



2004 LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT : LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

INTRODUCTION

Many people throughout Britain have shown concern at the direction taken by local transit plans in our towns and cities. The light rail concept, currently under that proverbial "dark cloud", has been officially abandoned in at least one major city. There is though one small chink of light on the horizon, a light which could mark a restart of at least one prominent project. This discussion document will attempt to place on record a true picture of the manoeuvres currently being debated up and down the country in an effort to find acceptable solutions to this light rail impasse.

HOPES RAISED IN MANCHESTER

The Transport Minister (Tony McNulty) recently suggested that the "Big-Bang" debate had raised some hopes in the Government that it could go ahead provided that its costs are reduced. A way forward in an unfettered way must be found because, if it is that or nothing at a £900-m starting price, then it has to be "not at those prices" (1).

Many thought that this cost escalation was following a national trend but this was not the view held by Tony McNulty. As the debate continued it seemed to imply that the whole lot (design, build, operate and maintain) in Manchester had to be put back on the table. Unfortunately, a re-evaluation of every single aspect of the scheme could produce a cost implication of gigantic proportions and, even worse, an increased time factor. A valid point raised by a Manchester MP during the debate was that steel and other engineering costs are continually rising and could cause the project to become "extremely risk averse".

A MEDIA ONSLAUGHT

Strong media opinion, directed at the Transport Secretary, apparently failed to upset his "calm public demeanour" (2). His being in control of various diverse transport modes and then having to make decisions of a contentious nature caused one newspaper to put forward a theory of panic which then brought out further speculation regarding a need for new legislation and a suggestion that "Darling realised this was the only escape route".

PUBLIC FEROCITY IN MANCHESTER

The "get METROLINK back on track" campaign, backed by all three political parties on the PTA (3) and combined with public ferocity will no doubt have shaken the DfT and squeezed them further into that proverbial corner.

The Manchester phase 3 project has now taken on a new significance with the Prime Minister setting up a working group, chaired by Tony McNulty, to find ways of delivering the scheme in light of the Transport White paper (4). The political anger shown in Manchester was not confined to the west side of the Pennines as was revealed in a Leeds newspaper report (5) about a committee member accusing the DfT of "deliberately undermining light rail projects up and down the country" - - - "whoever was in charge should have resigned".

LIGHT RAIL'S WORLD-WIDE SUCCESS

On a world-wide basis light rail has been spectacularly successful. Limited experience in Britain has already proved that a tram's superior quality will attract new customers. The frustration felt by the operators of Metrolink (only one spare tram available) (6) is replicated by infuriated passengers and could well be put at the door of some historic penny-pinching by the Treasury. Long and unexpected gaps in the service especially on a system working very close to capacity can hardly be expected to continue attracting new passengers. This was clearly demonstrated by the DfT's own figures which, for a 12 month period from 2002/03 showed a gain of 0.5% passengers compared with a 7% gain in Sheffield (7). On a world-wide basis, a quality research of 24 urban areas revealed our 3 UK systems very close to the bottom (8).

LEEDS, SOME PROGRESS BUT MIXED WITH FRUSTRATION

Things started to look a little brighter in Leeds when speculation gave the Supertram project a 70% chance of ultimate success. This was followed up by a statement at a special meeting in Leeds Civic Hall that the scheme price had been reduced by £250-m, partly accomplished by eliminating for the time being the branch from Balm Road to Tingley. A 500 page Supertram blueprint has been sent to Mr Darling (9).

That somewhat positive item of news though was tempered by some later information coming out of the DfT, any new submission from Leeds "will have to start from scratch" (10).

CONCLUSION

The current situation for light rail extensions in Britain at present is very disturbed with many of the interested parties working in completely different directions. Our light rail quality on a world-wide basis is far from satisfactory and may eventually be the incentive for some compromise solutions.

REFERENCES

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- 4) "Blair Gives McNulty task to resolve Metrolink extensions Impasse" - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 7 - 23rd September 2004.
- 5) Anne Alexander - Parliamentary Correspondent - Yorkshire Evening Post - page 2 - 11th November 2004.
- 6) GMPTA Chair Roger Jones - TRAMWAYS & URBAN TRANSIT - page 444 -December 2004
- 7) LIGHT RAIL STATISTICS : "Sheffield Tops Growth League" -ENTRAIN (Platform 5 Publishing Ltd) - page 18 - November 2004.
- 8) Carmen Hass-Klau - University of Wuppertal, Germany - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 16 - 2nd December 2004.
- 9) Paul Robinson - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST - 15th November 2004.
- 10) TRAMWAYS & URBAN TRANSIT - page 445 - December 2004.

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