INTRODUCTION

Anyone making a record of Britain's progress in providing light rail systems and then comparing it with say equivalent new projects in Europe could be forgiven for being somewhat confused about placing at least some of the blame on our complacency with transit matters. The whole light rail concept, which includes Supertram, is very complex indeed and probably made more so because of the many separate functions involved. Substantial gains or losses, depending on which side of the fence one is standing, can result from decisions designed to please everyone.

URBAN AND INTERURBAN, OLD TERMS BUT STILL APPLICABLE

This is well demonstrated in TYNE & WEAR territory around Newcastle. The integration of former suburban railway routes into the METRO network that now includes several lines under the CBD did in effect create a very efficient interurban system, made more efficient with many of its former bus feeder services. Unfortunately, without its bus feeders, its efficiency has slipped alarmingly. Would a less costly surface route operated with Supertrams through the shopping centre cater equally as well for both urban and interurban requirements? This was described in greater detail earlier in 2005 (2), Quote: "With hindsight, perhaps it should have been a tramway itself, trams would fit into Northumberland Street and Grainger Street just as well as into Piccadilly Gardens - - - but maybe that would have been an innovation too far in 1980".

Liverpool also needs to differentiate between urban and interurban operation because its efficient underground rail services serve several adjacent towns/cities and could correctly be filed under an interurban label. This has been recognised locally and plans are being produced for trams to return to the city.

CITY STREETS - WITH AND WITHOUT TRAMS

How best can a city street serve its citizens? Trams, buses, cars and pedestrians all claim a right to use it but several factors need to be considered before reaching a conclusion. This conundrum may best be answered by studying successful schemes overseas where ambience, safety, efficiency and personal mobility have been closely studied.

Pride of place must go to Karlsruhe in Germany where the daily flow of passengers and pedestrians through the principal shopping street must surely be the most intensive anywhere in Europe. The moderately slow but safe speed through the shopping mall is only for a comparatively short distance and within minutes high speed is possible, either trams on reservation (urban) or LRVs on railway tracks (interurban). The mixture in this city of trams and pedestrians or LRVs and trains is as yet unequalled elsewhere.

A good example of a costly but well intentioned experiment designed to please everyone comes out of Brussels in Belgium (3) where the surface trams running east-west across the inner city were placed in a 3.56-km tunnel in 1969. Plans are now being looked at to put them back on the surface.

15 YEARS TO BUILD A TRAMWAY : ITS ABSURD

The House of Commons Select Committee chairman (Gwyneth Dunwoody MP) said: "Tram schemes cannot simply be written off as too expensive. It is more complex than that; the problems come because the Government takes a long time to make decisions". The comment about delays may provide an answer as to why Leeds Supertram appears to be running out of time. Every Government demand to recalculate the project's estimated costs., or look once again at a bus alternative, takes up much valuable time and is a drain on the local taxpayers.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to understand the logic for delaying (to extinction?) the Leeds project. Already well proven is a tram's superior quality (less costly than underground rails and more efficient than guided
buses) and a BBC (Look North) news bulletin has quoted Sheffield's buses as being unable to retain their patronage. If efficiency reasons cannot be found to terminally end a Supertram scheme, then the only sure way is to delay its progress such that it will "Run out of time"..

REFERENCES


4) House of Commons Transport Select Committee - Questions why a UK system takes four times as long to build as the rest of Europe - TRAMWAYS & URBAN TRANSIT - page 172 - May 2005.

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