



## LIGHT RAIL? YES ! BUT WHO PAYS?

### INTRODUCTION

A White Paper on local transport reform, to be published in 2006, is expected to favour the responsibilities for local transport being changed to a Greater London style authority in an effort to strengthen decision making (1). "City summits" could be held in the eight core cities of England: Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield. They could also takeover powers of the PTA's. Although a city region agenda is complementary to the regional agenda, the life of the regional structure may be somewhat limited.

### BUS DEREGULATION

Bus deregulation and quality contracts may have a "third way" added which would give local authorities more say in bus operations. A recent meeting of the DfT's Director General for roads, regional and local transport with UK's five major bus operators took place to discuss options. Because bus operators may be reluctant to take-on risky investments (for example new vehicles and services), a so-far unused provision of the Transport Act 2000 might be necessary to deliver improvements. These proposed changes could be of help to future Supertram schemes which have suffered rather badly under the deregulation regime.

### FULL CONFIDENCE IN BUSES

Alistair Darling (Transport Secretary) has made no secret of his belief that buses could do an equal job to a Supertram scheme at much less cost and so proposals for a "third way" could help to introduce a level playing field.

This of course would be too late for Leeds where the press are still active at putting the blame squarely on the Transport Secretary. "... I doubt that Mr Darling has the courage to come and apologise for selling us short yet again" (2). This particular newspaper article included a large photograph of Mr Darling boarding a First Group guided bus in Yorkshire.

### ROAD PRICING

A pilot study in the West Midlands could pave the way for a nationwide road pricing scheme. Certain conditions by West Midlands TIP (Transport Innovation Fund) submission were that the pricing schemes must initially be voluntary and only become mandatory if the voluntary phase proves a success. The charge must also not be seen as additional taxation and the DfT must commit to improve public transport in the conurbation (3).

### HABITUAL OPTIMISM BIAS (4)

This is not a new phenomena but a natural reaction to the rules and risks of the game that "big numbers win prizes". Unfortunately, if this patronage forecast turns out to be wrong it has an undesirable effect, first on the contract itself and then later when it is up and running by turning a potential profit into an embarrassing loss. Those building toll roads or light rail systems have in the past fallen victim to this bias.

### GUIDED BUSES - ARE THEY WORTH THE MONEY ?

The contents of this discussion document have so far suggested that the financial problems of either ROADS or LIGHT RAIL have in fact many similarities. METRO's case for Supertram in Leeds included a suggestion that although expensive, it was still good value for money. Guided bus, with its lower infrastructure costs, provides proportionally less benefits. The actual cost to the taxpayer though is somewhat distorted because over half of the costs were provided by the operators themselves (5). After years of operation some bus services have continued along the parallel but unguided section of York Road which tends to suggest that service advantages available by using the guide way could be cancelled out by the cost of fitting those two horizontal wheels.

### PICKING THE RIGHT MASS TRANSIT SYSTEM (6)

Quote: "Official support for tram schemes hit their zenith in 2000 when the (then) Transport Secretary, John Prescott, announced in the ten year plan that he had become convinced of their value and wanted to see 25 new lines by the year 2010".

The 2004 White Paper (The Future of Transport) showed a clear shift in Government thinking and was probably an attempt to develop a framework that would ensure that no local authority will be tempted to even propose new light rail schemes.

Although bus based schemes appear to be favoured at Government level, there seems to be a general lack of data about them and in particular those that have had intensive investment, such as Crawley Fastway and guided bus systems in Leeds and Bradford.

### CONCLUSION

We have gone from a promise of 25 light rail lines over a ten year period to a new era where any Government expenditure on developing Supertrams or light rail systems appears to be officially discouraged. We appear to be telling the world that the bus, and only the bus, is a proven and affordable solution to our urban transit problems?

### REFERENCES

- 1) LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 1 - 13th October 2005
- 2) Paul Robinson - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST - page2 - 27th October 2005
- 3) LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 3 - 13th October 2005.
- 4) LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 4 - 13th October 2005.
- 5) Steve Graham - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST - 6th December 2004.
- 5) Matthew Ledbury - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY p.9 - 13th October 2005.

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