

Delivered at R.M.I.T.'s Storey Hall, on Friday, 20/12/2001,  
the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sir Robert's birthday, by Graeme Turnbull.

Received  
2/12/01

## **The development and retention of Melbourne's trams and the influence of Sir Robert Risson**

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Melbourne, the capital of the State of Victoria (Australia), currently operates an extensive tramway system as part of the metropolitan multi-modal public transport network.

"Using the criteria of fleet size, route kilometres and the number of serviced lines, the only cities with systems larger than Melbourne's on the basis of all three criteria are St Petersburg, Bucharest, Moscow and Kiev, in that order. Melbourne therefore has the largest tram system of any English-speaking country, the largest outside Europe and the former USSR." [1]

Several reasons have been advanced over the years as to why Melbourne, in contrast to the other Australian capitals, retained trams as the principle means of street public transport in the inner suburban area.

These reasons include

- The topography of Melbourne; wide city streets (in comparison with other Australian Cities, although there are a number of narrow streets with tramlines in Melbourne) combined with a grid street layout in the city centre (CBD). Adelaide for example enjoys the benefits of wide city streets but this factor did not save trams in the South Australian capital.
- The survival of the Melbourne cable tramway system into the late 1920's and 1930's; the last two routes did not cease operation until October 1940. This in turn meant that the replacement electric tram fleet was relatively new in the 1950's and 1960's when the replacement of trams was fashionable. In effect unlike other Australian cities Melbourne never operated a large fleet of first generation tramcars.
- The well documented Melbourne versus Sydney rivalry. Sydney had converted its tramway system to buses, however in Melbourne there was a prevailing view, even within Parliamentary circles that it would not necessarily be appropriate to follow similar trends just because Sydney had scrapped trams.
- The existence of a financially independent Tramways Board. The Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramways Board, formed in 1919, was sufficiently removed from day to day political direction and interference. The Tramways were a Semi-Government Authority. The term Semi-Government is significant. The political landscape in Victoria was known for the large number of powerful independent Semi-Government Authorities.

- The generally conservative nature of the citizens of Melbourne; In comparison with Sydney for example, there was substantial resistance to change.
- Progressive improvement in tramcar design; Construction of new trams continued throughout the 1930's, the years of the Second World War and well into the 1950's.
- Within the Workshops and design sections of the Melbourne tramways innovation and progressive development of tramcar design was encouraged; Whilst not all new innovations were necessarily successful, for example the fitting of dash canopy lighting, the majority were. The M&MTB progressively introduced tip over upholstered saloon seating, sliding doors, improved interior lighting, resilient wheels and carbon insert trolley shoes.
- Appointment of Sir Robert Risson as Chairman of the M&MTB.

Sir Robert was Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board from 1949 to 1970. This was an era when there were constant suggestions from sections of the media and road transport interests that Melbourne's transport policies were "out of touch" with the rest of the world, that the tramway system was "antiquated" and that trams should be replaced by "modern" bus services.

Not only is Sir Robert Risson well remembered, "the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board is remembered as the body which developed Melbourne's tramways to a position of pre-eminence. For more than 60 years, almost all of Melbourne's tramways were the responsibility of this well-respected institution". [2]

The origins of the Melbourne tramway system are complex and prior to the formation of the M&MTB involved a considerable number of operators and diverse services.

A large cable tramway system operated by the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company (MT&O Co) that had been built between 1885 and 1891. Melbourne's cable tramway system, a unique subject in itself, which exceeded San Francisco's in size, was known for its efficiency and outstanding engineering.

The cable tram network was extensive (nearly 45 miles of double track) serving the central city area and extending to West Melbourne, North Melbourne, Flemington Bridge, Brunswick, North Carlton, North Fitzroy, Nicholson St, Johnson St Bridge (the so called Carlton or Collingwood route), Victoria Bridge, and Richmond. Running south of the city down St Kilda Rd, cable trams served Toorak, Prahran, Brighton Rd, Windsor and St Kilda Beach. In addition two other routes served the area south of the Yarra River. These services ran to South Melbourne and Port Melbourne.

The success of the cable tram system was such that Melbourne was a late starter in the building of electric tramways.

It was not until 1916 that an electric tram service reached the City Centre and even then the electric line terminated in Batman Avenue, in effect only reaching the edge of the city central business district. The first electric trams did not run in Swanston St, City until 1926. This event can be contrasted with the introduction of electric trams in the central area of Brisbane in 1897, in George St, Sydney in 1899, in central Perth in the same year and in Adelaide in 1909. Hobart, the Tasmanian capital established an electric tramway system as early as 1893.

In addition to the main cable tramway system, the Northcote City Council operated an isolated cable tramline from Clifton Hill (where it connected with the main cable tramway system) north along High St to Dundas St, the northern municipal boundary.

The North Melbourne Electric Tramway and Lighting Company had from 1906 operated electric tram services from the cable tram terminus at Flemington Bridge to Essendon (Keilor Rd) and Saltwater River (now known as the Maribymong River).

Growing restless several suburban councils, in an era when the operation of public transport could be profitable established municipal council tramway systems. The first of these was the Prahran and Malvern Tramways Trust in 1910. The P&MTT was followed by the Hawthorn Tramways Trust and the Melbourne, Brunswick and Coburg Tramways Trust. Both the HTT and the MB&CTT commenced operations in 1916.

Subsequently the Fitzroy, Northcote and Preston Tramways Trust and the Footscray Tramways Trust were also formed.

The P&MTT grew into an extensive network that saw electric trams extend well beyond the initial member councils after whom the Trust was named. By 1918 new lines had been built to Kew (via Glenferrie Rd), Deepdene (via Burke Rd), East Kew (Harp Rd), Mont Albert (Union Rd), Victoria Bridge, Glenhuntly, Caulfield, Elsternwick and Point Ormond.

Even the Victorian Railways operated two isolated tramlines. The first of these from the railway at St Kilda to Brighton Beach (officially referred to as an electric street railway) opened in 1906 and the second from Sandringham Station to Black Rock opened in 1919. The Black Rock line was extended to Beaumaris in 1926 but after a very short life this extension was abandoned in 1931.

In 1916 the lease of the company (MT&O Co), which operated the cable tram system, expired and an interim Tramways Board was established.

As far back as 1911 a Royal Commission had recommended the electrification of the suburban railway network, the conversion of the cable tramways to electricity route by route, and that all tramways, cable and electric, private and municipal be vested in one body an all embracing Tramways Trust.

“In 1918, with overall tramway control just around the corner, the State Government appointed a Board of Inquiry to survey traffic congestion in the city area. Cable trams were now carrying 113 million passengers annually; 176 trams shunted at the foot of Elizabeth St between 5 and 6 pm daily; and during the same busy hour, more than 420 trams were clanging their way across the Town Hall intersection at Collins and Swanston Streets.....also in the same year legislation (no 2995) was passed setting up the permanent authority, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board.”[3]

“The Board was formed to consolidate and unify all these somewhat separate systems and to prepare an overall plan (General Scheme) for tramway development. The Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB) was constituted on 2 July 1919 to take over all existing and proposed tramways within a radius of 10 miles (approx 16km) from the GPO Melbourne with the exception of the two lines operated by the Victorian Railways” [4].

“ The extensive cable tramway system, together with the remaining horse car line (both formerly operated by the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company Limited) were taken over on 1 November 1919. The electric tramways of the Prahran and Malvern Tramways Trust, the Hawthorn Tramways Trust, the Melbourne, Brunswick and Coburg Tramways Trust, the Fitzroy, Northcote and Preston Tramways Trust and the Footscray Tramways Trust were taken over on 2 February 1920 together with the cable tramway of the Northcote City Council. The tramway section of the North Melbourne Electric Tramway and Lighting Company Limited was purchased on 1 August 1922. Both the Fitzroy, Northcote and Preston Tramways Trust and the Footscray Tramways Trust had not commenced operations when taken over by the Board.

The Parliamentary Bill establishing the M&MTB envisaged that the Board would also take over the Victorian Railways tramways. However at a late stage in the debate on the bill, the Parliament rejected this proposal and the ‘railway trams’ remained a separate undertaking.”[5]

The Board immediately set about the task of converting the cable tramways to electric traction. In the city area the last cable trams ran in Swanston St in 1926, Flinders St in 1927, Collins St in 1929. After a pause in the conversion program, due no doubt to the severe financial downturn of the time, the cable trams in Elizabeth St were replaced in 1936.

The various electric lines of the former Trust’s were connected and gradually consolidated into one network, sections of single track were duplicated and a number of extensions were constructed and then opened for traffic.

Some cable tramways, those carrying smaller numbers of passengers, such as the routes to West Melbourne, North Carlton and Port Melbourne were converted to buses during the mid to late 1930’s. The Tramways Board had operated buses since 1925 but for the next ten years bus operations were largely confined to temporary services whilst cable trams services were converted to electric trams and to some tourist services.

From the mid 1930's the position changed and within a few years new suburban routes had commenced from the City to Fishermans Bend and from Footscray to Sunshine, Deer Park and Moonee Ponds. Accordingly by this stage the Tramways Board was a significant bus operator as well as an operator of tram services.

In 1939 the cable tramway to Johnson St Bridge was converted to buses. This particular conversion was significant in that the Board had decided to replace the busy cable tram route via Lygon, Elgin and Johnson Sts with buses rather than electric trams. With the conversion of the Johnson St route the only cable tramways still remaining were the two routes that commenced in Bourke Street at Spencer Street, and ran to (a) Northcote via Clifton Hill and (b) north along Nicholson St past the Exhibition Buildings.

Between March and October 1938, the M&MTB's Chairman, Mr Hector Bell undertook an extensive overseas visit. Bell returned with a large number of innovations some major some minor but nevertheless all significant.

Several interior design features of the then new 1938 London Underground tube stock found their way into the final design of the Board's first luxury tramcar SW6 Class No 850, exterior dash canopy lighting and driver controlled pneumatically operated sliding doors were introduced and a Canadian designed tourist coach was ordered. But it was the latest model London Double Deck bus with a large open back platform (Leyland Titan) and the American PCC streetcar that most impressed Bell.

The Presidents' Conference Committee streetcar (PCC car) was designed to provide smooth acceleration, quiet running, good riding qualities and high traffic speeds. The design and subsequent production was produced as a result of the work of a committee organised in 1929 by the presidents of the leading USA city transport undertakings. The first production vehicles entered service in the United States in 1936.

Bell was so impressed with the London double deck bus that he immediately telegraphed from London directing that the Board immediately cease planning for the conversion of the Bourke St cable trams to electric trams and directed that Double Deck buses should be trailed in Bourke St to replace the last remaining and now life expired cable trams.

Melbourne it can be argued with the advantage of hindsight may well have been on the verge of becoming a much more bus orientated city with the M&MTB potentially operating a greater fleet of buses than railed vehicles.

Events were however to prove otherwise.

The decision to replace the last cable trams in Bourke Street with buses did not prove to be the success that many inside and outside of transport, passengers and non passengers alike considered that it would be.

The buses had considerable difficulty coping with the patronage, especially the extra wartime patronage, they were slow loading due to the single rear platform entrance. Short distance passengers in particular were especially reluctant to occupy the top deck.

There was a certain degree of reluctance on the part of the general public to accept the change.

As the cable tram tracks were not removed from the road surface until many years later the bodies of the buses showed the strains on running over rough road surfaces and not over a road pavement constructed specifically to cater for large double deck vehicles. The buses caused their own traffic congestion pulling into and out from the kerb. Shopkeepers and businesses along the routes had mixed feelings in relation to the success or otherwise of the changeover.

As the buses (including not only the double deck vehicles but also the single deck buses with a rear platform entrance) required a two man crew (two person crew) considerable manpower savings would have accrued if higher capacity electric trams had been introduced.

By 1943 the Tramways Board reviewed the situation and decided that upon the cessation of hostilities the conversion of the Bourke St bus routes to electric trams was to be an urgent post war priority as the trial of the buses had not proved to be a success.

Had the buses proved successful, it could be argued that no further tramways would have been constructed in Melbourne and that ultimately all existing tram services would have over a number of years depending on finance been converted to bus operation. Such events were to take place in every other Australian capital city throughout the 1950's.

Due to a combination of factors, not the least being the huge post war shortage of essential supplies and materials the conversion of the buses in Bourke St to trams was to take several years to achieve.

The debate between the relative merits of trams and buses continued. When Mr Reg Ansett (later Sir Reginald) returned from an overseas visit in 1948 he was quoted in the Melbourne press as expressing the view that trams will have ceased in the USA in fifteen years. At the time, Ansett had considerable road passenger transport interests apart from his perhaps better known aviation investments.

As Ansett was no impartial observer, others saw the situation differently. "Mr Ansett has only a few days ago, as we write, returned from a trip abroad and has been reported in the Melbourne 'Sun' as saying that trams would have ceased to exist in America in fifteen years time and that Melbourne should take this lead. This utterly inaccurate statement- there are some 2,000 new trams on order in the USA at the moment, and several systems are building new branches or extensions despite intense bus propaganda-might not seem worthy of comment were it not for the following facts, Mr Ansett builds buses on a large scale; Mr Ansett owns bus runs and is endeavouring to extend them; Mr Ansett is reported to have large scale financial backing from American sources; Mr Ansett's backer is reported to be a principal of General American Aerocoach one of the backers of the National City set-up." [6]

Despite the general acknowledgement in the community that the buses which had replaced the last of the cable trams in Bourke Street had proved largely unsuccessful, the Board and, in particular, its Chairman (Mr Bell) were frequently accused in the press of being anti-bus. In 1938 Mr Bell could well have been accused of being anti-tram.

Meanwhile the Victorian Premier (October 1947 to June 1950) Mr. Holloway (Liberal-Country Party Coalition) had just returned from an overseas visit during which he had noticed considerable tramway abandonment was taking place overseas. The Tramways Board was asked in December 1948 to cease preparations (Bourke St scheme) and prepare an urgent report on the relative merits of trams, trolley buses and buses. The Board of the M&MTB duly submitted a thorough report.

“The Premier of Victoria (Mr Hollway) announced on Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> February [1949], that the State Government had approved the plans of the Tramways Board to convert the Bourke St bus routes to electric tramway operation. The four main reasons for this move were

- the width of Bourke Street suited trams
- trams could handle crowds better than diesel or trolley buses
- municipalities along the routes wanted trams
- construction and running of the trams required no imported materials.

Other factors included the large expenditure already incurred by the Board in preliminary works and material.”[7]

Not all sections of the community shared the same enthusiasm for the project. “Objection to the decision was voiced by the Secretary of the Chamber of Automotive Industries (Mr H W Morrison)...who was reported in the press as saying that the sooner Mr Bell was removed the better it would be for the motor industry.” [8]

Apart from the Bourke St project the other protracted issue was the introduction of the PCC tramcar. The M&MTB Chairman had also “entered into negotiations to have one (PCC) car imported complete and to build others locally or adapt their features to new rolling stock. The Customs Department refused to permit duty free entry of a sample car to Australia.” [9]

The Tramways Board ultimately had to be satisfied with importing one car-set of PCC trucks and associated electrical equipment and modifying a standard SW6 class body to accommodate the PCC equipment. The sample set of PCC trucks and electrical equipment arrived at Preston Workshops in April 1949. Noise and vibration elimination being the foremost achievement of the truck, which featured extensive use of a rubber sandwich. The PCC car was destined not to enter service whilst Mr Bell was Chairman whilst the PCC car No 980 itself was destined to become a one-off tramcar as no further PCC equipment or complete cars were ever ordered.

In April 1949 the Government announced that it was advertising for a replacement for Mr Bell who is retiring. Mr Bell was at the time 73 years of age.

On the 20 June 1949, the State Government indicated that Mr Hector Hercules Bell would retire on 30 September 1949 and at the same time announced the appointment of Mr Robert Joseph Henry Risson as the Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board. Bell stayed on as a consultant until the end of the year.

Mr Bell was awarded the CBE (Civil) in 1950 in recognition of his services to Local Government, the Hawthorn Tramways Trust and the M&MTB.

Mr Bell enjoyed many active years in retirement. Mr Bell passed away on 12 November 1964 at the age of 89 and just 19 days short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Sir Robert Risson was born in 1901 at Ma Ma Creek near Grantham in South East Queensland. Educated at nearby Gatton High School and subsequently at Queensland University. He graduated in Civil Engineering before briefly joining the Toowoomba Foundry in 1922 and then the newly formed Brisbane Tramways Trust in 1923.

He joined the Australian Army Engineers (Militia) as a Lieutenant in May 1933 and married Gwendolyn Spurgin in Brisbane in May 1934. He enlisted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF in October 1939. At the time of his enlistment in 1939 he was the Permanent Way Engineer of the Brisbane Tramways.

Sir Robert saw active service with the Seventh and Ninth Divisions in the Middle East (including Tobruk and El Alamein) and with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Corps in the South West Pacific (New Guinea). He commanded a field company during the siege of Tobruk. For his services commanding the 7<sup>th</sup> Divisional Engineers in Syria he was Mentioned in Despatches. At the battle of El Alamein he commanded the 9<sup>th</sup> Divisional Engineers and was again Mentioned in Despatches. He was awarded the DSO and the CBE and was promoted to the rank of Brigadier in March 1943. In April 1943 Risson led the troops of the Ninth Division in a special parade through the streets of Brisbane (literally marching along his permanent way) following their return from the North African campaign.

After the Second World War his service continued with the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in which he was appointed General Officer Commanding, Third Division with the rank of Major-General in July 1953 and in 1957-58 he was the CMF Member of the Military Board.

“His outstanding service during World War II was recognised on two occasions: firstly with the award of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), and secondly, Commander of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE). His outstanding service continued after World War II, and he was promoted to the rank of Major-General and served as the Senior Officer in the Citizen Military Forces in Victoria, and as the CMF member of the Military Board, the highest appointment to which an Australian part-time soldier can be elevated. For that service, he was made a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath [1958]. Subsequently for his service to the community, he was created a Knight Bachelor.” [10]



Even during his military career Risson's staunch support for trams was well known and fortunately has been documented. One military history, the author of which met Risson at Headquarters wrote, "The Chief Engineer on Corps was Brigadier Bob Risson. He was a splendid man and greatly devoted to trams as a means of transport. If the DDMS [Deputy Director of Medical Services], Harry Furnell, thought things were getting dull in the mess, he would tell Bob that steel-on-steel was an outdated form of transport. The CE [Chief Engineer] would then explain very convincingly why it was not. He became head of the [Melbourne and] Metropolitan Tramways Board after the war." [11]

After the Second World War Sir Robert returned to the Brisbane City Council (BCC) Transport Department rising to the position of Assistant General Manager and Acting as General Manager whilst the General Manager of the Brisbane City Council, Transport Department, Mr Sydney Quinn, was overseas studying the latest transport trends late in 1948.

It was during this period that Brisbane was at the forefront of modern tramway development. City Aldermen proclaimed that Brisbane led the way in the construction of the finest tramcars in the world.

The BCC was introducing resilient wheel tramcars, with modern interior designs (Silver Bullets), making extensive use of concrete track construction during tram track relays, whilst several tramway extensions were completed (Chermside, March 1947, Belmont, July 1948 and Enoggera, August 1949) with others planned. At the time an underground tramway subway was even under consideration for the Petrie Bight intersection in Central Brisbane.

The Council was also expanding its bus operations. New buses, with local bodies being built on AEC chassis were being delivered and many more on order. The Melbourne tramways were also about to place orders for a large fleet of AEC buses.

In October 1949, Sir Robert was appointed Chairman of the M&MTB succeeding Mr Hector Bell who had been Chairman since 1936. As such Sir Robert was the third Chairman of the Board. Only five individuals were to hold such appointment, Cameron, Bell, Risson, Kirby and Snell. Sir Robert's appointment occurred at a very critical time in the history of the Board. The Melbourne press of the day were continuing to suggest that the future lay in more flexible buses and trolleybuses.

The newly appointed Chairman soon encountered a period of considerable industrial unrest (in fairness not confined to the tramways) staff shortages and delays in procuring essential supplies. There was a strong push from the Union for over award payments.

During the War the Union had been able to achieve equal pay for women who joined the service from the first day that the recruitment of conductresses became necessary.

The M&MTB's long awaited PCC Car No 980 which Hector Bell had long sought finally entered service in July 1950 and although new tramcar construction continued all new trams apart from the PCC car were of the Board's conventional standard sliding door design. The Board under Risson's chairmanship continued with (or reverted to) the design of the SW6 car of 1938 with some innovations.

When the Board in an attempt to overcome critical staff shortages purchased suburban hostels for recently arrived migrants, there was considerable criticism in State Parliament of the costs involved and even calls for Mr Bell to be reinstated as Chairman. The Hon Member for Melbourne (Mr Hayes), Legislative Assembly, said, "My suggestion is that the present Tramways Board should be removed from office and that a Commission should be appointed to investigate its administration. In the meantime, the former Chairman of the Board, Mr H.H.Bell, should be recalled and entrusted with the conduct of the services". [12]

Sir Robert, however, soon made his own mark on the organization, his straight down the line, "yes meant yes" and "no meant no" management style combined with total integrity was very much admired by the tramways staff.

Many, including those who support the development of electric public transport would suggest that the conversion of the Bourke Street bus routes to electric traction in June 1955 (Northcote via High Street route) and June 1956 (East Brunswick route) was his greatest achievement. Both projects being completed during an era when tramway abandonment was considered fashionable especially in the United Kingdom, United States and other Australian cities. Only Europe, it seemed like Sir Robert, remained loyal to the tramcar.

Addressing the Institute of Transport in 1955, Risson spoke of hard cold facts. The Board's preference for tramcars in Bourke Street being, some may well suggest, ironically supported by the insistence of the Tramway Employees Union that a 41 seat bus be operated by a two man (person) crew.

In economic terms this translated into an operating comparison between a two man (person) tram with 48 seats and a two man (person) tramway bus with 41 seats with the tramcar having a greater overall capacity allowing for standees.

The dogmatic attitude of the Tramways Union and its militant strength for which it was frequently criticised, ironically played no small part in the retention of trams in this era. Whilst the Board endeavoured to convert the Bulleen-Garden City and the Fishermans Bend bus routes (which used 41 seater buses and carried a conductor) to one man operation, there remained a paradox in all this because of the Union's refusal to budge on manning levels on tramway bus services; the cost of continued two man operation of buses strengthened the argument for retaining trams. The carrying capacity of a tram exceeded that of the largest buses whilst they were also staffed by a two man crew.

The Board (since it supported the continued operation of trams in Melbourne) and the Union, it could at least be moderately argued, shared a common agenda. Not an agenda that either side would have publicly declared. But both sides at least knew where the other side was coming from.

The wisdom of Sir Robert's preference for recording all interviews was demonstrated in August 1957 when following the announcement by the Board that it was intended to construct a new bus workshop at Dudley Flats, the Melbourne Press informed their readers that the trams were going and buses were taking over.

Sir Robert, who firmly believed that he was completely misquoted in the newspaper article, duly appeared on "Meet the Press" (then a radio programme) and offered to play back the entire recording of the initial interview to set the record straight. Sir Robert quickly gained the upper hand in the on-air debate.

But from the middle 1950's, substantial operating economies were necessary to keep the organization afloat. Buses operating on reduced headways from February 1957 replaced All Night tram services. Several Sunday tram services were also replaced by buses from 1959 and tram services with low patronage serving Point Ormond and the Footscray local lines were withdrawn in October 1960 and March 1962 respectively.

The last new tram for seventeen years entered service in 1956 and the only new vehicles acquired by the Board throughout the entire 1960's were 100 AEC buses with short 31 seater bodies (due to Union requirements).

Yet throughout this environment Sir Robert consistently defended the tramcar. Risson believed that trams were the most efficient vehicles for moving vast numbers of passengers in inner metropolitan areas, where journey times did not exceed 40-45 minutes. Still a very important factor to reconsider in today's environment. Risson stressed the need to compare the cost of a new bus system against the cost of retaining the existing asset.

The view has been frequently expressed that the retention of the Melbourne tramway system during this period and its subsequent survival is due almost solely to Sir Robert's strong management and his very firmly held (and public) view that tramcars were the most appropriate urban transport vehicle for servicing the inner suburban areas of large cities. Risson's task was made no easier in that the decade between 1960 and 1969 saw the M&MTB's costs increase, patronage continued to decline, while tram services were operated by a fleet of vehicles whose average age was gradually increasing.

Patronage (tram & tramway bus) dropped from 263 million in 1949/50 to 209 million ten years later. By 1965/66 it had fallen to 166 million and by 1969/70 patronage had declined to 133 million.

It has been said that "the logistical superiority of trams appealed to Risson.....A Major-General in the Army Reserve, he managed the tramways like a military division, and brought the full force of his formidable personality to bear upon politicians and the press". [13]

There were other contributing factors that continued to support tramway retention in Melbourne, several of which were discussed earlier, wide city streets, an independent Tramways Board, well maintained rolling stock, reasonable percentage of the tram fleet not life expired and the majority of tram tracks were in reasonable to good condition. In more recent times it has been suggested by some that Melbourne retained trams in keeping with the city being seen as a cosmopolitan European city. Many other cities claim to be cosmopolitan but they do not necessarily operate trams.

There is no doubt that the Risson factor (strong management support for tramway retention) was a key factor. Yet a recent newspaper editorial in the Melbourne morning newspaper, "The Age", commented that Melbourne "more by accident than design has clung to its trams". [14]

Cole (1996) suggested, "perhaps the simplest answer to the question of why Melbourne kept its trams is that no one in authority ever decided to get rid of them". [15]

Cole also noted "while I would not wish to minimise Risson's contribution, I believe the singular events arising from the replacement of Melbourne's central-city cable trams are probably crucial to understanding how Melbourne kept its trams." In effect the longevity of the cable system, which in turn meant that Melbourne's electric tramcar fleet was not life expired in the critical 1950's combined with the new Bourke street trackage were all very critical factors that supported Risson's position".[16]

In April 1963 in his presidential address to the Institution of Engineers conference in Adelaide, Sir Robert spoke in favor of the need for modern transportation facilities in cities if they were to retain their prosperity. In addition he reaffirmed the policy of retaining trams in Melbourne and spoke of the proposed underground tramway scheme under Bourke and Swanston Streets, the plans of which the Board had released a year earlier.

The same year saw the establishment of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee. Sir Robert saw to it that he was elected to the steering committee and furthermore that a senior planning engineer from the tramways was on the working party.

Sir Robert answered any challenge. In tragic circumstances in October 1963 a tram driver died as a result of head injuries sustained after he fell from the roof of a tram in Spencer Street, whilst attempting to replace a trolley pole. The rope had snapped. Tram crews at individual depots introduced a ban on the practice of climbing on to cars to retrieve trolley-poles.

"On the day the accident occurred the Secretary of the employees' association concerned (Mr. O'Shea) stated that he had not yet received any reply to a letter sent by his association to the Tramways Board on August 22 requesting the fitting of pantographs following a mishap at Hawthorn on July 30. On October 14 [1963], the Chairman of the Board, Mr. R.J.H.Risson announced that he had written to the Association requesting that the ban be lifted forthwith pointing out that there was no risk to staff involved if the relevant instructions were adhered to".

“The next day officials demonstrated the correct method of replacing a trolley-pole at Hawthorn Depot: the Chairman was in attendance and the proceedings were televised. Mr. O’Shea then went on record as saying that it was only appropriate that Mr. Risson (a Major-General) should “lead his men into action” and demonstrate the correct procedure. The challenge was accepted on October 16 [1963] when the latter climbed on to the roof of class “SW6” car No 960 in Collins Street at Spencer Street, this event received wide coverage by the press and also television”. On October 18 the Board announced its intention to equip each tram.....with an emergency rope.....”[17]

Throughout the 1960’s “Melbourne’s tramways [still] faced an uncertain future and attitudes towards trams were ambivalent at the time and [so much so that] a mock-up [of Melbourne’s proposed new European design new trams] was constructed with considerable secrecy, much of the work being undertaken late at night. Consisting of about two-thirds of the length of a tram, the mock-up was built in a window-less building [at Preston Tramway Workshops] known as the old tyre store”. [18]

In April 1967, in their Weekly Service Bulletin the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers (VCM) published an article under the heading “Sound the death knell for trams” which perhaps partially explains why the events just described took place in the manner in which they did. The article written in point form was highly critical of the continued operation of trams and in short called on the authorities to replace the tram system with buses or trolley buses.

Given that a wide cross section of the Melbourne community now see the trams as a city “icon”, the language of the 1967 article provides a valuable insight into changes over the prevailing thirty year plus period. The views of the VCM would not have been alone in 1967.

“ While trams are said to give Melbourne an Old World atmosphere, we should not fail to observe that the only places preserving this atmosphere outside of the Continent today are cities or places like California or Disneyland where trams are part of the show.

This city could save itself millions of dollars over the next few years and make Melbourne a better place in which to live by getting rid of this relic now passing for this city’s transport system.

It has been mooted for years that Melbourne is getting a new fleet of silent trams. They haven’t eventuated yet and they should not now be permitted to do so. Any orders that have been placed should be cancelled.

The saving in capital cost by diverting our order from a fleet of custom-built trams to a fleet of “off the shelf” buses or trolleybuses would be substantial, to say the least.

Yet this would be only a minor saving in comparison to the expenditure that could be saved on Melbourne’s roads.

Any company occupying offices along St Kilda Road, Melbourne, or for that matter along any tram route, will agree that trams create the greatest bottleneck our roads have ever experienced.

In St Kilda Road, the broad center strip of this magnificent thoroughfare is, for most of the day, practically deserted by motorists who desire to avoid the stop-start interference of trams.

Worse still, right in the city proper, from between one-third to one-half of the city's major streets do not carry the volume of vehicles for which they were designed because of trams and tram-user safety zones.

It seems to be crass stupidity on our part that we – Melbourne's population and the authorities, have tolerated trams for this long.

It is often argued that trams are more economical than buses or trolley buses because they carry a larger load. However before that question is answered we should ask how many times a day trams are filled to capacity? Moreover, when trams are full, it is no exaggeration to say that upwards to one-third of the fares are not collected over a trip of one city section.

This statement is in no way meant to reflect on the work of tramway employees, the Tramway's Board of Directors, but it is an honest statement of fact as repeatedly observed, due primarily to the inherent design and construction peculiarities of trams.

The savings in noise each hour of the day if trams were replaced would be worthwhile, even if no other benefit existed.

This Chamber believes public tolerance of trams is waning. While each year trams become harder and harder to suffer, likewise, each year our apologies to overseas visitors on account of our trams have to become more contrived.

Public opinion on trams should be tested - not here, but in Sydney where trams were taken out of service just long enough ago to enable people to remember them while allowing adequate time for people to get accustomed to an alternative transport system.

This could be done by public opinion poll of public transport users and motorists in the inner city region of Sydney, asking which of the systems of public transport they preferred, trams, buses or trolley buses.

Something must be done, and quickly, to shake Melbourne free from the seemingly hypnotic acceptance of the presence of out-moded trams.

Perhaps a "pilot study" of the effects could be tested by eliminating trams from all routes which run up and down Swanston Street and St Kilda Road." [19]

In the late 1960's there was on going debate between the Board and the Union over suitable attire during periods of very hot weather. Tramway employees sought through their Union the right to remove caps and neckties during the hot summer months and for their uniform to include the optional wearing of shorts. Sir Robert believed a uniform was a uniform and that if the uniform was to be changed or varied then due process was to be observed. Not surprisingly given the strongly held and opposing views of the parties involved a period of lengthy industrial disputation followed.

The continued operation of trams was called into question when plans were first drawn up for the St Kilda Junction Project and associated road improvements. Initial plans included the retention of the East Brighton and Malvern Burke Rd trams in narrow Wellington St. The Board sought successfully for trams to utilise the centre medium strip in the divided roadway. The new tramline opened late in 1968. It proved to be more than a symbolic relocation. At last Melbourne had a glimpse of what was becoming commonplace in Europe.

In 1969 the Metropolitan Transport Committee released the 1985 Transport Plan for Melbourne. The report recommended the continued operation of trams and that further studies be undertaken into proposed tram or bus extensions. Quietly Sir Robert had won the battle. To many in the transport industry, Sir Robert it has been said, had the battle (to save Melbourne's trams) won before it had started.

Sir Robert received his knighthood in the Queen's Birthday honours of 1970 and retired as Chairman of the M & MTB on 30 June of the same year. He then served with distinction as Executive Director of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee until 1977.

By the early 1970's public attitudes towards urban passenger transport were gradually changing. The Hon Vernon Wilcox, State Minister for Transport from 1967 to 1973 was quoted in 1971 as expressing the view, "I had my doubts about the future of trams a few years ago, but no longer. They are proving their worth in moving people in the mass....."[20]. Sir Robert enjoyed an excellent professional working relationship with Transport Minister Wilcox not only during his time as Chairman of the M&MTB but in his subsequent role as Executive Director of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee.

Known as "Bob Risson" to his closest friends, Sir Robert gradually retired from "public" life. Sir Robert Risson, CB, CBE, DSO, OStJ, ED passed away on 19 July 1992, at the age of 91 years, after an outstanding transport and military career. Sir Robert's contribution to society extended into many fields.

"Professional affiliations included Fellow Institution of Civil Engineers, Fellow Institution of Engineers of Australia (Sir Robert was President 1962-63), Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and a Member of the Institute (now Chartered Institute) of Transport. Community service included Chief Commissioner Boy Scouts, Victoria between 1958 and 1963, President of the Good Neighbour Council, Victoria 1963 to 1968 and Chairman of the National Fitness Council 1961 to 1971." [21]

Sir Robert also served as Chairman of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme when it was introduced in 1963. Sir Robert joined Freemasonry relatively late in life at the age of 60 joining Baden Powell Lodge in 1961 and Army Lodge in 1964. Sir Robert served as President of the Board of General Purposes, Senior Grand Warden, Deputy Grand Master and finally served with distinction as Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of Victoria from 1974 to 1976.

In addition Sir Robert was a foundation committee member of the Victorian Association of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and was president of that association from 1980 to 1983. In this capacity he established the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Scholarship scheme, which continues to this day.

To fully understand the extraordinary influence of Risson, one has to attempt to understand the nature of the man himself.

Sir Robert was a tall, imposing figure. He was very astute with his interventions. When appropriate he used his booming voice to maximum effect. His presence (arrival) could bring a crowded conference or function room to a standstill. He was strong on discipline and would not tolerate practices or activities that he considered improper. Many of his staff vividly recall the distinctive way Sir Robert pronounced the word 'improper'.

Risson managed the Tramway Board finances as if the funds were his own.

As one of Australia's most decorated soldiers in World War Two, he commanded the highest level of respect. He was an extremely powerful figure. The permanent heads of other potentially rival organizations were usually headed by returned officers of lesser rank and certainly less decorated.

In this era (1950's to 1960's) virtually everyone in Melbourne knew that (Sir Robert) Risson was the Chairman of the Tramways Board. In effect Risson was the Board, which if required Sir Robert forcefully reminded those who indeed had the courage to question or even doubt. Whether it was at the Tramways or the United Grand Lodge or the National Fitness Council or something else he headed, more than a few can still recall an incident when the words "I am the Board", "I am the hierarchy" were vigorously echoed.

Sir Robert sensed that he had to take control of the immediate situation and if required Risson could very effectively turn a conversation, a request or a chance meeting into a situation where he quickly gained the upper control.

Risson on initial observation would often appear aloof and pompous. To those tramway staff accustomed to the style of Mr Bell, Risson was seen as aggressive and unapproachable and to some intimidatory, but "beneath Sir Robert's stern exterior was a warmth and understanding of the problems that confront the average human being. His wise counsel and positive advice helped many who consulted with him.....in all his activities he was ably and loyally supported by his wife, Gwen, Lady Risson." [22]



Under, the at times rigid façade, Risson was really a shy person. A highly prominent person active in so many distinguished interests yet in other aspects of his private life a very much private shy individual not always at ease and often uncomfortable when the occasion suggested a relaxation of standards. His strong preference for formal attire being preferred even if the professional occasion demanded something less formal or partially casual.

Nevertheless to those who were fortunate to have known him personally, Sir Robert's achievements, in transport and in the defence of Australia are held in the highest regard. In short Risson will always be remembered as an outstanding leader.

One senior tramway professional officer described Sir Robert as having the ability to logically and critically review something on a strong and sound basis.

Speaking at a seminar in October 1974 to discuss the Implementation of Melbourne's Metropolitan Transportation Plan, Dr Derek Scafton (South Australia's Director General of Transport) paid tribute to Sir Robert "I would like to take this opportunity to publicly express my admiration over the years for the professional strength of the Executive Director of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee, who stood by his faith in trams, along with a few others in a handful of cities in North America and mainland Europe when other cities in Australia followed the British example and got rid of trams as fast as possible. The world has now vindicated Sir Robert, with talk of new interurban light rapid transit, supertrams or whatever you care to call them".[23]

Although sections of the media portrayed Sir Robert as a "tram man", he was nevertheless a highly respected transport professional whose influence extended beyond tramways especially in his role as Executive Director of the MTC.

Whilst Melbourne continues to operate the largest tramway system in the "English speaking world" and globally numerous light rail schemes have come to fruition (such as Sydney), the recent emergence of segregated busways (Brisbane) and transitways (western Sydney) as alternatives to light rail in urban areas has and will ensure that the modal debate is likely to continue.

The continued operation of Melbourne's trams has drawn widespread support from those committed to tramways and light rail. The continued operation of the network is sometimes questioned on economic grounds and challenged by those who support other forms of urban transport.

One legacy of tram retention in Melbourne has been the concentration of resources both financial and physical in the inner suburbs to the detriment of outer suburban areas.

Trams are probably the "most socially acceptable form of public transport" in Melbourne

Melbourne has a unique multi modal transport network but it must be remembered that Melbourne does not receive special financial consideration from the Grants Commission because it either elects or historically has operated trams and other state capitals in Australia do not.

The pollution issue “green image of trams” is open to debate, especially as Victoria uses brown coal as the fuel source for the generation of electricity and given technological improvements associated with modern buses (CNG, Ethanol and now further developments with hydrogen).

The current tramway network in Melbourne despite substantial investment is still a “conventional” 1920’s style tramway system competing for 21<sup>st</sup> Century traffic space and all too frequently with the resulting slow journey times. There is, I believe, considerable scope for upgrading the network (in management terms, what we might call to achieve it’s full potential).

Sir Robert’s considerable influence has led to the continued operation of a unique multi-modal public transport system in Melbourne, of which the trams, now seen by many as an “icon”(a far cry from their image throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s) are an integral part.

The “true” transport professional will seek the optimal solution and select the appropriate mode (in the case of public transport) and design a balanced transport network, to meet the needs of public and private transport in line with community needs, whilst maintaining a satisfactory level of equity.

Sir Robert I am told by his closest friends privately believed that there was a role for trams in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Sir Robert was also a strong supporter of the trolleybus.

In an address to an assembled gathering at Melbourne University in 1968 as part of the Special Lectures in Transport, National Transport Policy series Sir Robert said “Trolleybuses, I regret, are out of fashion and will disappear altogether, wrongly in my opinion. They are excellent vehicles, smooth, quiet, odourless, with good hill climbing characteristics, using locally generated power. I think it is a mistake to let them go, but going they are. The usual explanation given is that they are route-bound. With the greatest respect to my colleagues in the industry, this does not make sense. The last thing a passenger or operator wants is chopping and changing, uncertainty, of routes.”[24]

Here in lay and still lies [at least at the present time] one of the strengths of the Melbourne tramway system, the familiarity with the operating network even to a casual traveller or an out of town visitor.

Regardless of individual opinion or personal preferred mode of transport, Sir Robert’s impact on Australian urban passenger transport remains.

The rapidly changing lifestyles of today, leading to what transport planners term linked trips is providing a new challenge to the operators of conventional transportation systems. In Sir Robert’s day it is far to say that operational considerations often took precedent as they did in other Australian urban transport authorities.

Today’s “ transport systems exist for the people who use them, not for the people who run them. Transport Authorities and providers will be increasingly customer focused”. [25]

Finally a quote from Sir Robert himself... “Nothing in the world stands still. And if it did it would wither. It either goes forwards or backwards”. [26]

Thank You

### **Acknowledgements**

The author appreciates the assistance of Brigadier Keith Colwill, Maureen Brewer, Keith Kings, and John Price in the preparation of this paper.

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