

## ***Diatribes 184***

### ***How Petrolheads will believe anything.***

It is now well over a century since travel by motorcar became a practical – although dangerous – possibility for ordinary people in wealthy countries. By the mid 1920s the present configuration of 4 wheels and an internal combustion engine was well entrenched, although many other solutions are practical. Actually, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were more battery powered cars on the road than petrol powered ones. This doesn't stop today's "innovators" from claiming they are inventing the battery car. In my view there has been only one major innovation – the introduction of compulsory seat-belts. Most of present-day electronic innovations are belated gimmicks. Who, for instance, needs GPS to find their way nowadays when they never use unsignposted back roads?

As for "Australian" car design, there isn't any. The number of locally made cars is tiny and shrinking. All are designed overseas. Holdens and Fords are good examples. The next model always has to be bigger even if it bears the same name. You would think that with rising fuel prices, and world-wide publicity about global warming, traffic congestion, parking problems for large vehicles and examples of suitable Japanese and European passenger cars, local car yards and distributors would be full of smaller Australian-made cars which made life easier and cheaper for Australian commuters. This should be even more marked as the Australian family shrinks, and as more and more even middle-income people seek overseas holiday destinations which they reach by air. This sort of conclusion would be inescapable if the choice of private motor vehicles as a means of getting from home to work were in itself rational, which it isn't.

Amidst the madness which prevails in our choice of transport, there is a core of thought which yearns for something more suitable for to-day's environmental problems. It is therefore not surprising that senseless and unworkable ideas for wonder-cars emerge and gain currency. You might remember how the late unlamented premier of Queensland Joh Bjelke Peterson pushed the notion of a car which was supposed to run on water, and more recently there was a project of selling the concept of the so-called air car being pushed from India, although the supposed inventor hails from France.

I don't want to spend my time railing against the senselessness of seeing the car as a predominant solution for getting people from A to B. What interests me, at this stage, is that a large percentage of men and women in Australia who have been through secondary schools with a modicum of basic physics can, in the case of the air car, be persuaded to treat as real, a project which has many of the aspects of the perpetual motion machines of the middle ages.

Such a project can be rejected out of hand on purely theoretical grounds without going to the trouble and expense of building and testing prototypes. The energy requirements of cars are well known. The effectiveness of new engines can be established on instruments. Much of what is claimed doesn't pass muster even at first sight.

We can calculate how much energy can be stored in a pressure vessel the size of a car's fuel tank. If all of it could be recovered in the air car, it would take it about 3 or 4 km on level ground. In the only publicised test on the car, this is precisely the distance it covered before its power petered out. Funny, that. Other claims for the air-car are similarly phoney. Some are statements of the bleeding obvious. Of course such a car, if feasible, would be non-polluting. The pollution would occur at the source of the compressed air.

You don't need more than a secondary school education to see that the air car is an air castle. So now we come to the bitter bit. When I looked up the air car on Google, as one does, I discovered dozens of entries relating to it in a variety of blogs. Only there wasn't much variety. All but one or two were over the moon. Here was the car he/she had always wanted. When can I have one? The site run by TATA the makers of the wonder-car initially was coy and kept quiet. It was years after the initial launch of the publicity for the project that finally there was a road test in which, as I said, the wonder vehicle went for 4 km on level ground before coming to a gutless halt. TATA now admitted that it was a case of back to the drawing board. Some drawing board!

For me, this was an intriguing case. Clearly the whole thing is a scam. But who benefits? After all, TATA is a reputable car maker, the largest automotive manufacturer in India, they have just taken over BMW and LANDROVER, they make an interesting small car, the NANO, and, clearly, they would know that the air-car was phoney. What gives?

This takes me back to the VFT. The Very Fast Train. Remember the VFT? Peter Abeles, then owner of Australia's second biggest airline, was going to build a train line from Melbourne to Sydney. Average train speed was to be some 330km/hr, some 80 km/hr faster than that of the French TGV on which the VFT was modelled. The cost of each trip was what was then the cost of a plane ticket (it is about twice of what it would be to-day). The noise level in the valleys of the southern Alps which the line was going to traverse would have been appalling. There were to be tunnels under the permanent way every half kilometre or so for wombats and other wild-life to cross to the other side. Presumably there were to be severe penalties for such wombats as failed to comply. The technical assumptions were equally bizarre; for instance, energy consumption was to be the same per km as the TGV, although the train was to travel 25% faster, and, under normal circumstances, energy consumption grows with the cube of the speed. No-one knows what the cost of track maintenance would have been. State instrumentalities would have to supply power at a discounted price, the unions would have to make concessions in the pay of staff and usage would have to be over 80% of capacity.

In short, the chances of this project succeeding were about the same as those of the air-car proving practical. Peter Abeles cleared it all up for us. The VFT was not a transport project; it was to be a project to "open up" eastern Australia, he said finally, in short, a land scam. Indeed, some state instrumentalities had already compulsorily acquired land along some of the projected routes. With principled objections prevailing and with finance to the tune of \$5 billion not forthcoming, the project was quietly dropped. The land deals may well have yielded a profit to the promoters just the same.

The air-car has the same smell about it. The engineer who 'invented' it toured the world with a TATA executive. Wherever they went (Australia included) they promised that location where they held their press conference was to be the world centre for the air-car's manufacture. Given the projected size of such manufacturing plants, this would be a bonanza for these locations. The fact that this was sponsored by TATA, a 'reputable' company, lent what Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan fame would have called an 'air of verisimilitude' to this otherwise transparent scam.

The question remains, however. Why would people educated in what some idiots in government called the 'clever' country fall in large numbers for such an obvious con. Not just here, but in many areas of the world. It just shows that greed and wishful thinking beats common sense every time in an industrial capitalist society