



SUPERTRAM - HAVE LESSONS BEEN LEARNED?

There was much euphoria about 20 years ago when Bristol led Britain with what was then (1987) a historic event that had considerable potential to solve many of our congestion problems. After considerable effort and a bit of arm twisting the city was granted legal powers to construct a tramway type light rail system. Being a "first" in UK, it generated controversy from the start and as time passed it became embroiled in a mixture of political opposition and public disagreement with the route and after several major changes produced an end result that favoured buses. During this difficult period experiments were continued with a small vehicle on rails driven by a flywheel that received its boost at passenger halts. Known as the Parry People Mover, it failed to impress the "powers that be" and very nearly slipped into oblivion as the city continued its slow drift towards the current bus system.

Lessons that could be learned from Bristol were applicable 20 years later in that Government funding support was a rare commodity indeed. Despite the various transit schemes, all originally costed at reasonably price levels, the then Transport Secretary (Alistair Darling) allegedly caused increases by asking time-delaying questions. This was thought to be somewhat unfair because the promoters had jumped through "hoops" to satisfy DfT requirements. It is well known that delays of this nature to any project anywhere in the world will automatically cause it to suffer price increases. On this point the Government appeared to wish to finance only low-cost bus systems. The attitude appeared to be, why should the Government provide a high quality Supertram system when a bus can be disguised as a tram and do an almost identical job at lower cost? This question is reminiscent of the well known saying "*A rose by any other name is still a rose*". There is little doubt that the public will recognise the difference and vote with their feet.

With the Government now in the "hot seat" and continually being interviewed by the press, difficult questions bring out difficult answers. The need to learn lessons was recently admitted by a Transport Minister (Stephen Ladyman) when interviewed by the political correspondent (William Green) of the Yorkshire Post (24/11/06). This interview was very important because it revealed what could have been the real reason for rejecting Supertram projects. The Minister added a warning that future transit systems must go hand-in-hand with congestion charging to tackle rising traffic levels. Also revealed by this article was that nearly half of the regions business would consider moving if a road charge was introduced. Although mistakes had been made at Whitehall, the Minister said he was not going to "throw blame about" but nevertheless suggested that politicians in Leeds be realistic and warned tram supporters not to try and kid ministers about the cost of a scheme. Although it was rising costs which changed the construction price, the schemes had been good value when originally put to the Government. The Minister was not worried by the coming audit by the National Audit Office (NAO) Inquiry because decisions had been taken with best intentions and advice. This interview brought an immediate response from the METRO Director General (Kietan Preston) suggesting that the Transport Minister's comments about Supertram were misleading. The cost/benefit ratio of over two to one in Leeds meant that under the DfT guidelines it should have gone ahead. When the NAO report on Supertram is published it will reveal that the Minister's own civil servants advised him, before turning it down, the scheme represented value for money, better in fact per km. than the extension approved for Nottingham.

Mr Darling told Leeds that the funding for a bus alternative would be available providing it was the right scheme. Lets hope that any lessons from Bristol are "taken on board", especially the tram/bus issues which did not turn out as helpful to the Supertram concept. Despite the many obstacles faced during Nottingham's construction period, it is now recognised by the present Transport Secretary that Nottingham deserves praise because passenger numbers during its second year exceeded forecasts.

As the basis for this article was learning vital lessons from those who had "trod this path earlier", it comes as a surprise to learn of the "poles apart" examples in Greater Manchester and South Yorkshire.

Manchester Metrolink's proposals had adopted "scale" as a method of introducing economies. Better known as "big-bang", it was rejected by the DfT in favour of bus extensions. This was changed when the Government recognised the local strength of feeling and what could be called a "little-bang" emerged permitting a smaller scheme.

The Sheffield/Rotherham Supertram extension was rejected in favour of buses, possibly a glaring example of defending buses from competition. Earlier competition, buses-v-Supertram in Sheffield resulted in the tram winning hearts and minds and may explain why the Chairman of Stagecoach (the Supertram operators) is offering to buy the extra trams needed for this Rotherham service (*Tramways & Urban Transit* - January 2006)

If it is not too late, lessons can still be learned from Bristol.

Prepared by F A Andrews, Assistant Publicity Officer, LRTA.