Ticketing Woes in Australia: The Patchy Record of Myki

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What is it about government contracts that produces the worst results and poorest returns? Those clods behind such deals, notably in the poison chaliced field of public transport, seem so utterly incapable at even modest competence.

In public transport, muddles, bungling and oh so much fumbling are common; the whole show comes into view when public money is thrown at a project, and the planners get enthusiastic about a contractor they favour. In the Australian state of Victoria, this seems to be of a particularly advanced order. When it comes to paying for public transport, things always seem to be untidy and inchoate. With the plastic transport card known as Myki – be wary when government officials call them "smart" – a triumph of clumsiness and ineptitude came into being.

The list of problems, tweaks, and aberrations afflicting the soon-to-be-reformed myki system, covering trams, buses and trains, is lengthy. From the time the contract was made in 2005 with Kamco, subsequently acquired by NTT Data, it seemed that it was a system designed to create problems. In June 2008, it was reported that the new Myki ticketing system had failed 10% of the tests it had been subjected to. The system, projected to cost A$500 million, had already been running three years behind schedule, leading the Labor Brumby government to put A$350 million into the scheme to cover the burgeoning blowout.

In May that year, Transport Minister Lynne Kosky was forced to concede that the government had underestimated the problems that would come with the introduction of the new "smart card" across the transport network. But she still insisted, as the provincially

minded always do, that Australia's second most populous state would be receiving the "world's best" system by early 2010.

As a result of such delays, both myki ticketing, and the pre-existing Metcard ticket system would be run parallel to each other for up to 18 months, adding twelve months to what had originally been planned. Not exactly the world's best solution.

Then came the information pamphlet fiasco, where 500,000 booklets of 28 pages were scrapped for being out of date. The then opposition public transport spokesman, Terry Mulder, asked the sensible question: "Wouldn't you think number one, you get the system working properly, number two, you get the brochure printed and you send it out." Too logical; too tidy.

Victoria's Transport Ticketing Authority was defensive on the issue. "[The] project schedule is different to what was expected then, and in particular there has been a change to the way Myki is going to be used on trams," explained the TTA's Bernie Carolan.

Once the system came into operation, more hiccups followed. In 2011, 20,000 seniors received, according to The Age, "a new smartcard that does not give them the travel benefits they are entitled to, including free weekend travel and discounted weekly fairs." The ticketing authority had to broadcast a fat, full-voiced mea culpa: the error had arisen because the cards in question were marked "Seniors" but still charged the full fare.

As the years have gone on, other cities have pushed ahead, giving travellers other options of payment. The Victorian approach has, however, become schizophrenic. In July 2022, the Guardian Australia could only poke fun at the fact that Sydney has given its transport users the option of not even using their version of Myki – the Opal card – excepting concession travellers. Travelling in Sydney on light rail, ferries, buses, and trains was a simple matter of using a credit card or relevantly linked smart device.

In Melbourne, travellers have yet to be availed of that option. Those with Android devices could opt for using Myki's mobile version. The same could not be said for the iPhone, despite the state government's A$1 million allocation in 2019 to resolve that issue. All this time, NTT Data, the company maintaining the system, could hardly be said to be a paragon of efficiency.

As is often the case, getting a provider of a workable, faultless system can prove to be a challenge. The government in question finds the company or entity willing to provide services. A deal follows, often to the least suitable candidate. At times, soft corruption serves to garnish the arrangements, cushioned by a history of friendship, political ties, and sometimes, a family bond.

In 2016, NTT Data convinced the Andrews government that it was still the best custodian of the transport system. At the sum of A$700 million, its contract was renewed for seven years. This did little to impress the state's auditor, which had found "significant issues with the system, which precipitated six major amendments to the original 2005 contract." It noted, for instance, the time taken to design and deliver Myki: the original plan of two years ballooned to nine, leading to "significant unanticipated costs – a $A550 million (55 per cent) increase on the project's original budget of almost A$1 billion."

In the case of updating the current Myki system, the US-based Conduent has been entrusted

with the grave task, to the whistling tune of A$1.7 billion, to operate the ticketing system from December this year. Two [others failed to convince](#): NTT Data had finally lost its favourable standing, and Cubic, responsible for the Opal system in Sydney, Melbourne's perennial nemesis in terms of childish city rivalry, was fobbed off.

The contract with Conduit is for 15 years and will do what the Opal system in Sydney currently does: move card ticketing to a platform based on accounts where smart devices, debit and credit cards may be used.

Following the script given to all transport ministers, Ben Carroll [was boisterous](#) about the ordinary and unremarkable. "This is a very important moment for Victoria and public transport. For the past 16 years, we have had a card-based ticketing system under Myki. We now reach the 21st century with account-based ticketing."

At least the minister resisted the temptation this time to make claims about a revolutionary system that would place Victoria as the forefront of ticketing nirvana. Gone was the bushy-tailed enthusiasm of the world beaters: Melbourne was merely leading from the middle. "We aren't the test bed. This is an off-the-shelf system." It just might work.

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