

Revisiting the Demise of Streetcar Systems

by Peter Cole

Cliff Slater, writing in the Summer issue of *Transportation Quarterly*, may have succeeded in dispelling the myth that General Motors conspired to destroy quiet and efficient streetcar systems. He risks creating a new myth, however, by describing the streetcar in the 1950s as obsolete, costing more than buses in every regard, and implying that the streetcar to bus conversion was analogous to the move from horse and buggy to the automobile.¹

While many individual streetcar systems in the 1950s were undoubtedly obsolete, particularly in North America and the United Kingdom, other tramway systems, for example in Europe, had not suffered the long-term disinvestment peculiar to the abandonment of the highly capitalized street railway. Furthermore, under favorable urban transport and planning regulatory environments, trams could outperform buses in terms of service quality and economic performance well beyond the 1950s (e.g., Melbourne, Australia) and up to the present day.²

Streetcar companies in the late 19th century were regarded as potential monopolies, much like the railways. They were consequently highly regulated in terms of routes, fare structures, and payments to municipalities. Road-paving requirements, a necessity

in the days of horse-drawn streetcars, remained on the statute books as another unfair burden on electric streetcar companies. High capital costs for tracks, electricity generation, and overhead equipment meant that streetcar companies were generally not in a position to extend their services into automobile-based sprawling suburbs.³

Buses were the beneficiaries of two important 20th-century innovations: huge grants of public money to roads and, in the United States at least, subsidized suburban sprawl. Buses, with low initial capital requirements and freely provided roads, extended their services beyond the limits of streetcar tracks, and then proceeded to pick up former streetcar passengers as they traveled into city centers. Streetcar systems tended to wither away at the unprofitable extremities (which had often been partly financed by land speculation rather than being justified by passenger loadings). After the extremities were closed, the once-profitable trunk lines lost patronage and continued to succumb to competition from the car and the bus.

Mr. Slater quotes a good deal of contemporary opinion on the alleged economic and operational benefits of buses compared with trams. Unfortunately, he tends to concentrate on only one side of that debate. My

investigation of streetcar to bus conversions leads me to believe that passengers did not favor the change to buses (although they were rarely, if ever, asked for their opinions). Consequently, public authorities and transit companies felt obliged to indulge in the kind of pro-bus propaganda which Mr. Slater regales us with in his article. Even the alleged savings in bus operations were often a result of the tendency of streetcar companies to adopt railway accounting practices and build their depreciation allowances into their operating expenses. Early bus operations often failed to take account of the much shorter working lives of buses, thus reporting artificially high operating profits. This may help explain the economic difficulties bus operators faced as early as the 1960s.

This is described in an article by Karlaftis et al. immediately following Mr. Slater's article.⁴

If Mr. Slater is to make his case for the economic superiority of buses, he needs to quote some substantive evidence by way of detailed operating accounts over a reasonable time span. He also needs to take more account of the regulatory and urban planning context any transport system has to operate in. Finally, any celebration of the success of the bus in the 1950s and 1960s needs to be tempered with an acknowledgment of the dramatic decline in public transport usage in recent decades. This decline is most evident in those cities that have chosen to rely on the bus as the dominant mode of public transport.⁵

Endnotes

1. C. Slater, "General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars," *Transportation Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 61.

2. C. Bushell, *Jane's Urban Transport Systems*, United Kingdom: Jane's Information Group, 1992, 29; C. P. Cole, "The Survival of Melbourne's Trams" in T. Dingle, ed., *The Australian City—Future/Past*, Monash University, 1997; T. Pharaoh and D. Apel, *Transport Concepts in European Cities*, Ashgate Publishing Company, 1995, p. 18; and B. S. Pushkarev et al., *Urban Rail in America*, University of Indiana Press, 1982, p. 7.

3. T. C. Barker and M. A. Robbins, *A History of London Transport*, Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 188; and K. Button, *The Economics of Urban Transport*, Saxon House, 1977, p. 6.

4. M. Karlaftis et al., "Impacts of Privatization on the Performance of Urban Transit Systems," *Transportation Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997). See also G. Yago, *The Decline of Transit*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 172; D. St. Clair, "The Motorization and Decline of Urban Public Transport, 1935-1950," *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981), p. 579; and D. St. Clair, *The Motorization of American Cities*, Praeger, New York, 1986.

5. D. H. Aldcroft, *Studies in British Transport History*, David and Charles, 1974, p. 266; Bushell, *Jane's Urban Transport Systems*, p. 29; Button, *The Economics of Urban Transport*, p. 14; Commonwealth Bureau of Roads, *Public Transport in the State Capitals of Australia*, Australian Government Printer, 1969; J. Kenworthy, F. Laube, P. Barter, and P. Newman, *Cities and Automobile Dependence, 1960-1990: An International Databook* (in press), University Press of Colorado, 1998; P. Newman and J. Kenworthy, *Cities and Automobile Dependence: An International Sourcebook*, Gower Technical, 1989; and K. H. Schaeffer and E. Sclar, *Access for All: Transportation and Urban Growth*, Penguin Books, 1975, p.45.

Peter Cole is currently a doctoral candidate with the Institute for Science and Technology Policy at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. His research into the history of the local mechanized transportation systems has focused on the decline of the railways and urban tramways (streetcars) and the growth of road transportation. He has had a long interest in transportation matters, having been employed by the Main Roads Department of Western Australia and the Road Transport Section of the Commonwealth Department of Transport in Canberra.