

James C. Murphy
The Making and Unmaking of East-West Link
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The Politics of Infrastructure and Anti-roads Campaigns in Australasia

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Proposals for large road projects can encounter fierce opposition from concerned citizens, anti-roads activists, and social movement groups. However, the effectiveness of public pressure in cancelling a project can be limited, especially when there are powerful forces within governments that influence the decision-making process and provide limited opportunities of public participation. In this context, citizens and activists must understand the politics of transport policymaking and planning, and decide how to organise their responses. James C. Murphy's *The Making and Unmaking of the East-West Link* takes important steps towards such political understanding by examining the controversial East-West Link (EWL) road project in Melbourne, Australia, and its eventual cancellation in 2015.¹ The book focuses on how contentious road projects are cancelled or proceed in the face of opposition, and it is a valuable resource for political scholars and activists in Australasia and beyond.

The Making and Unmaking of the East-West Link is based on Murphy's PhD research, and he outlines the challenges involved in obtaining information about the EWL. The EWL was a multi-billion-dollar toll road and tunnel that would link two freeway 'dead-ends' in the inner-city by compulsorily acquiring hundreds of homes and a section of Royal Park with native vegetation. The approvals process

1 James C. Murphy, *The Making and Unmaking of East-West Link* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022).

for the project was fast-tracked to bypass public debate and the police were granted special powers to break up protests at the construction site.

The EWL was a complex issue that involved political leaders, the government bureaucracy (public servants), and extra-parliamentary actors or pressure groups, and Murphy examines all three in his case study. Although Murphy was able to gather thousands of pages of primary documents and conduct over 100 interviews, he faced significant challenges when making requests under the Freedom of Information Act (similar to Aotearoa New Zealand's Official Information Act) and, often, the information he gathered was heavily redacted, which made it unintelligible.

Murphy's study is highly relevant to Aotearoa New Zealand, which has depoliticised infrastructure planning.² Murphy draws on a number of theories to analyse the EWL—such as political leadership, policy entrepreneur, and interest group theories—which enables him to develop three broad hypotheses about what influences infrastructure planning. The first, called the Premiers Hypothesis, focuses on whether political leaders are the most important actors in shaping policy, whereas the second, the Bureaucrats Hypothesis, examines the role of public servants in policymaking. The third, the Pressure Politics Hypothesis, analyses the role of extra-parliamentary pressure or interest groups and activists in influencing infrastructure policymaking. The first two hypotheses are seen as 'most likely' explanations for the EWL and the politics of infrastructure because since the EWL was a large government project, political leaders and public servants had a significant influence on the outcome. In contrast, Murphy suggests that his third hypothesis, the Pressure Politics Hypothesis, is the 'least likely' explanatory cause due to size of the project and the political backing behind it.

Murphy begins his analysis with the Premiers Hypothesis, as political commentators often believed that the Premier of Victoria was the key decision-maker in the EWL project. At first glance, this hypothesis seems

2 Iain White, Crystal Legacy, Graham Haughton, 'Infrastructure in Times of Exception: Unravelling the Discourses, Governance Reforms, and Politics of 'Building Back Better' from COVID-19', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40, no. 7 (2022): 1–19.

convincing as the project was prioritised, and key decisions behind it were made, by Ted Baillieu's centre-right Liberal-National Coalition (2010-2013). When Denis Napthine took over the Coalition from 2013 to 2014, the EWL was fully-funded, and contracts with building companies and infrastructure specialists were signed even though the project was in the process of legal challenges from a protestor and two inner-city councils. However, Murphy claims that Baillieu played more of a 'gatekeeper role' rather than a proactive role in the project; he was guided by public service advisors and tended to avoid media attention and political debate. Baillieu also lacked key relational resources—his electoral appeal was not enduring, he lacked vision, and he was unable to find many allies outside of parliament to support his leadership. After initially hesitating on the EWL project, Baillieu only proceeded with 'full funding' after 19 months of investigation by the Baillieu Ministry.

In contrast, Napthine was more decisive compared to Baillieu and made good use of the institutional resources of the premiership—such as frequent media appearances and expanding the Premier's office—and his own political capital to be more involved in the planning and decision-making of the EWL, influence public perception of the EWL through the media, and build key relationships that undergirded the project. Under his government, the project was fast-tracked, and he even took the risk of signing industrial contracts only two months before an election where Labor had pledged to cancel the project. Despite Napthine's effective use of the Premier role, he was often reactive, and he was ultimately only one political actor among many others who were influencing the success or failure of the proposed EWL. With these points in mind, Murphy claims that Premiers do not always have full control over infrastructure policy and decision-making and so the Premiers Hypothesis does not fully explain the EWL saga.

Murphy then turns to the Bureaucrats Hypothesis as it was public servants and agencies that seemed to keep the project going and advised the government on why it should proceed. To explore this hypothesis further, Murphy compares the 'institutionalist' approach to transport

policymaking, which is commonly used in Australia, with the ‘policy entrepreneur’ approach. This latter approach incorporates John Kingdon’s theory of policy entrepreneurs and his ‘multiple streams framework’, which Murphy argues is better suited for explaining the EWL case. According to Murphy, policy entrepreneurs are ‘especially dynamic people’ who pitch ‘the right idea at the right time’ and who can build support for their proposal. His policy entrepreneur approach emphasises the agency of entrepreneurs involved in the three ‘streams’ that influence the policymaking process: the ‘problem stream’ (identifying issues as policy problems), the ‘policy stream’ (crafting policy proposals), and the ‘political stream’ (the political forces that influence policy proposals). One of the problems, in Murphy’s view, with institutionalist approaches is that they favour structural explanations, such as ‘path dependence’, which means that they are unable to explain why the EWL was abruptly cancelled. Path dependence explanations focus on how the discursive (the ways of thinking about a problem), historical, or institutional context influences the direction of a policy, which makes the ‘path’ difficult to change. Such approaches also imply that large projects like the EWL are almost unstoppable, which downplays the controversial nature of the proposal in the first place and the importance of contestation and the actions of bureaucrats in its demise.

The policy entrepreneur approach to the EWL focuses on the pivotal role played by Ken Mathers (a civil engineer and CEO of the Linking Melbourne Authority) in both pushing the proposal forward and in its eventual cancellation. Murphy argues that Mathers was able to advance the proposal through several ‘entrepreneurial activities’, such as centring the EWL, a project he had been involved in since 2005, as a solution to the broader problem of growing Melbourne. He built support and lobbied ministers and staff during a change of government in 2011 and, two years later, during a change of leadership. However, Murphy observes that Mathers did not have a good grasp on the broader political environment in which the EWL project was immersed and overlooked the importance of the anti-roads movement, especially in the context of climate change activists encouraging people to shift from private car use to public transport.

As a result, the Bureaucrats Hypothesis is also unable to fully explain the EWL case.

The final chapters focus on the Pressure Politics Hypothesis—the forces outside of government that influenced the EWL proposal. Many of Murphy’s interviewees believed that policymaking in Australia had become politicised due to increasing influence from stakeholders and/or pressure groups. Murphy illustrates that there has been a rise in pressure groups, minor parties, and other factors in policymaking across the board, and thus political parties no longer have a monopoly on policymaking. To understand pressure politics, Murphy identifies two useful concepts for outlining how policies can be contested: ‘policy image’ (how the issue is framed and understood) and ‘policy venue’ (where policy is debated—the institutions, procedures, and rules for how decisions are made). He describes how, initially, the process for the EWL was governed by an elite group of ministers, bureaucrats, and private sector consultants and contractors—which he calls the ‘iron triangle’—who protected the policymaking process from public scrutiny. However, once the proposal went through an approvals process as part of the state budget in 2013, outside groups had an opportunity to contest the EWL.

Pressure groups started their opposition campaign by challenging the political and public framing of the project. The government had initially claimed the project would solve congestion, but, in response, the Yarra City Council (with support from residents and environmentalists) launched a public transport campaign that promoted trains as the solution to congestion in the city. Picketers from the local Socialist Party (now Socialist Action) also challenged the congestion narrative through a working-class frame, which told a story about ordinary people who were trying to save their homes. This frame helped to challenge the ‘social licence’ of the project while highlighting the impacts it had on residents. Initially, the protestors picketed the geotechnical drill sites that were part of the preparatory works for the EWL. When drilling continued, they locked themselves to the drill rigs, which gained national media attention. After a several months of direct action, the government announced new police powers to end the

protests. Police action to remove the protestors escalated the conflict and damaged the project's image.

Public opposition was not only focused on how the EWL was framed by the Victorian government but it was also channelled through a formal public hearing and in court. The public hearing, which was called the Comprehensive Impact Statement (CIS) hearings, was organised as part of the statutory approvals process. Its purpose was to evaluate the EWL by an expert panel, based on public submissions and open hearings. The hearings process did not stop the proposal, but it helped bring opponents together to formulate new strategies, which included preventing a fast-tracking process to locking the proposal in a slow-moving court process. Slowing down the project with a venue shift from protests on the street and media coverage to formal, decision-making venues also helped to challenge the government's 'transparency' frame as, when pressed, the government were reluctant to reveal their business case and the project's economic benefits. Crucially, the delay, combined with Labor's opposition to the EWL, helped make the project an election issue. By challenging the framing of the project and delaying it through a venue change, the pressure groups convinced Labor to challenge the EWL and commit to cancelling it if they won the election. In other words, it was the combined efforts of the pressure groups and Labor that led to the EWL's cancellation.

Murphy's research reveals that there was not one single explanation for the emergence and then collapse of the EWL, and ultimately, it was the specific actions of the opponents that led to its cancellation. This seems like an obvious point, but it is an important reminder, especially for activists and social movement groups, that infrastructure projects (or similar contentious policies) are not inevitable, and that they can be contested by concerned citizens and from within government. The actions of leaders and bureaucrats are important as well, as their movements can depoliticise a project or policy by making it seem like a certainty. As Murphy highlights, actors within government are powerful, but sometimes there are windows of opportunity for citizens to effectively challenge a controversial project or policy.

Murphy's account of the failure of a large infrastructure project and its politics often reads like a murder mystery: something has been killed and it is up to the academic detective to find out 'whodunit'. Much like Bruno Latour famously does with *Aramis* (a failed personal rapid transit system), this murder mystery style makes for entertaining reading and a clear narrative.³ Having said that, I was left wondering by Murphy's book about the nonhuman actors or the material politics of infrastructure controversies, which Latour highlights in *Aramis* and which have also been explored in recent work on infrastructure politics in science and technology studies (STS).⁴ Sometimes, as these STS studies demonstrate, the success or failure of a project depends on how well it aligns human and nonhuman actors, and material objects can be central to a dispute. While the human actors were thoroughly examined by Murphy, the nonhuman actors were not under his spotlight. For example, the impact of construction on the environment—such as flora and fauna—was debated at the public hearing for the EWL. Submitters raised concerns about the proposal to remove wetlands and over 5,000 trees from Royal Park, but the environmental issues are only briefly mentioned by Murphy.

Overall, *The Making and Unmaking of the East-West Link* is not only a valuable scholarly contribution to understanding Australian politics and infrastructure policymaking, but also provides crucial insights for anti-roads activists, citizens, and social movement groups. Murphy's book demonstrates that finding support from allies, challenging the image of a project or policy, and finding multiple venues for contestation can be critically important for pressure groups. This analysis is important because anti-roads activists, at least in Aotearoa New Zealand, often focus their energies on participation in consultation processes rather than finding

3 Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

4 See, for example, Andrew Barry, *Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Morgan Hamlin, 'Antagonism, Technology, and Public Involvement in the Kāpiti Expressway Project', *New Zealand Sociology* 31, no. 5 (2016): 110–130; Morgan Hamlin, "'The Kāpiti Distressway': A Sociological Case Study of Public Involvement in a Socio-Technical Controversy' (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2016).

alternative venues and/or challenging the political and public framing of a road project.⁵

5 Morgan Hamlin, 'The Populist and Institutional Logics of Anti-Expressway Campaigns in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Counterfutures* 11 (2021): 100–121.