have been threatening industrial action over stalled enterprise negotiations with the Government. Reports point to the fractious relationship between Vince Graham and his staff. Train drivers have been under intense scrutiny all year, since the release of the first Waterfall report in January showed the driver of that train was in terrible shape, prompting a wholesale review of RailCorp's medical guidelines and stringent tests that sidelined many drivers this year.
- Is the culture of CityRail simply not one of serving its customers? Some commuters have expressed frustration at the level of service they receive (or not) from staff. But perhaps staff reflect a culture being modelled by management.

Christian responses. While we may not be able to untangle the problems facing the rail network, it may be helpful to start unpacking some underlying issues.

What has really been expressed over the past few weeks and months is not a problem with *trains*. No one is angry at the wheeled machines themselves. Rather, what is being expressed is a meltdown in *relationships*. Continual rail problems are caused by failing relationships, and are in turn affecting relationships. Unreliable transport services rob relationships in a number of ways. With shrinking margins of error in our lives, unreliable train services set off a damaging chain of events—frustrations about incompetence, stress over running late for work, pressure from employers who have demands and expectations that don't leave room for the possibility of late workers, and lost time made up at the end of the day which then affects family life. Over weeks and months, chronic feelings of utter helplessness set in, bringing frustration and simmering anger. According to one internet pundit, “my husband comes home every night yelling at me about the trains, like I can help it!”

However, driving these relationship meltdowns is a peculiar and odious conception of how our society should run. We've lived with this conception for so long that it seems normal, but when you stop to think about it, it is actually rather strange, and it does bind and imprison us in many very sad ways.

It goes like this. In order to ‘progress’, good societies must grow; growth involves competition; we must be ‘efficient’ to be competitive; and efficiency requires a highly ‘mobilised’ and mobile workforce (as if we are an army, ‘mobilised’ for perpetual war). These notions of progress, growth, competition, efficiency and mobility all require a bunch of ‘managers’, so that all the adults involved in this project (for it is a project that largely excludes children) can, ultimately, ‘control’ the world, or at least very large chunks of it.

We don't really think too much about this system. We just play our part in it. But when the system somehow starts to fail, we seek for someone to blame, for after all, there must be some ‘manager’ somewhere who has ‘lost control’.

Will the coming Kingdom of Heaven have a train network? The place *is* pictured as a city, and there *will* be a lot of people there. Whatever the ‘work’ of heaven is (and it might simply be praising God), we'll do it in communities, with no need to rush about on schedule anymore. Who knows? Maybe a mass-transit system will be an interesting addition to the heavenly city, bringing crowds before the throne of God! But it certainly won't be there as part of a project of progress, growth, competition, efficiency, mobility and control. The kingdom of heaven will be a place where God is gratefully enjoyed and the new creation received for what it is.

Meanwhile, we're here, and stuck with the system as it stands. How might the Christian respond

in this situation of heightened tensions, aggro, blame, buck-passing and frustration?

Christians might begin by pointing to the excesses of human pride. Revelation 18—which probably began as an observation of Rome’s excesses but which has attained a timeless quality—pictures ‘Babylon’, a world driven by pride and so devoted to trade and commerce that all else is sacrificed to these gods:

All the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries ... cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

Human pride creates this system, which owns ‘bodies and souls’, like those of the commuter who yells at his wife, or like poor Rebecca who must juggle so much. Human pride also blinds us to the fact that we can never attain the kind of control we seek. The well-oiled ‘machine’ that we imagine the modern city to be—with its progress, growth, competition, efficiency, mobility, management and control—is simply an idolatrous illusion, beyond our grasp to achieve; and if achievable, so totalitarian and destructive to so many things along the way that it is not really worth achieving. In other words, the Christian might be the one within the situation who acknowledges the folly of human pride, and asks instead that people rediscover what it is to be humble participants in and recipients of God’s good world, rather than lords over it.

In fact, we could run this city for a purpose other than progress, growth, competition, efficiency, mobility and control. Imagine Sydney as hundreds of thousands of people who know themselves as ‘stewards’ of God’s good creation, sharing its good gifts to create caring communities, working against the effects of the fall. Something like this happened in a small and temporary not so long ago. Transport Minister Costa recently restated some headlines about poor performance that sounded like today’s headlines, but were in fact from 2000 just prior to Olympics. But he didn’t go on to wonder why we could fix the system so quickly then for its flawless operation during the Olympics. Perhaps everyone pulled together and tried that little bit harder, as a community, to make it happen.

To this end, Christians will also be peacemakers. The Christian is someone who will try to mediate, translate and explain the problems felt by train drivers, commuters, bosses, managers and politicians. The Christian might be the person who oils the process of social interaction so that together, we can find a solution, rather than contributing to the yelling. Being a peacemaker might also mean helping the angry boss to forgive the late worker, or helping the angry commuter be kind to the beleaguered train driver.

These approaches just might help people rediscover what a train network is really for: to assist people in the daily work of creating a caring, kind community—which is what is really needed to get this ailing network back on the rails.

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