



Media Release

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For immediate release

Engineers win infrastructure comedy debate against economists at NSW Parliament House

Few would dispute that NSW has significant infrastructure problems, but if policy makers could only turn to one profession for solutions, would it be economists or engineers? Given the difficulty of answering that contrived question in a single debate, the economists and engineers settled for the next best thing: pointing the blame at each other for the failed infrastructure dreams of the past.

The inaugural debate between Engineers Australia Sydney Division and the NSW Branch of The Economic Society of Australia was held at the NSW Legislative Assembly on September 1. The adjudication panel of Craig Baumann (Member for Port Stephens and Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Planning), Professor Elizabeth Savage (UTS Business School) and Tim Mooney (Boston Consulting Group) awarded the debate to the engineers by a single point.

The engineers team of Athena Venios (AECOM), Andrew Pratley (Expressive Engineering) and Richard Buckland (UNSW) defeated the economists team of Dr Oliver Marc Hartwich (Centre for Independent Studies), Dr Richard Tooth (Sapere Research Group) and Justin Di Lollo (Hawker Britton).

At the centre of the debate was an argument over which profession had the better grasp of reality. Oliver Marc Hartwich opened the attack for the economists. "Unlike politicians and engineers, economists don't engage in daydreaming. We don't do free lunches, because we are the dirty realists of the social sciences." And Justin Di Lollo continued the line of argument. "The engineer and the gullible politician both live in this world of ideals. Engineers love to gold plate." "The Cross City Tunnel ... is a gold plated piece of infrastructure, that is stuck somewhere where it's not required, all because nobody sat down and actually thought, 'Is this thing needed?'"

The engineers returned the accusations of impracticality with examples of their own. Athena Venios pointed to the Sydney Harbour crossings. "A couple of years ago [the economists] came up with a thing called 'variable tolling': charging more

for the same thing. It's still taking you as long as it did when it was cheaper." And Andrew Pratley made an example of Sydney City's bicycle lanes. "I'd suggest the economists would probably like to narrow the lanes a little bit. They're so wide! They can fit the handlebars but it's only the tyre that touches the road. It's madness!"

After both sides had trawled through NSW's infrastructure woes, the engineers had one last trick in the bag: a good-humoured argument about association rules. In the last speech of the night, Andrew Pratley pulled a hand puppet from a bag at the table, proclaiming it "the newest member of The Economic Society of Australia". Indeed, the engineers had registered Terry the Tiger only hours before, made possible by the open invitation of The Economic Society. His argument was a long way from an infrastructure solution, but it brought the House down on both sides.

The debate can be seen at www.expressiveeng.com.au/debating.



expressiveeng-econvseng11.jpg: Andrew Pratley during the 2011 Economists vs Engineers debate at the NSW Legislative Assembly. Photo by Lionel Chan.

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About Expressive Engineering:

Expressive Engineering promotes technological sciences, design and innovation through corporate education and communication services. The Economists vs Engineers debate was organised and hosted by Expressive Engineering.

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