



LEEDS SUPERTRAM - WHAT THE PAPERS SAY!

INTRODUCTION

Many Leeds citizens were in general support of the Supertram scheme, an attitude that added some important backing to the strong cross-party political support. Understandably there were also some dissident voices but it became fairly obvious that some visions were a little clouded by the distant memories of the first generation Leeds tramway system.

This discussion document will put on record many of the newspaper articles printed just before and just after the "axe" fell.

ONLY FITS WHERE IT TOUCHES

Mr Darling's claim that Supertram would only help a small part of the city (1) was to a certain extent "politically correct" but in fact somewhat misleading. This is mainly because it did not take account of the majority of European urban transit systems which were made up of three basic transit modes, suburban rail, trams in built-up areas and buses filling in the gaps or on less busy routes.

DARLING PREFERS BUSES

In his explanation for "killing-off" the Supertram scheme, Mr Darling insisted that a state-of-the-art bus system will be just as good, if not better, and appealed to transport bosses and civic leaders in West Yorkshire to work with him to come up with a new scheme which he would be willing to fund (2).

Just over a year ago he opened the highly successful transit system in Nottingham which basically consisted of a single route with a short branch, not unlike the Leeds scheme.

ROAD CONSTRUCTION ALONE NO ANSWER

When interviewed on a local TV programme (BBC Look North) about the north/south divide and the high cost of the Kings Cross ticket hall, he responded by quoting the high Yorkshire investment in new roads and expanded motorways. He obviously had not seen the VIEWPOINT article in LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY (3).

IS IT A BUS?

"When is a bus not a bus? - ANSWER --- when it's a tram on wheels" "That was the message from the Government as it launched a damage limitation exercise in the wake of the controversial decision to kill-off Leeds light rail dreams" (4). Mr Darling told MP's that the bus scheme would involve top quality vehicles, high frequency services and some dedicated lanes, and would deliver many of the benefits of Supertram at about half the cost. The so-called bus rapid transit (BRT) systems similar to those he proposed for Leeds, are (he claimed) already in the French towns of Rouen and Clermont-Ferrand. (NOTE : Rouen operates both trams and BRT whilst the Clermont-Ferrand BRT followed strong lobbying by Michelin (5).

SUPERTRAM - A WASTE OF TIME AND MONEY

"Two of Leeds most outspoken critics of Supertram have called for heads to roll over the fiasco which has led to millions of pounds of public money being wasted" (6). They claimed that since the idea was first mooted, £40-m of taxpayers cash has been wasted over 16 years without an inch of track being laid or a single passenger carried. A METRO spokesman noted that Supertram would bring huge benefits to Leeds, surrounding towns like Morley and the rest of the County which is why so much work and effort was put into the scheme.

MINISTER'S SUPERTRAM BETRAYAL

"The worst of the Supertram debacle is the loss of hope that the scuppered scheme represented. Within its limited vision was a real chance of city and regional regeneration. That chance is all but sunk" (7).

Supertram would have enhanced employment possibilities, new shopping and leisure facilities, improvements to areas of poor housing, and of course a step towards fulfilling Leeds's need for an efficient public transport system. The Government has chosen to flush away tens of millions of pounds without so much as a backward glance whilst falling over itself to invest heavily in London and the south east. "It had been well known here for as long as he has been in office that he and his Transport Department colleagues

never had any intention to allow this city and its neighbours the advantage it needed to further advance local and regional economy with fundamental transport modernisation".

WILL FUNDING BE AVAILABLE FOR TRAM-TRAINS?

The Harrogate - Knaresborough - Leeds line would be ideal for high frequency tram-train operation because it carries no freight and could operate on-street through the city centre before joining the Leeds -York railway line (8). Chris Cheek and consultant Arup have been pressing Metro to look at this technology. Further funding for anything on rails would seem very unlikely because, as Greg Mulholland MP commented : "The simple fact is I suspect, the Government has spent the money they agreed for Leeds ---"

CONCLUSION

With 5 tramway type light rail systems in UK already proving to be popular, and all planning extensions, it is somewhat difficult to understand why the Transport Secretary pulled the plug" on Leeds Supertram. BRT and buses generally are recognised as unattractive to motorists and it will interesting to see whether shoppers will pay the congestion charge, use the Superbuses or simply drive to another town.

REFERENCES

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- 4) Paul Robinson - YEP - Page 2. - 4th November 2005.
- 5) The decision of revaluation in Clermont-Ferrand followed political lobbying by tyre manufacturer Michelin - LIGHT RAIL AND MODERN TRANSPORT - Page 104. March 1997.
- 6) Geoff Fox - YEP - Page 8. 8th November 2005.
- 7) Editorial Opinion - YEP - 27th October 2005.
- 8) Can tram-trains and quality buses rescue Leeds from tram collapse - Andrew Forster - LTT - Page 9. 10th November 2005.

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