BRISBANE'S TRANSPORT STUDY

Do 1935 ideas dominate its approach to public transport in 1965?

"Replacement of all trams and trolley-buses with diesel units is recommended. Immediate action should be taken to purchase the necessary buses in order that this conversion can be completed within a maximum period of three years. This recommendation is based on a number of considerations including:

1. *The inflexibility of tram and trolley-bus operation prevents the efficient scheduling and utilisation of vehicles and manpower which is vital to the preservation of a reasonable fare structure;*

2. *The cost of complete bus replacement is substantially less than expenditures on tram replacement and track reconstruction;*

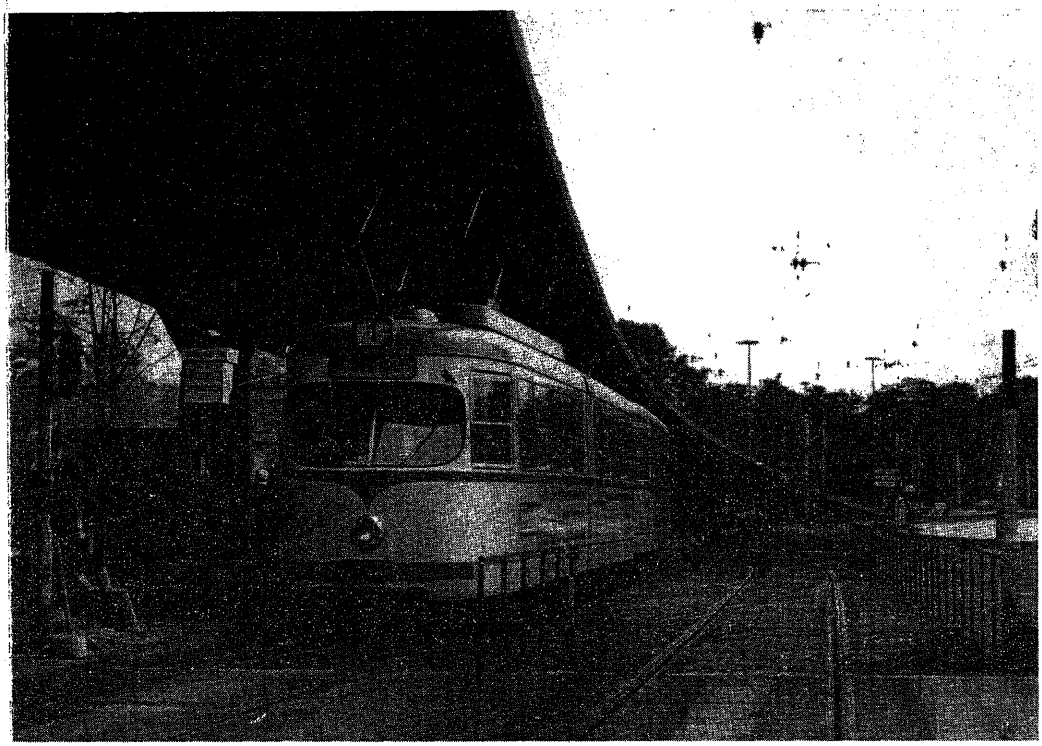
3. *Pro forma* (sic) *adjustments of the* 1963-4 *financial statement indicates that an all-bus operation in that year would have reduced operating expenses by about* £570,000, *which is more than enough to offset the* £420,000 *additional interest and depreciation on the new buses;*

4. *Major road system improvements can be accomplished with minimum capital expenditures after conversion to an all-bus operation;*

5. *Routes can be extended promptly into new residential and industrial areas as needs warrant, and through-routing of lines to better serve the central City can be accomplished; and,*

6. *Additional safety will be afforded passengers, and an impediment to traffic flow eliminated by kerbside loading of passengers."*

Many cities are getting new trams and new freeways. This modern tram in Düsseldorf (West Germany) pauses in the shadow of a new overhead motorway—just one example of skilled engineers' ability to fit tramway improvements into modern road systems.



THIS uninspiring recommendation came, not from the pen of the late R. Stuart Pilcher in 1935 (for he would never have misused words and made the grammatical errors which we reproduce faithfully from the original), but from American transport consultants in 1965! It is just one of the recommendations of the *Brisbane Transportation Survey*, whose list of the members of the Policy Committee, Technical Planning Committee and Study Staff seems not to include the Manager of the Transport Department or any of his staff listed as such. Perhaps that is why the report is couched in the ideology of 1935 instead of 1965.

There can be few examples of consultants recommending a city to get rid of its trams, trolleybuses and suburban railways in favour of the private car. Even Los Angeles, the city of automobile smog, needs railed rapid transit. Yet Brisbane paid £A126,000 to Wilbur Smith and Associates for their report, which was duly presented to the Lord Mayor on 4th August, 1965. Mr. J. E. Hamm, the Brisbane representative of the consultants, said that "the plan has been graded to solve Brisbane's traffic problems until 1981 when the population was expected to reach one million. After that date, a new plan will be necessary." Adoption of the report will cost Brisbane's citizens £A178 million over 20 years; what the post-1981 plan will cost is not mentioned but we dread to think of it.

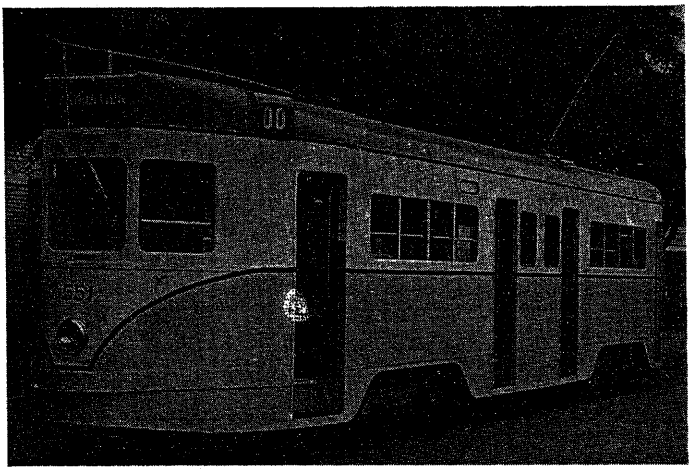
Apart from scrapping the 265 trams and 36 trolleybuses, the report recommends a gigantic road plan, five new bridges across the Brisbane River, closing the suburban railways to Manly and Pinkenba to passenger traffic, and dropping a cross-river rail link between South Brisbane and Roma Street, though it does favour the introduction of rapid transit services on the 17-mile Darra-Virginia route on existing tracks through the city. Though the report does not state this explicitly, it is all too evident that the buses are just an interim solution before complete motorisation takes place.

In the absence of any evidence that a city designed for the motor-car can be a success, the consultants tested their proposals on some of the world's biggest computers and found that the road system would be highly efficient under peak loading conditions. One must not forget that a computer is designed to answer the specific question it is asked, and that even the world's biggest computer does not answer back by enquiring if the customer has asked it the correct question. We think that the computer should have been asked whether the road network was necessary and whether an optimum public transport network would have been as efficient, let alone cheaper. The answer might have been embarrassing.

We lack evidence that the human element is as sound as the mechanical design of the private car; would the road network depend on the absence of failures in human control systems? Prediction or evaluation of traffic frustration is impossible, and it is noteworthy that San Francisco voters have revolted against urban highways and have turned to new urban and regional railed rapid transit systems. The unfinished urban highways make an ugly scar on the city, as if they are a memorial to abandoned foolish ideas. Brisbane could well find out what motivated the developments in San Francisco, and possibly save its citizens the fantastic expenditure on this admittedly interim solution. The report ignored the very successful urban railways of Chicago or Stockholm, and the equally successful light railways in European towns like Göteborg (Gothenburg) and Köln (Cologne)—or to note that you can upgrade a tramway to a *Métro* at minimum expense when traffic gets out of hand. The Brisbane Press did suggest, however, that the Lord Mayor favoured the removal of trams.

The Premier of Queensland, Mr. Nicklin, added fuel to the fire in a Press statement by remarking that if the City Council decided that the tramway replacement proposals were unacceptable, then many major works would have to be revised and their cost would increase. He did not add that if public transport were made attractive enough to stem the craving for new roads, the much lower expenditure would not have needed a new plan in 1981.

Shortly after the plan was made public, both the Brisbane Chamber of Commerce and the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland supported its recommendations. The RACQ suggested, ominously, that the trams should be replaced gradually and should be allowed to run themselves out. Readers in Britain who remember how similar policies were implemented will shudder



Brisbane's best trams are attractive, comfortable vehicles, but do not incorporate many post-1950 engineering advances which have made travel faster, smoother and cheaper in many larger—and smaller—cities.

at the thought. The Glasgow trams, once financially sound, became heavy losers once scrapping was begun. Newcastle, typical of many British towns, operated trams that were almost disintegrating on track that had already disintegrated. We all know the rest.

Those Brisbane citizens who come from Britain will have noticed a very familiar ring about the reasons for tram scrapping; it is as if the consultants had hibernated some 20 or 30 years ago and had been insulated from the rest of the world. It sounds like an old-fashioned prescription marked *The Medicine as before;* in its time, it must have killed quite a few patients, but there may be special reasons why the latest wonder-drug, urban railed transport, was not prescribed for Brisbane. Just what is this *inflexibility* we used to hear so much about? Do the experts really think, for instance, that a London bus regulator dare divert a bus to a route not normally worked by its parent garage? Could they be referring to those infamous "predestinate grooves" which keep trams on a predictable path? Of course not, for bus lanes are merely white lines to make buses run as if they were trams, and experts would not make a silly mistake like that—or would they?

Something quite new is the claim that buses are more economical than trams in manpower. Dare we misquote London Transport's latest "with it" advertisement for public transport as "These five buses hold 345 people who could all be carried on one eight-axle articulated tram." The comparison is between five crews of two plus an out-of-date fare system and one crew of two plus several ticket cancelling machines and an intelligent ticket system. Have the experts heard of conductorless cars, self-service ticket cancellers, one-man trains of articulated cars? If not, they had better realise soon that these things are with us now and will spread, even to Brisbane if it is lucky. Did anyone make any allowance for the fact that the present tramwaymen might not want to stay in their jobs when trained as bus drivers? European experience suggests that bus drivers promptly leave to get jobs as lorry drivers with regular hours of work. This problem does not arise with tramwaymen. Better utilisation of manpower indeed!

What then of relative costs? We have never claimed that the first cost of a tram is cheaper than a bus; when you add capital expenditure on track and other fixed assets, it is very much dearer. But cost comparisons have to be made on overall costs, and if the experts had included a Transport Manager, he could have told them wages are a high percentage of costs. When one makes due allowance for the capitalised saving in wages through use of modern trams, the picture becomes very different, and the advantages of trams are made plain. A superficial comparison of first costs can only mislead. Few Brisbane ratepayers realise how many anachronisms are present in their tramways; antiquated staffing with roving conductors, old-fashioned trolley-

pole collectors with wheels, as many as eight stops per mile (which must really keep the speeds to a minimum) and, last but not least, the total absence of measures to give tramcars priority over private transport. So many cities exploit the positive virtues of trams, including their *flexibility* by modern thinking (for a modern tram can go anywhere: in the street, on roadside, median strip, embankment, cutting or tunnel), that one wonders why Brisbane is out of touch with the rest of the world. As to these so-called *Pro forma* (did they really mean *pro rata*?) adjustments to the 1963-4 financial statement, we are left wondering how they were computed. One fears that the well-established British municipal traditions of the 1930's were the basis, and that no account was taken of modern operating methods.

It seems as if the experts had advised that good houses should be sold at prices corresponding to their value as rubble, and that tents should be bought in their place, just because they are cheap and can be moved easily. If the tram system were retained, it seems to have been overlooked that only 100 new trams would have been required to replace the drop-centre cars; an initial order of 50 followed by about 12 per annum for four years would surely have been cheaper than universal bus replacement. In any case, one would expect articulated units to carry three times as many passengers as modern buses, and also to have at least twice the life expectancy. Was allowance made for such factors?

Was it forgotten that Brisbane maintains its track to best European standards out of revenue funds? And was allowance made for the extra 15 ft. of roadway to be maintained by the ratepayers if the trams disappear? Of course we cannot prove this, but we can make a good guess that neither point came into account. The claim that tramway operating expenses are higher than those for buses is not borne out by the experience of Australian cities. When the four Adelaide Street routes were closed, the trams were holding their own losses. The Melbourne tramways make financially but the buses made heavy a profit which helps to offset the loss on buses. In Sydney and Hobart, where buses handle all the traffic, heavy deficits are incurred annually.

If the cost and the low speed of extending into new areas are grounds for tram scrapping, someone should tell this to München (Munich), for that city is steadily extending its trams over former feeder bus routes as traffic grows. Such extensions are all on segregated tracks with flyunders and short subways, and help to provide a faster and more attractive service without adding to traffic congestion.

The sixth reason was the added safety to passengers from kerbside loading. This must surely be the most out-of-date reason of all! Why then do so many European cities make their buses load and unload at tramway stations with islands in the roadway? A visit to Zürich, Bochum or Stockholm would indeed puzzle these experts, for the central stopping position avoids hindrance to other traffic through buses pulling in and out at stops. Do we still have to remind these experts that while 100 per cent of all tram passengers cross half the street, 50 per cent of bus passengers have to cross all the street? One could always reserve the kerbside traffic lane for buses, but where then would the motorists park their cars—and this is a report to encourage motoring.

The Press has revealed that many Government Ministers are disappointed with the survey, especially for the lack of ring roads which they claim are needed to keep traffic out of the city. The RACQ has commented that the cost of the plan could be double the estimate, and added that the cost must be borne by every member of the community rather than just the motorists. Since the plan will force everyone to become a motorist (or withdraw into monastic seclusion), the distinction is rather academic, and higher vehicle registration fees are a virtual certainty, along with higher fares and less and less frequent services.

Before mortgaging their future earnings to finance works which cover only the estimated needs of 1981, Brisbane's leaders and citizens may perhaps consider whether a more economical solution would provide high-speed segregated tramways that would run as efficiently in 1995 as do many now in Gothenburg, Munich, Cologne, Düsseldorf and Boston.

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