



## SUPERTRAM - IS IT NOW A POLITICAL FOOTBALL?

The public and the press are still somewhat bemused at the unusual treatment by the DfT regarding traffic congestion in Leeds. This review will conduct a scan of the events leading up to that specific day in 2005 when the Transport Secretary "pulled-the-plug" on Leeds Supertram. "Not value for money" is still understood to be the reason for blocking a quality urban transit network for a cheaper but lower quality transit system.

Anyone having kept records will be struck at how the constant squeeze on funds has not always been evenly spread over a long period of time. The tram in particular has suffered badly, occasionally a big spend followed by an even bigger scrapping policy, sometimes before the running-in period has been completed.

A full and detailed account of alleged malpractice has been covered in many books and this review will attempt to present a very brief summary of the technical breakthrough in tramcar development in pre-war USA and the attempt some 20 years later to create a British equivalent. The hard road to technical progress in recent years came to a sudden halt in 2007 when DfT played its anti-tram card.

The PCC (Presidents Conference Committee) tram staggered USA when it started to operate in the mid-1930s in New York (Brooklyn and Queens). Its major operational advance soon "swept the world" and even today this 70 year-old design can be seen at work almost everywhere. Surprisingly it never operated in Britain although the National Tramway Museum at Crich offers rides on its single PCC exhibit.

A British built tram surprised the transit world in 1953 when Leeds built a railcar based very much on the PCC concept, in preparation for later subway operation. The streamlined body was manufactured in Leeds by Charles H Roe and fitted with Crompton Parkinson VAMBAC CONTROL equipment on trucks by Maley and Taunton. Because of the narrow curves and sharp bends in Leeds, this single deck vehicle could only carry 17 seated and 36 standing passengers. With a normal crew of two the operational economics were very poor indeed. If the Germans had perfected their articulated joint by this time the economics could have been very different.

Many present-day bus passengers, too young to remember trams, could be forgiven for being somewhat bemused at the current political interest now developing in Supertram and its future. Anyone making regular visits to Europe and using the transport system provided there would remain shocked at the poor standard for our citizens. Of the five tramway light rail systems in Britain (the latest in Nottingham was successful from the day it opened) it is somewhat difficult to understand why the DfT is pushing what many still regard as a second class vehicle.

"fir" streetcars and trolleybuses may be a step forward in the transit world but fail to provide many of the benefits taken for granted with Supertram. The original tram system in Leeds was, to the end of its life, embroiled in the politics of the day and an election promise to scrap the trams and substitute buses sealed its fate. Their elimination was very quick with the last tram running in 1959. Once the replacement motorways had become established, Leeds proudly declared itself "The Motorway City of the 70s". Whether a little premature or just boastful is difficult to say because consultants at the time were thinking on different lines and quietly recommended that some thought should go towards urban rail transit.

To some though this speedy transition to buses was going in the wrong direction, especially as the 1949 extension from Belle Isle to Middleton was being recognised for its high quality track work.

The consultants (almost unofficial) advice came in an "either/or" recommendation, either re-use former suburban railways lines or develop a highway based system. The re-use of former railway lines was not favoured though because they were generally situated in the wrong place.

By the late 1980s the City Council was becoming concerned at the increasing congestion and made a visit to Lille, Leeds twin city, to inspect its new automated VAL system. Our Councillors, very much impressed, prepared a Parliamentary Bill, LEEDS ADVANCED TRANSIT, as a British equivalent to VAL but called BRIWAY. Its elevated structure was an untried system requiring a forest of access steps at its many stations.

About the same time, a guided bus system was also being planned by the City Council. Called BUS EXPRESS TRANSIT or BEST, a 1990 brochure by Yorkshire Rider promoted the project.

Not to be left behind, the then West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council had already started promoting METROLINE, a tram system using some land at Colton, especially reserved for it. It lost its protection when the County Council was disbanded and Council owned land was sold to the public.

Soon after, the Ilkley branch line from Leeds and Bradford was downgraded somewhat by British Rail and then, following consultant recommended action, the line was considered for possible use as a light rail line. Following a change by British Rail, the light rail suggestion was short lived and the branch was electrified at high voltage for a railway service.

The next change of any significance was a Parliamentary Bill for 11.25-km of tram line for a Supertram service from Cookridge Street (Leeds city centre) to Tingley with a branch from Hunslet to Stourton. The all party support for this Bill will no doubt have helped it to gain Royal Assent. More legal action followed because of the decision to extend the scheme. Leeds was now being put under pressure to conduct road charging trials. This was agreed to but with an understanding for it to be in the best interests of the city and that a public transport alternative to the car was already in place.

The Government offered to drop its requirement for some up front congestion charging and offered a generous funding package towards Supertram. This was unanimously approved by the full City Council. The 1997 public inquiry was made public in 2000 and displayed a very positive approach to Supertram. The judgement on safety was that it was likely to be improved overall, for all road users. Supertram would be more cost effective than an enhanced bus provision. Funds to build the project were included in the ten year investment programme but was less than clear cut during the initial stages. The reason for this was a need to pass the Government's recent value for money appraisal.

The scheme in 2001 was a 28-km project costed at £487-m, 40 trams with each to carry 270 passengers. 75% of the network would be segregated and expected to attract among its passengers 25% former car users.

It would appear that the 2005 move by Alistair Darling to block the Supertram scheme was strongly tied up with congestion charging. The Government is on record as introducing the Transport Innovation Fund to try and force areas to implement congestion charging schemes. In return funding would be provided to improve local transport networks (Graham Stringer MP - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY -4th to 17th January 2007).

A full business case is expected to be submitted to DfT later in 2007 for a £300-m trolleybus scheme in Leeds. Subject to DfT approval, a Transport & Works Act approval and a successful inquiry, construction work on the scheme could start in 2010 with phased completion by 2011 (David Marsh - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST - 16th June 2007).

Although this Light Rail Transit Review has been written in an attempt to clarify the situation in Leeds, the latest political move will involve a former Deputy Prime Minister (Michael Heseltine) in a detailed look with a possible recommendation. If the all-party support still holds good his task will be that much easier.

If a two-rail transit system is thought to be best after all, either the already planned Supertram system could be recommended or alternatively the fairly new tram-train concept now sweeping Europe.

This Review has covered just over 70 years and includes events leading up to the PCC/VAMBAC/SUPERTRAM era. Every effort has been taken to present an accurate sequence of events up to the present time.

WATCH THIS SPACE

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