



LIGHT RAIL : PASSENGERS NOW RELEGATED TO A REAR SEAT

INTRODUCTION

"MONEY IN THE DRIVING SEAT" is the very apt heading used in the comment column of a leading transport newspaper (1). It very effectively draws attention to money being the root of most transport policy changes, changes not necessarily meeting the peoples needs, their wish to travel nor certain environmental requirements. Stated challenges by the Transport Secretary Alistair Darling have probably been guided by the Treasury's overall spending plans. Failing to get a grip on railways costs whilst exercising an extremely tough line on light rail schemes signals a coming policy change : "we'll provide if you pay". Such an approach lends itself to a "predict and provide" era now being demonstrated by the M6 toll road.

TRANSPORT WHITE PAPER

Any lingering doubt about Government intentions was removed by this new white paper : "THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORT - A NETWORK FOR 2030". The apparent reluctance of some local authorities to introduce "up front" road charging before a light rail scheme was up and running was discouraged and replaced by bus quality contracts, easy to implement because of light rail overruns. Cynics can now grasp this opportunity to describe Government know-how as somewhat mistaken, transport problems cannot be solved on the cheap by improvement to bus services alone.

NEW LAW TO HELP BUS TRAVEL

The traffic management act became law during July 2004 and includes a requirement for local authorities to designate a traffic manager to be responsible for the efficiency of the road network and keeping all forms of traffic flowing. Powers will also be given to local authorities to enforce minor traffic offences. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of Metropolitan District Councils working with PTA's to give effect to their bus strategies. To give the PTE's a kick-start, DfT is reported (2) to be considering giving PTA's more powers to deliver bus priority schemes should local highway authorities fail to do more to promote buses themselves.

GMPTE REACTIONS FOLLOWING WITHDRAWAL OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Reactions were swift with representatives from Greater Manchester meeting with DfT officials to discuss the future of the "big-bang" Metrolink extensions. So much money has already been committed in preparing for the extensions to Oldham, Rochdale, Ashton-u-Lyne and the Airport, approximately £200-m on advance works, that to hear civil servants asking for further reviews to be conducted on all public transport options, was not well received. The DfT view was that it should not be assumed that Metrolink was the preferred option which drew comment from the GMPTE that an exercise of this kind would further delay an already seriously delayed project.

A contention was expressed that light rail was being marginalised by the Government on the grounds of value for money and then compared with the Minister's apparent willingness to spend more money on heavy rail. Conventional rail services are taking an increasing and disproportionate amount of national spending without the centre having any clarity about the overall costing of the rail system, never mind the benefits it is generating (3). A prime cost escalation comes from Thameslink 2000 which increased from an original £600-m to £2.75-bn, according to the Rail White Paper.

OTHER PROJECTS, ALSO STARVED OF FUNDING

Probably the most advanced scheme, with some pre-contract work already undertaken, is the Leeds Supertram project. The PTE is hoping to submit a revised scheme in September, a scheme that could split up the design such that the maintenance and operation will involve a public/private split

permitting the risk factor to be shared. The two consortia with an interest in this project have indicated a willingness to remain fully committed to the idea.

The South Hampshire scheme (Portsmouth to Fareham) promoters have asked the Government for 70% of the additional funding. They have also made proposals to modify the scheme as well as a reallocation of the revenue risk.

Blackpool Borough Council is seeking urgent talks with the DfT after its bid to extend its tramway was rejected by Ministers as not value for money. "We are adamant we can bring the scheme in on budget". An extension to Lytham St Annes was also being considered.

CONCLUSION

Money, or lack of it, now seems to be the principal cause of light rail solutions being relegated to an "also ran" status. Town centre ambience, environmental considerations, safety, overall efficiency and convenience for those that will use it, does not appear to have entered the equation. The mode that many would regard as with second class qualities alongside Supertram has become the preferred option, chosen at Westminster.

Whilst every effort has been made to accurately present this document, no responsibility can be accepted for its contents.

REFERENCES

- 1) "MONEY IN THE DRIVING SEAT" - A comment column editorial in LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 19 - 29th July 2004.
- 2) LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 2 - 29th July 2004.
- 3) GMPTE Director General Chris Mulligan - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY Front Page - 29th July 2004.

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