



## QUALITY TRANSIT AND A HIDDEN AGENDA

Regular readers of this series of transit reviews ("*Bus Resurgence That Eventually Fails*" March 2007 and "*Capital Cities in Western Europe*" April 2007) must surely be puzzled at the Government's apparent love affair with buses. The push for guided buses to replace the former rail service to Cambridge appears to go against the valuable experience gained conclusively on an international basis. Probably more alarming is the Government cancellation of some worthwhile Supertram projects on cost grounds whilst going ahead with road building that has suffered similar inflation type cost increases.

This type of political action is not confined to the UK as only a few weeks ago the Utah Transit Authority (UTA - tram and bus operator Salt Lake City) survived an attempt at a hostile takeover. Many appear to have recognised that the UTA is most efficient and would not be improved by being part of a basically highway administration. (Deseret Morning News - Nicole Warburton - "*House Fails To Act On Bill To Dismantle UTA*" - 6th March 2007).

Many overseas opinions casting doubt on some of our transit schemes seems not to have changed the British attitude towards public transport. Whether right or wrong, the Eddington Report has been criticised by economists (in USA) for its failure to protect abandoned rail rights-of-way from development. "The Eddington Report could have taken a position which would have cost little and yet preserved future options - ring-fencing projects where valuable rights-of-way may be lost to development". (Michael R Weinman - *Head of a railway consultancy in USA*).

A very good example in Britain on railway preservation being put into practice was with a tramway type light rail service between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. It is doubtful if this line would have gone ahead if a railway track-bed had not been available. An added bonus was the ease with which the line could be extended through the CBD and operated with low-floor trams.

The Eddington Report has presented the Government with the dilemma of trying to target funding such that it will fund important transport spending in the part of the country where it is most needed. A discussion paper by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has agreed with this policy but added: cities should drop "*TRAM DREAMS*" (the italics are ours) and accept that showpiece projects are unlikely to catalyse economic growth or regeneration. This conclusion seems strange considering the evidence available for transit induced growth. Also published by IPPR was a paper on land-use planning stating that, more green-belt should be developed, as it cannot be preserved intact for ever. (*Local Transport Today* - "*Eddington Presents Dilemma Says Think Tank*" - 15th to 28th March 2007).

It is interesting to note that many influential academics as well as transport advisers found that successive governments can be held responsible for failing to curb soaring traffic growth. Could this be a case of agendas failing the democratic process through an apparent lack of discussion? Equally critical of the current DfT's *Light Rail Guidance* was a critique from UK TRAM which described it as anti-light rail. UK TRAM represents all parts of the tramway industry. (*Local Transport Today* - David Walmsley - *Fixed Track Executive of Confederation of Passenger Transport* - 15 to 28th March 2007).

A simple but hidden type of agenda appears to have overtaken some of the new tramway type light rail projects currently proposed or actually operating in Britain. At present there are only five that survived beyond the planning stage: Manchester (METROLINK); Sheffield (SUPERTRAM); West Midlands (MIDLAND METRO); Croydon (TRAMLINK) and Nottingham (NOTTINGHAM EXPRESS TRANSIT). Because the tramway light rail concept in Britain has so far been as successful as their European neighbours it is not surprising that all five are seeking funding for extensions. This is where local authority aspirations have clashed with DfT expectations regarding the new funding requirements, now almost hiding behind road pricing complimentary measures. (*Local Transport Today* - *DfT and Councils at odds over TIF?* - 15th to 28th March 2007)

Although many citizens will be somewhat confused at a Government decision to go for a less costly transit mode, there will still be a sinking feeling at the realisation that some qualities and other important benefits will be sacrificed for some of the cheque book economies currently affecting urban transit. What happened to that proverbial level playing field?

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