

Think outside the box before we're boxed in



Phillip O'Neill

OUR son's local football field, when he was a child, was standard Hunter Valley fare: a flat enough track, patchy grass, two sets of roughly vertical goal posts, and a council-built amenities block with two change rooms, no hot water, toilets and a canteen.

It was all that was needed except for one thing. On Saturday mornings, early, the club secretary would unlock a shipping container which sat by the road so a small group of loyal helpers could access line markers, nets, corner posts, bags of footballs, witches' hats, and so on, such that by 9am a skinny-legged referee could blow life into another great day.

Louts, robbers, arsonists; none could violate the shipping container's 20 feet of treasure.

I often wondered with a smile how the thing had got there, but dared not ask. Fell off the back of a truck, I'd have been told, a small part of a bigger tale that only blokes with names like Dave could tell.

Creative re-use of shipping containers has become a world-wide phenomenon and the internet tells extraordinary tales like of the 16,000 vendors in Ukraine in a 70-hectare market place selling from aisles of old containers. And of a West London hotel that has been built entirely from stacked shipping containers pre-fitted in China with fixtures, furniture and windows. And of architects winning awards for colourful stacks of containers for cheap student housing, art galleries and beach getaways.

In Australia, any number of portside agents will sell you a 20-foot container in good condition for about \$2000. Other firms advertise fit-outs including vents, shelving, doors, windows, electricity, plumbing, even airconditioning.

For a standard salty dirty box, though, you can pay less than \$1000. And that's the problem. It costs more than this to return an empty container to China.

At the moment, Australia's imports arrive in containers and our exports leave in bulk ore carriers.

The latest monthly shipping reports show Sydney's Port Botany received 88,562 containers in September, split



CONTAINED GROWTH: Some see housing or hotels, some see markets or sheds, but others see sheer waste.

just about equally between the two standard sizes: the 20-foot box and the 40-foot box. But only 31,256 empty containers were shipped out.

Now, if you happen to be browsing the minutes of the October meeting of the Sydney Ports Cargo Facilitation Committee, Appendix 6, you'll notice that Sydney's 11 official empty container storage sites currently hold 43,206 containers, and are close to full. Evidently this stash of boxed air caused considerable alarm at the meeting.

A search was commissioned to look for new storage sites, including on an island on Sydney harbour, and the shipping industry was advised that older boxes may need to be buried even if this meant forgoing unpaid storage charges.

It could all be quite funny really, were it not for the state of the Australian economy and the massive tonnages of minerals we export, and the gluttonous way we suck in cheap Asian manufactured goods with an over-priced Aussie dollar.

The Australian Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and

Regional Economics says that freight movements in Australia will grow by more than 50 per cent by 2020 and probably will triple between now and 2050. The growth will be in all categories – commodities, fresh produce and containers.

Our urban road systems and our interstate corridors will all bear the burden. The places hardest hit will be the areas where population growth is highest, like along our part of the continent. Already we see signs of the future. Trucks now determine driving conditions down to Sydney along the F3 Freeway. Then between the F3 and the M2 Motorway, the road surface is shoulder-to-shoulder trucks.

By 2020, Australia's biggest freight growth will be along the Sydney-Brisbane corridor. There, freight tonnages will rise by more than 70 per cent by 2020, and by 150 per cent by 2030.

Just about every truck going north from Sydney goes through the lower Hunter, as does nearly every truck going south from Brisbane. That's why the federal government

announced last week that it would spend \$1 billion upgrading the northern rail line to Sydney as an alternative to trucking these alarming freight volumes.

More than 85 per cent of containers unloaded at Port Botany are unpacked in warehouses within 40 kilometres.

Then smaller trucks cart cordless drills, electronic toys, women's bags, golf clubs, televisions and running shoes to shopping malls across an ever-growing conurbation stretching from Port Stephens in the north to Lake Illawarra in the south.

Imagine three times our current freight movements by 2050. Imagine the warehousing, the super-sized hardware outlets, the next-sized shopping malls. Imagine all those empty shipping containers. And imagine all those minerals we will need to dig and export to pay for it all.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is the director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.



Poised to rip rail

THE state government is poised to make one of the biggest political statements in the Hunter's history by ripping up the inner-city rail line between Hamilton and Newcastle. At least that's been the talk of the town lately and now the talk of the Newcastle Herald's website too.

There is understandable emotion from many of us who remember a vibrant Hunter Street commercial precinct. However, removing the rail will not bring this back. Forces involved in CBD decline are nothing to do with the rail line. Sadly, I have the sinking feeling that if the line was to be removed, the promised light rail alternative will not eventuate. I invite the Premier to deliver an iron-clad guarantee.

Craig

Wow, now that would be a fantastic Christmas present for the dilapidated Hunter Street and CBD-mall areas. Maybe the O'Farrell government has finally made the history-creating decision that would go a long way to securing a modern, progressive future for the inner-city region.

Novocastrian

What a fact-less story. There is just no way light rail can do the job of the heavy rail with its exceptionally good rise in patronage over the past few years.

Bigfeller

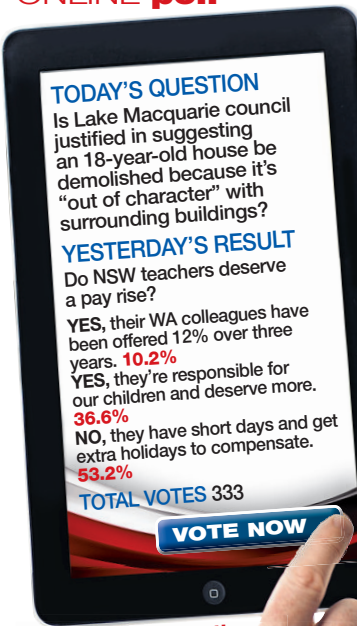
How exciting, we really need this to bring our city into the future. Hoping that the government follow through with it. And to all those saying why weren't we asked or consulted? That is why we elect governments. Did we get asked if we wanted a carbon tax? No, so when the government does things we don't like we reward them by voting them out.

SG

Who removes a functioning public transport corridor in this day and age, to replace it with a "green corridor" and maybe light rail? Removing rail lines has been tried in Sydney and now they want to spend billions to restore it.

stumeister

ONLINE poll



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Hope is the present for the forever future

Santa Claus is sweet, but he's a concept, writes Adele Nash.

AS a small child, I was always sceptical about the existence of Santa Claus. All of the ones I'd met in shopping centres had fake beards – I knew because I'd pulled on a few of them – and presents always came from parents and grandparents.

And realistically, how would Santa – a fat, jolly man – fit down the chimney to the fireplace in our lounge room?

But one Christmas Eve when I was about five or six, I had retired to bed in my room, which was next to the lounge room, and was reading a book when I heard a scrabbling noise in the chimney.

Could it be? Was it he? Was Santa real?

To cut a long story short, no, it wasn't Santa. It was a possum that had decided to explore the chimney. This led to some adventures in trying to catch and release it, which should have been accompanied by Benny Hill *Yakety Sax* music. And the possum didn't even bring presents. Well, not ones you wanted, at least.

It did make Christmas memorable, however, and memories are usually the things that people speak about most in relation to Christmas. They're not usually memories of presents, but of spending time with family and friends, sharing food, having fun, singing carols, going to Christmas parties and services, and spending time with people you only get to see occasionally.

It's a time of year when we want to be with those we love, and those who love us. For many, that's more important than gifts, especially if those gifts are more socks and jocks.

However, Christmas can be a time of bitter disappointment: from not receiving the present you wanted, to not getting along with those you spend the festive season with, to the pain of a first Christmas without a loved one, to the sadness of not being able to afford presents for your children.

It can also be a time of stress, too much food, and a growing resentment towards hearing songs about "dashing through the snow" in every shop you go to when it's 30 degrees or more outside.

But when everything is stripped back to the simple elements, Christmas is about hope – or it should be. The hope is Jesus, whose birth is the reason for the celebration of Christmas. Although the concept of Santa Claus grew out of the 4th-century Greek Christian bishop Saint Nicholas of Myra, picking up folkloric and modern influences on the way, he remains that: a concept.

Jesus, however, was a real historical figure (whether or not you choose to believe in His divinity). His time on earth was spent sharing love, help and hope with those He encountered. The greatest element to His offer of hope was salvation and eternal life (1 Peter 1:3 in the Bible explores this).

The hope that Jesus offers isn't there for just one day of the year, either, but all year round. This is something that should encourage us this Christmas – whether we're Christian or not – to provide love, help and hope to those around us throughout the year too.

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