



"WE MUST MOVE FASTER ON LRT" (1)

One city in particular (Birmingham) has good reason to have told the Transport Minister face-to-face in the House of Commons that UK cities have a struggle to compete against their European counterparts because they have had 40% less to spend on their transport infrastructure over the last four decades. The opportunity to make comments of this nature came at the All-Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group meeting (24th June 2008) which involved senior figures from both the public and private sectors.

It should be pointed out that the Midland Metro tramway system was mostly built on the track-bed of a former heavy railway line and terminates at Snow Hill on the fringes of the CBD. Unfortunately it involves a fairly long walk to many of Birmingham's important destinations. The DfT would no doubt recognise that a mistake had been made if it visited such places as Bremen, Freiburg, Karlsruhe and Kassel where the tram does what it does best and operates through shopping streets as well as on reserved tracks if required.

The Transport Minister, pushed on the slow trials of the tram-train concept, should have known that Europe had already perfected the learning curve for successful operation. The author of these Discussion Documents has visited both Saarbrücken and Kassel many times. Saarbrücken was originally like Leeds with electric railway routes serving a station situated a walking distance from the CBD. This was later corrected by constructing a street operated tramway with tram-trains accessing the city centre. Electrical power at tramway voltage was used when on street tracks but an automatic switch changed its operation to high voltage when on railway track. Kassel went a stage further by operating electric/diesel tram-trains in its commercial centre and different vehicles (electric/diesel) in the outer suburbs.

A study conducted by consultant (ARUP) for Leeds (2) identified the Leeds-Harrogate-York line as the best option out of five being examined. The Transport Minister was never-the-less reminded that most cities in Europe provided large infrastructure investment for funding trams and metro systems whereas our transit systems have inevitably fallen behind with best practice now a glaring example of restraint on growth. Under investment here is accentuated by unpopular and relatively inefficient buses and a neglected rail system operating at capacity and in need of longer platforms.

In comparison with the French city of Lyon, the last decade had not only seen four metro lines built but in 2001 a start made with a new tramway system, now expanded to three lines with a fourth in planning.

Probably overshadowing the all-party Parliamentary Group meeting of 24th June was the Light Rapid Transit Forum conference of the 2nd of July in Nottingham. The newly appointed Metrolink Director for the GMPTE (Mr Purdy) was very outspoken and accused the DfT of "*Analysing schemes to death*". Mr Philip Purdy oversaw the expansion of Melbourne's 155-mile tram network, one of the largest systems in the world (3). His hard hitting comments were echoed by other speakers and Mark Fowles, Managing Director of Nottingham City Transport, drew attention to the difficulty of telling politicians that tram schemes could boost run-down urban areas "*When they don't have pound signs attached*". Government reaction to criticism has so far been conspicuously absent and a rapid growth of tramway systems in the UK is unlikely because it doesn't win votes nationally.

REFERENCES

- 1) Geoff Inskip - Chief Executive of CENTRO/PTA - West Midlands Transport Authority - TRAMWAYS & URBAN TRANSIT - August 2008 - page 300.
- 2) "TRAM-TRAIN STREET OPTIONS FOR LEEDS AND YORK" - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY" - 13 to 26th June 2008.
- 3) Chris Randall - TRAMWAYS & URBAN TRANSIT - August 2008 - page 298.

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