

# **The Sir Robert Risson Era - An enduring legacy**

Address by Graeme Turnbull FCIT, Transport Research Centre, RMIT University

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Today marks a significant day, which has become associated with the development of Melbourne's public transport network. It was on this day one hundred years ago that Sir Robert Joseph Henry Risson was born.

Sir Robert is best remembered as Chairman of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramways Board from 1949 to 1970, 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 bus services.

Sir Robert 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 joining 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 and 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 New Guinea. He was awarded the DSO and the CBE and was promoted to the rank of Brigadier in March 1943.

After the Second World War his service continued with the 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. Subsequently for his service to the community, he was created a Knight Bachelor." [1]

After the Second World War Sir Robert returned to the Brisbane City Council 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.

Meanwhile the Victorian Premier Mr. Holloway had just returned from an Overseas Visit during which he had noticed considerable tramway abandonment was taking place overseas. The Tramways Board was asked to prepare an urgent report on the relative merits of trams, trolley buses and 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.

Despite the general acknowledgement 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 had been accused of being anti-bus. When the Board reaffirmed its decision to proceed with the conversion of the Bourke Street buses to trams in 1949 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....who was reported in the press as saying that the sooner Mr Bell was removed the better it would be for the motor industry." [2]

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.

New tramcar construction did, however, continue and the M & MTB's long awaited PCC Car No 980 which Hector Bell had long sought finally entered service in July 1950. Future trams, however, were to be of more conventional design.

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". [3]

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 (East Preston 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 Union insistence 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 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" and offered to play back the entire recording of the initial interview to set the record straight.

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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.

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 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.

Venn (1995,p.26) "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". [4]

There were other contributing factors that supported tramway retention in Melbourne, 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.

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". [5]

View is frequently expressed that Sir Robert's appointment is the sole reason that the Melbourne Tramway System survived. The decade between 1960 and 1969 saw costs increase, patronage continued to decline, while services were operated by a fleet of vehicles whose average age was increasing.

Over the years several reasons have been put forward as to why Melbourne retained trams. Independent Tramways Board, higher priorities for Government, tram tracks in reasonable to good condition, tramway assets not life expired, etc

Cole (1996, p. 257) 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”. [6]

Cole (p.266) 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”.

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, 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 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.....”[7]

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.

The continued operation of trams was called into question when plans were first drawn 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.

Sir Robert received his knighthood in the Queens 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 1978.

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....."[8].

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, 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." [9]

Sir Robert also served as Chairman of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme when it was introduced in 1963. Sir Robert joined Freemasonry in 1961 and 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.

“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.”.[10] To those who were fortunate to have known him personally, Sir Robert’s achievements are held in the highest regard.

Speaking at a seminar in October 1974 to discuss the Implementation of Melbourne’s Metropolitan Transportation Plan, Dr Derek Scrafton 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”.[11]

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, the recent emergence of segregated busways and transitways as alternatives to light rail in urban areas has and will ensure that the modal debate is likely to continue.

Regardless of individual opinion or personal preferred mode of transport Sir Robert’s impact on all of us remains.

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.

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 we run trams and other state capitals in Australia do not.



The pollution issue “green image of trams” is open to debate, especially using a brown coal fuel source and given technological improvements associated with modern buses (CNG, Ethanol)

The current tramway network despite substantial investment is still a “conventional” tramway system. There is, I believe, considerable scope for upgrading the network (in management terms, what we might call to achieve it’s full potential).

In summary, from an increasingly global viewpoint, there will be a growth in busways, transitways and other forms of urban transport alongside light rail. Sir Robert’s Legacy (to return to the title of today’s lecture) is that we can still debate these issues in Melbourne.

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.

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.

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”. [12]

Thank You

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