

Why Melbourne Kept Its Trams

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Why did Melbourne keep its trams, especially during the 1950s and 1960s when other Australian capital cities, the major cities in New Zealand, the UK and Ireland, and most US and Canadian cities didn't? Melbourne now has the largest tramway system in the world, as measured by route length, though not by passenger numbers. This paper will explore how the automobile clubs and bus lobbies campaigned to get rid of trams. What is it in Melbourne's topography and political culture which enabled its tramway system to survive, while Sydney, with a bigger system, closed its entire network? Cities abandoning their trams promptly turned to buses. Only a handful of 'heritage' tram lines survived, though there is now a resurgence of light rail in some cities, and of all places, on the Gold Coast. The paper will set the analysis in the context of the coming of mass car ownership in the 1950s and 1960s, and the apparent attraction of getting rid of trams in the name of modernity.

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Melbourne now has the largest tramway system in the world, as measured by track length, though not by numbers of passengers. Sydney's tramway system, at its peak length in the 1930s, was bigger than Melbourne's. From around the turn of the last century to the 1950s electric tramways carried more passengers in many of the world's large cities than did railways. Most large cities had tramway systems, especially in the UK, Europe, America and Australasia. At the same time, many invested in underground rail systems, also powered by electricity, from New York and London to Paris and Boston.

In this paper I attempt to explain the comparative fate of urban tramway systems. Why it is that Melbourne would save its tramway system? The only other large systems to survive were in Europe, from Amsterdam, Zurich, Berlin and Vienna, to Bucharest, Budapest, Milan, Prague and St Petersburg, the latter once having one of the largest networks and still, today, the highest patronage. Some other cities also retained smallish systems, from Lisbon to Basel to Hong Kong to Kolkata to Hiroshima.

Suburban railways and tramways spread throughout larger urban centres in the latter decades of the 19th century. Before then, residents and businesses had to rely on foot transport or horse and cart for carriage. The spread of these new forms of fixed track public transport not only made the cities more efficient, it enabled the movement of goods and people on a scale never before contemplated.

Most urban railway systems actually started as freight and passenger lines to service industrial and/or agricultural activities beyond the cities. The largest 19th century cities in Australia and New Zealand were port cities, so the railways provided transport for agricultural produce, including wool and wheat, to ports for export. Sydney and Melbourne were among the 20 largest cities in the world in the 1890s, which Adna Weber, deputy commissioner for Labor Statistics in New York, pointed out in his book *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (1899).

Gradually the railway networks, owned by colonial and then state governments in Australia, unlike the privately-owned networks in the US and the UK, could see the benefit of catering to growing suburbs, especially in the rapidly expanding metropolises of Sydney and Melbourne. In the other cities the port of Fremantle got a railway line, as did Port Adelaide and Hobart, while the Brisbane wharves were connected by rail to the state's hinterland.

While most of these suburban railway lines started as freight routes they soon had suburban services grafted onto them. The bigger cities gradually added new routes to cater for suburban land development, and allegations of vested interests for these new routes were common. All this transport investment was undertaken by colonial and then state governments who, holding income tax and inheritance tax powers, could readily borrow money on the British bond market. From the 1920s Sydney and Melbourne converted their suburban railways to electric traction, while other capital cities stuck with steam or diesel.

The ubiquitous tramway

At the same time as the railways are expanding, municipalities, attracted by the revenue they could raise from gas and electricity manufacture, suddenly realised that they too could get into mass public transport. Privately owned horse-drawn tram routes had become quite common by the 1860s and cable trams, most extensively in Melbourne, by the 1880s. But as the municipalities owned the roads and were increasingly investing in coal-fired electricity power stations, they seized the opportunity to become proprietors of electrically powered trams. Unlike the railways they didn't need to compulsorily acquire rights of way, they could simply have the track inserted in the streets they already owned.

These tramways were clearly aimed at suburban commuters. And because of the much heavier investment required in both track laying and property acquisition for railway corridors, trams were seen as a relatively cheap investment which municipalities could afford. Most early trams were open at the side. They could cope with overcrowding, which could be dangerous as photographic evidence of the time attests, with people literally just hanging on. The tram routes depended on the finances of the municipalities and tramway boards that funded them, but of course they were also strong income earners, fare evasion being relatively difficult with eagle-eyed conductors ever present.

With the notable exception of Melbourne, where the cable trams continued to flourish, most major world cities embracing trams moved quickly towards electric traction, whether they were municipally or privately owned. London, with its first electric tram in 1901, had a variety of private providers. St Petersburg got the American Westinghouse Corporation to provide its system in 1907. American expertise in what they called 'streetcars' was much admired around the world. By 1919 New York had one of the largest tramway systems in the world, carrying more people than railways and subways combined. (Rose and Seyfried 1995)

The nature of the routes depended on both the topography of the city and connections with other forms of transport. In Sydney quite a few tram routes connected to ferry wharves, often down perilously steep streets, hence photos of half submerged trams that had suffered brake failure hurtling into the harbour beyond the Taronga Zoo ferry terminus. In Brisbane the only way to get from South Brisbane station – which serviced both suburban railway lines and the interstate line – to the city was by tram, as no rail bridge had been built joining South Brisbane with the city centre. Melbourne, with its much flatter topography, provided fewer challenges to tramway builders. And unlike the convict cities – Sydney, Hobart, Brisbane and Perth – Melbourne luxuriated in wide streets, so the tramways often got their own reservation, separating themselves from horse-drawn traffic and subsequently the onset of ever more congestion caused by the car and the truck.

With the rise of the bus in the 1930s and the much anticipated coming of mass car ownership after World War Two, tramway systems throughout the world were under attack. Most had old rolling stock and all needed a new capital injection. Unlike railway systems, which were much chunkier, with guaranteed rights of way and control over vast swathes of inner city property, tramways could readily be challenged by buses, which were much more flexible. By the late 1940s most transport planners in the English-speaking world, not least in the United States, had decided that tramway systems were old hat, and that the bus and the private car would rule the post-war world.

Well over one hundred cities decided to abandon their tramway systems from the 1930s to the 1950s. The roads, which municipal or metropolitan authorities usually owned, could easily be reclaimed: tram lines could be simply covered over with bitumen. This happened throughout Canada, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and Australia, with the notable exception of Melbourne, with a substantial network, and Toronto, with a much smaller one.

The rise and rise of the car

Public transport use in Australia peaked towards the end of the Second World War. No new cars had been imported or manufactured for the domestic market during the last years of the war and severe petrol rationing severely restricted car use. Most blue collar and white collar jobs were in or within a few kilometres of the city centres, and the existing rail, bus and tramway routes served even the growing suburbs quite well. Most households lived within two kilometres of a rail or tram route in all the capital cities, and that distance was regarded as well within the walking or cycling capacity of most adults and almost all children. In the late 1930s only one in five households had access to a motor vehicle, and that declined during the war. Only a small proportion of women held licences, so many households put their cars up on 'blocks' while male heads of households enlisted in one of the armed services. (Spearritt 1987)

With the election of the conservative Menzies government in 1949, promising an end to petrol rationing, car use increased rapidly. The Curtin Labor government had already held an international competition for the manufacture of Australia's 'own car' which the US firm General Motors won, that corporation having already formed an alliance with Holden, an Adelaide assembly firm. The new Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, unveiled the first Holden coming off the assembly line in November 1948, to massive press and newsreel publicity. (Davison 2004, 8-10)

While railway patronage kept up after the war – particularly on longer suburban routes where trains were usually quicker than cars – tram patronage fell dramatically. Private bus companies had made inroads into tram routes since the 1920s. The regulations and restrictions on private bus operators varied greatly from capital city to capital city. Government bus services started in all the capital cities in the 1930s but none grew so rapidly as the Sydney system. Melbourne's government buses – some operated by the Tramway Board and some by the Railways – experienced a brief heyday during the war and early post-war years, but at their peak never carried more than one quarter of the trams' passenger volume. In 1950, before the most significant tramway route removal began, Sydney's buses were carrying almost two thirds the number of passengers accounted for by the trams. (Spearritt and Wells 1984)

In a number of American cities General Motors and other automotive interests bought up entire tramway systems with the express purpose of closing them down. The automotive industry stood to gain through car sales, truck and bus sales, as well as catering for an ever-growing demand for petrol. Trams were readily condemned as old-fashioned, no longer pertinent to establishing America as the world's most modern industrial power. Mass car ownership had well and truly arrived in America, having already flourished in the interwar years. Privately owned cars could cater for every imaginable trip, whether for work or leisure. (Yago 1984)

London: a streetcar named defunct

In the late 1940s and early 1950s Australian public transport bureaucrats either went overseas or hired overseas experts to come to Australia to tell their state government masters who to modernise their road and public transport systems. The NRMA and all the other motoring organisations (all with 'Royal' in their title) took their lead from America, and began a strident campaign for city freeway building which they have continued ever since. The NSW government hired experts from London to tell them what to do about road passenger transport in Sydney and Newcastle. (Sinclair 1949, Spearritt 2000).

Trams had continued as an important part of London's transport throughout the interwar and war years, but unlike the underground, which continued to expand its network, trams were already being replaced by trolley buses (overhead electric wires, but not fixed-track). Red double decker motor buses were introduced to London in the 1930s, and soon became a central trope for the depiction of the great metropolis.

As Barker and Robbins explain in their definitive *History of London Transport* (1974) the new diesel buses had a flexibility that both trams and trolley buses lacked, especially in new routes, where they did not need either fixed track or an overhead electricity supply. And Britain had its own major bus manufacturer in Leyland. The decision to ditch the tramway system, taken in 1946, saw its complete

closure by July 1952. *The Economist* ran a substantial editorial, with a delightful pun on the Tennessee Williams play, headed 'A Streetcar Named Defunct'. It noted a marked difference between London and those European cities which had much higher population densities and commented:

In Britain the urban population has in this century spread relatively thinly into the suburbs; the bus can operate correspondingly thin services economically. In countries where the towns have grown upwards as much as outwards, the tram can still provide very economically services on routes where the traffic is heavy....The buses could run as cheaply, or more cheaply, over the tram routes and then fan out in the suburbs and countryside to give something like door-to-door service. Why, then, keep the trams going too? (*Economist*, 5 July 1952)

It is easy with hindsight to point out the mistaken assumptions in this analysis. The *Economist* did not foresee that the coming of mass car ownership would produce very high levels of traffic congestion. There was no appreciation of the possibility that fixed-track transport systems might become both quicker and more reliable than driving, because of the difficulty of parking, and ever increasing traffic congestion, exacerbated every time there was an accident. The writer also failed to observe that the overground rail system, in conjunction with the London Underground, serviced most busy commuter routes very well, delivering people from far-flung suburbs to almost all the major centres of employment, with just a station change or two. The writer did note that Paris had already closed most of its tramway system, and that Bruges had done likewise, concluding 'in taking the tram to its terminus modern Britain is, as happens perhaps too rarely, showing the way'.

The Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board

Post-war Britain did show the way to all Australian and New Zealand city tramway systems, with, in the first instance, only two exceptions, Brisbane and Melbourne. Trams had been regularly pilloried in all Australian cities, especially with the growth in car ownership in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1934 the Melbourne Lord Mayor wanted to 'pitch the trams out' of city streets, and the RACV complained that trams took up one third of the roadway, but only accounted for five per cent of the traffic. The ever-vigilant Tramways Board were quick to respond that while trams in Elizabeth St, City might be only five per cent of the vehicle movements, they carried 85 per cent of all people using the thoroughfare. (*Argus* 31 May and 28 June 1934)

Oil and motoring interests combined to continue their campaign against the trams. T.G. Paterson, the chairman of their thinly disguised lobby group, deceptively called the Australian Road Safety Council, told the *Argus* in 1948 that

Trams are illogical vehicles, since they are really railways using the road for a track...Because they are confined to the centre of the road they are 'road hogs', and a menace to their passengers and other vehicles. (28 July 1948)

Paterson claimed that in other parts of the world trams had been scrapped at the rate of 2,500 per year for the last 20 years, and that there were now 52,000 fewer trams worldwide than in 1927. He further claimed that 'in the interests of smooth traffic flow and road safety' the number of trams in the US had been reduced from 73,000 in 1923 to 24,000 in 1947. (*Argus* 3 August 1948) Paterson

did not mention that some of this sharp reduction was the result of General Motors buying up tramway systems cheaply and promptly closing them. (Rose and Seyfried 1995)

The Chairman of the MMTB, H.H. Bell, countered by telling the press that Melbourne's future city transport will be 'restricted to trams' which in time would be 'silent in running'. Bell reported that unlike other major cities, Melbourne was opening tram lines to replace buses, including the La Trobe St to Port Melbourne line and a line to Collingwood. Police Chief Morris proved a useful ally, stating that trams handled crowds better than buses and that 'until we have underground railways, I say, stick to trams, Melbourne'. (*Argus* 10 March, 31 January 1948) Sydney already had a small underground rail network in its city centre, but Melbourne had to wait till the 1980s for that.

The MMTB, as an independent statutory authority, had a long history of strong leadership. During the war Bell had run the system at a substantial surplus, but the profits were returned to the participating municipalities. Bell was replaced as Chairman in 1949 by Major-General Robert Risson, then the assistant manager of Brisbane City Council's tramway department. Coming from Australia's only capital city with a metropolitan-wide government, Risson came from a tradition of independence from the state government. The BCC not only owned the trams and the tracks, but they owned the power station on the Brisbane River that powered the trams. And tramway employees were on the council payroll. (Cole 1984)

Risson had no difficulty in adapting to the statutory authority he was to run. The MMTB had healthy patronage, and even though car ownership was increasing rapidly, the trams were still vital – with the railways – for the majority of journeys to work, and vital to get customers to and from the shops, whether in the city centre or along the great suburban shopping strips that the tram made possible, from Chapel St Prahran, and Acland St, St Kilda, south of the Yarra, to Nicholson St and High St in the north. Some arterial tram routes had their own rights of way, from Dandenong Rd and Royal Parade to Victoria Parade, where the trams could really belt along. The MMTB had actually put down some new routes in advance of suburban growth in the 1930s.

Tram patronage fell in Melbourne in the 1950s, but not as precipitously as in the other capital cities, where line closures were in full swing. Adelaide (maximum route length 129 kilometres) and Perth (maximum route length 55 kilometres) both closed their tramways in 1958. Auckland and Christchurch had closed theirs a few years before and Wellington had already abandoned half of its network, as had Sydney.

The coming of television in the late 1950s saw a decline in cinema attendance, but both rail and tram remained vital in getting people to and from AFL games, in the Australian city that still draws greater numbers to sporting events than any other. While Sunday drives remained the preserve of the car, trams still drove much of the action in inner and middle ring suburbs, from the journey to work to school and shopping trips.

In his suit, waistcoat and polished black shoes, Risson, who lived at Burwood, caught the Toorak Tram to work. For two decades he ran an effective holding operation, steering the Melbourne system through the dismantling of all other capital city systems, including Sydney by 1961 and Brisbane by 1969. Risson's trams didn't get to the new car-based shopping centres, including the first in Melbourne, Chadstone, opened in 1960. Brisbane's tram network did reach Australia's first

car-based shopping centre, at Chermside, opened in 1957, but that was it. Brisbane had invested in placing tram lines in concrete rather than bitumen but the rolling stock was decrepit. Hundreds of new buses were purchased from Leylands in the 1960s, which Brisbanites saw as the embrace of modernity. A fire in the Paddington Tram Depot in 1962 destroyed one fifth of the city's tramcars. Before then trolley buses had replaced trams on a number of routes, especially in the city centre. Trolley buses had been supplanted by diesel buses in all Australian cities by late 1969. (Manning 1991, 37)

Risson inaugurated a house journal for the MMTB in 1964, where unions and management would meet face to face. The MMTB journal carried more overt lobbying about expenditure on public transport than the union journal, preoccupied with working conditions and pay rates. In May 1966 they ran an article praising the purchase of new rolling stock, with the added tagline that Melbourne 'is well suited to trams'.

Why does Melbourne retain its trams? Because trams are eminently suitable for Melbourne...They are more efficient than buses...and they are many times more efficient than private cars, which eat up road space and carry, on average, less than 1.5 persons per vehicle...There is a tendency by some people and some authorities to suggest that scrapping of trams, and replacing them with a huge bus fleet...(but) Melbourne is well suited to trams. Its broad layout and wide streets, especially in the city, give it a place well ahead of congested cities – with narrow, twisting streets like Sydney and London. (May 1966)

A few months later, Risson, no doubt partly with a cheeky eye to the pro-Soviet group in the powerful tramways union, praised trams 'staging a fast come-back in Soviet Russia, one of the world's most advanced technological nations'. At the time, only a bureaucrat who had served with distinction in the Middle East and New Guinea could get away with praising the Soviets, even if just for their tram systems. During two decades of retirement, Risson had the pleasure of seeing a whole series of extensions to his tramway network, to Keilor Rd, Preston and East Burwood, while the tram lines from Port Melbourne and St Kilda were converted to light rail in the late 1980s, with some minor adjustments to their respective routes. (Vines, 2011)

Risson had, as a sometime ally, the nation's strongest tramway union, which managed to resist 'one man' operation for longer than in any other city. In NSW, the tramways union was promptly bought off with offers of employment in the rapidly expanding bus networks in Sydney and Newcastle. Tram depots were readily converted to bus depots, with the notable exception of the Bennelong Point tram terminus which made way for the site of the Sydney Opera House. (Manning 1991, chapter 3)

Melbourne's trams faced only one serious challenge in Risson's lifetime. In 1980 transport minister Robert MacLellan, was happy to admit that he travelled the forty kilometres from his home in Berwick to the city in a chauffeured government limousine. This product of Melbourne Grammar and the Melbourne University Law School, commissioned Murray Lonie, the former General Manager of BHP Coal, to reform Melbourne's public transport system. MacLellan stated,

the tramways and suburban railways are carrying fewer passengers now than they did in 1915 and they are doing it at about 1000 times the cost...Fewer passengers, higher costs, and if anybody wants to know why, and there are a few kinky in the community, who cannot perceive what has happened

between 1951 and now, then I try to remind them that Henry Ford was right when he said that the internal combustion engine had a future. (Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce *Proceedings* 1980)

Six months later Lonie recommended the closure of seven tram lines and eight rail lines. McLellan dismissed the protestors as white collar commuters. Lonie pointed out that 90 per cent of all trips in Victoria were by private car, and that buses could readily replace the proposed abandoned tram lines, as they had done in Sydney. (Lonie 1980)

Lonie's recommendations galvanised discussion about the future of Melbourne's public transport. Neither Lonie nor MacLellan appreciated the cross-class support that Melbourne's trams enjoyed, including middle class professionals getting to work in the city centre and their children getting to the major public and private schools, especially in the eastern suburbs. Many other Melburnians could not and cannot afford a car, and at any one point in time over one third of the population can't drive because of age (both young and old) or they don't have a licence.

Melbourne's trams had long starred as one of the city's most distinctive features, from tourist posters to visitor maps of the CBD. Photographs of the Shrine, St Kilda Rd, St Paul's Cathedral and the new Arts Centre were invariably taken with trams in the foreground. They were the nearest Melbourne had to Sydney's ferries, long a core ingredient in that city's marketing campaigns (Davidson 1986, chapter on city images).

In the 1950s Melbourne's trams required a much smaller operational subsidy than Sydney's' buses, not least because the trams served higher density suburbs, which they had, in part, helped to create or at least sustain. CBD workers continued to use the trams for travel around the city and for the journey to and from the inner eastern, northern and southern suburbs, with less reach into the west (Manning 1991).

Conclusion: why did Melbourne keep its trams?

Melbourne's tramway system survived through the 1950s and 1960s for a number of key reasons, all peculiar to Melbourne. In Major General Risson they had a strong and adept political adept leader/administrator. The RACV was a much more demure motoring organisation than the NRMA in Sydney, much less aggressive in its attacks on trams. And Melbourne, with its generous street layouts, had many more tram 'rights of way' than any other Australian city (See Broomham, 1996 and Priestly 1983 on the respective cultures of the NRMA and the RACV).

The only other time Melbourne's trams faced a draconian challenge came with the Lonie report. But with the almost total rejection of Lonie's closure recommendations, trams resumed an unchallenged centrality in inner Melbourne. A huge tram strike in 1990 backfired on the union, which won only a brief reprieve for keeping conductors, but it simultaneously reinforced the importance of trams for the functioning of the city. On tram ticketing machines were introduced between 1996 and 1998, and conductors eventually disappeared. Gradually the system has acquired new rolling stock making it more user friendly. Under Premier Kennett trams became semi-privatised in 1999, but with fewer downsides than the troubled railway privatisation, where the state government keeps on switching providers. (Davison 2004, 240-42, Mees 2005).

The tramway systems of Eastern Europe, most of which had to be at least partially rebuilt after the war, continued to flourish in the 1950s and 1960s, before car ownership became widespread. Since then many have reduced their route length, but their patronage remains substantial. Melbourne currently boasts 240 kilometres of track length, and 190 million passengers per annum. St Petersburg's network is much reduced, to 220 kilometres, but it still carries 490 million passengers a year. And around the world, from Manchester and Los Angeles to Sydney to the Gold Coast, new tramway routes are on the rise, sometimes reusing redundant rail corridors. While Melbourne is today only around the 200th largest city in the world – a long way from the top 20 in 1900 – it can now lay claim to have the largest tramway system on the planet, and what a civilizing influence that is.

Note of sources: There is a vast enthusiast's literature on former tramway systems in most parts of the world. The books tend to be reliable on the opening and closing dates of routes, and go into great detail about the rolling stock, but as with railway history, are usually less interested in the public policy and political issues around public transport versus private car use.

The rise and decline of street cars and tramways is best documented, in a concise fashion, in successive editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, including the 1910, 1947, 1964 and 1969 editions, with later entries under the title 'Electric Traction'. National Encyclopaedias are also useful, but with the demise of the reliable, multi-volume print Encyclopaedia as a well-edited, well-researched source, Wikipedia has come to the fore. The quality and reliability of its tramway coverage is very variable, but it does have a useful entry canvassing the automotive 'conspiracy' to buy up and shut down US streetcar systems. It is also the best single source on information about new tramway systems, but again the coverage is scatty. Nonetheless it is the best single source for up to date figures on route length and passenger numbers of tram systems around the world.

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