



TRAM-TRAIN TECHNOLOGY AND THE CONGESTION CHARGE

Whilst openly calling the congestion charge a bribe (1), the Press also noted that the various transport groups thought of it as another road tax. This line of thinking was certainly not shared by Manchester's Councillors who by now must be somewhat confused by the Government's continual change in attitude on transport matters, especially towards Metrolink. Economy was at the front of expansion plans with "Big - Bang" appearing as a cost saving procedure as well as a quicker way to procure new rolling stock and a few extensions. With the restrictions on funds, GMPTA attempted a limited contribution towards carrying more passengers with the ultimate aim of reducing traffic congestion. This was an import of some 2nd hand trams from North America. Technical differences aborted what at first seemed like a good idea and the present tram fleet just carried on working to capacity. Whether or not the current traffic problems would have benefited from a successful import is open to speculation but the successes of today's tram fleet is there for all to see. The once congested thoroughfares in the city centre are now pleasant precincts and used by only people and trams.

We now have what might be called "Little - Bang", a series of smaller sections that not only amount to spaced out requests for transit funds but also a slower way of dealing with traffic flow improvements. With an impatient Government, this longer spell in the "doldrums" gives the DfT the opportunity to agree with GMPTA some form of entry charge. This time gap would be better used as a settling-in period giving drivers some extra time to adjust to new transit facilities.

As a nation we have been somewhat slow at investigating tram-train technology. Much of the necessary infrastructure is already in place, a factor that keeps costs down. At the 1992 start of Metrolink, the system almost resembled a tram-train system and its earlier start was made possible by permitting much existing track to be used by a phased renewal as funds became available. (Not a perfect solution but probably preferred to a congestion charge).

After that unfortunate day in 2005 which saw Britain discard quality transit systems in favour of buses and trolleybuses with that simple statement, "*Trams Are Not Value For Money*", the world gained the impression that we had now become a poor nation. Although the news that our transport experts were now inspecting the tram-train concept in Europe, many would consider it as a well timed face-saver even though six or more years are forecast before trials on tram tracks can be concluded for evaluation. In some ways this tends to compound the initial notification that tram-trains would replace worn-out suburban railway stock on a line with no connection to a tram line. The second announcement, when it came, appeared as a possible rethink at high level to clarify the earlier mixed message, hardly a tram-train matter. Europe had been developing this new technology nearly 20 years earlier and the delayed statement from Westminster displayed what amounts to some muddled thinking. There are proposals for trials to take place on the York to Leeds (via Harrogate) railway line and include street extensions at both ends. Entry at Leeds would be by a spur just south of Burley Park station onto new tram lines along Kirkstall Road and Wellington Street and then a loop around Leeds shopping centre (2). Leeds has for many years stated that a Supertram system must be in place before it would consider introducing a congestion charge. This lower cost method of introducing street tram operation could in any case alter the necessity to impose a charge for entering the CBD. As it has turned out, the "Big-Bang" approach for funds makes the scheme vulnerable to the whims of officials not transit minded. If the Leeds tram-train experiment is successful, a one section at a time appeal for funds could win approval.

REFERENCES

- 1) "*Its a congestion bribe*" - Sophie Nazan, Consumer Reporter -YORKSHIRE EVENING POST - 10th June 2008.
- 2) LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - 13-26th June 2008.

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FOOTNOTE

After this Document was prepared a local newspaper printed a statement by the Chancellor, Alistair Darling : "*The idea of charging motorists for every mile they drive will not go away*" (Mark Hookham - Political Editor - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST 24th June 2008.

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