



Working Paper

Series

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Abstract

Melbourne, the capital of the State of Victoria (Australia), currently operates an extensive tramway system as part of a metropolitan multi-modal (train, tram and bus) public transport network. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a worldwide trend especially in the English-speaking world to replace tramway systems with bus services.

Melbourne largely ignored this post war transport trend and as a consequence, Melbourne became the only Australian city to retain a tramway system, which in turn has survived into an era when it is not only unfashionable to abandon tramways but globally there is an upsurge of interest in tramways and their modern application as light rail systems.

A separate working paper in this series (Turnbull, 2002) describes the development of the Melbourne tramway system, experiments with double deck buses in the 1940s, the public debate over the relative merits of trams and buses and the appointment of Mr R.J.H.Risson (later Sir Robert) as Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB).

Risson was a staunch supporter of the tramcar and in the opinion of many is the person who more than anyone else saved Melbourne's trams. Risson ironically, came from the Brisbane tramways where he rose to the position of Assistant General Manager. Risson's tramway experience was founded upon the Brisbane system.

In Brisbane, the capital of the State of Queensland, the tramway system enjoyed the benefits of post war modernisation, particularly in the period between 1947 and 1952. It is not unreasonable to suggest that to some extent, developments in Brisbane during that short period were well in advance of events in Melbourne at the time.

However, by the mid 1950s events behind the scenes and a drastic decline in the number of new trams being constructed, contributed to the beginning of the decline of the Brisbane tramways. The loss of some 65 trams in a depot fire at

suburban Paddington in 1962 hastened events and ultimately forced decisions to be made on the future of Brisbane's trams.

Despite open public speculation for years, a formal announcement was however not made by the Brisbane City Council of its intention to changeover to an all bus system until June 1968. This announcement could hardly be regarded as surprising as the Council had previously placed an order for the delivery of 340 new buses. Subsequent events were swift and rapid.

The last tram ran in Brisbane in April 1969. Yet it is not unreasonable to postulate or argue that if the system had managed to survive for a few more years, that given the concerns of the environment and the energy crisis that emerged in the 1970's, together with the worldwide development of light rail, the Brisbane tramway system like Melbourne's could well have survived to the present day.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that Sir Robert Risson is the key figure associated with resisting any attempt to close the Melbourne tramway system, just as in his capacity as Lord Mayor Alderman Clem Jones is seen by many to remain the key figure associated with the final demise of Brisbane's trams.

Whilst Alderman Clem Jones will always be remembered by many as the person who closed down Brisbane's trams, Jones who was Lord Mayor of Brisbane from 1961-75 will also be remembered because of his significant contribution to public works, housing, sewerage, road construction, aged care, services to disabled persons, youth welfare and support for the sporting community.

Above all, the City Council administration led by Jones, laid the foundations for the modern Brisbane of today, the dynamic prosperous capital of Queensland, and the vibrant centre of economic activity that it is today. Although Brisbane has successfully introduced busways in recent years to better facilitate movement by mass public transportation, a modern light rail system would compliment the 21st century city that Brisbane has become.

The turning point, towards an all diesel bus system, in relation to Brisbane's trams is often seen as the Paddington Depot fire in September 1962. Although, as significant as the destruction of the Paddington Depot was, the period immediately after the fire represented the last opportunity to save and modernise the system and reverse a trend of significant indifference towards trams in Brisbane, which had occurred, under successive council administrations.

Had a decision been made to retain and modernise the system (as distinct from the chilling silence) after the Paddington Depot fire the Council would have found it necessary to invest in a very substantial vehicle construction program, at least of the magnitude of the level of activity that occurred in 1946 when sixteen new trams were built in a year. There is no doubt however, that the Milton Workshops were capable of doing this.

Indeed, it could be argued that the demise of Brisbane's trams began when the new vehicle construction programme ceased in the mid 1950s. At that time numerous hand braked drop centre cars still formed a large percentage of the fleet, and if one closely examines events, the demise probably started, slightly earlier, around the time, when those who did not really support continued tramway operation realised that Sydney Quinn was approaching retirement. Infact, I would go further to suggest that the warning signs can be traced to an earlier period. Brisbane continued to operate the first generation of trams from the 19th century (the original BTRCo fleet) in daily service throughout the Second World War and even into the 1950s.

The permanent way side of the undertaking had kept pace (due in no small measure to Risson) but in practice even in the halcyon years of the tramways, vehicle replacement lagged and, except for the period in the late 1940s, when Brisbane invested in new rolling stock it largely stayed with existing out of date tramcar designs for longer than was accepted practice in Melbourne. As the M&MTB Chairman Risson was also assisted by the investment in a fleet of new trams which were required for the Bourke Street routes when they were opened in the mid 1950's.

Given that the rolling stock situation in the immediate post war era was a little more favourable in Melbourne, perhaps it is no surprise that Risson with all his experience in military strategy, maintained his strategy of relaying Melbourne's tracks and for good measure, the majority were placed in mass concrete.

As one tramway researcher commented during an interview, the effort Risson and the Tramways Board put into ensuring the tracks were well maintained in Melbourne was noted by the tram buffs, and presumably by the inner city councils, since the Board was responsible at that stage for the full cost of maintaining the centre of the road, but one suspects largely unnoticed by the state politicians.

Equally as Risson exhibited a sense of vision (even if not everyone shared that vision) well in excess of the average transportation manager, perhaps he realised even in 1949, when one could argue that Brisbane's tramway 'modernisation' was at its height, that the Melbourne tramway system' was more secure and had a future and above all else that the Melbourne system could more fittingly accommodate his professional aspirations.