



LIGHT RAIL : IS IT GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY?

If an English transport expert in say the DfT cannot fault a proposed light rail tramway system on technical grounds, there is always another way to oppose it. Probably somewhat unjust to those without cars but, for those controlling the "purse strings", a simple way to stop it is to just say no. The many recent treasury refusals could be blamed for pushing light rail well down that "priority ladder" with a subsequent effect that eventually it could effect almost every citizen in this country. **Choice**, a valuable asset, is slowly being taken away from us and, with or without a congestion charge, a Supertram service is necessary in its own right.

Just why the proven Supertram concept was rejected when almost every town or city in Europe has one as its principal urban carrier is difficult to apprehend. Surely, the "value for money" reasoning seems to lack creditability and is being currently questioned by several academics. Its status, as a "middle of the road carrier", gives it an edge, fast service at a modest price. True, a motorist rejects the low-cost bus alternatives and the high cost outlay for a metro system is gradually being surpassed by a modern tram's carrying capacity. One outspoken expert from USA (Kuri Popo PhD - University of California - *Railway Gazette International* - page 476 - August 2007) confirms this. He made the point that several cost-effective tram networks have been destroyed to give way to ineffective metro lines. To a certain extent, Leeds went through a similar experience in 1959 by destroying what was probably one of the most efficient light rail tramway systems in Britain and gained a motorway network combined with a 100% urban bus system. Another example came from Toronto where Canadian experts are planning a segregated light rail system of gigantic proportions helped by a tramway's lower cost.

British transport experts were shocked recently when the cost of moving the "stats" was put firmly into the light rail budget. Trolleybuses can thank their significantly lower costs on this change because their road running surface is paid for by "others". This makes it very difficult to calculate true costs for comparison purposes.

Some of our well known politicians are beginning to speak-out about the direction that we should now be taking on transport issues. A strange phenomenon in this case is the opposite views being expressed by organised groups in the same political party. (*Local Transport Today* - 13th to 26th September 2007).

The Conservative's Quality of Life Commission wants a moratoria on motorway widening schemes coupled with a major expansion of the rail network capabilities. This tends to clash somewhat with the Economic Competitiveness Policy Group which recently called for a renewed programme of motorway widening and a shift of emphasis in urban traffic management to give more priority to improving road traffic flow.

These two opposing points of view will probably delay considerably for a major shift in spending from one mode to the other. Also noted was the cost benefit analysis which was described as fundamentally flawed because it gave too much weight to motorists time savings and not enough weight to environmental degradation

A conclusion that could be reached after reading this review is that the pro-light rail and anti-light rail interests are as wide-apart as ever they were and some drastic political changes will need to be made before we can catch up with the rest of the world's efficient urban transit systems : **Trams on busy urban transit routes backed up with buses on the lighter routes.**

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