


Submission to the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment

Inquiry into ACTION buses

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Introduction

The fact that the committee should be conducting an inquiry into ACTION buses at all is a reflection of just how far the once proud and innovative leader in the provision of public transport services in Australia has fallen its glory days from 1977 to 1988. The current inquiry was no doubt precipitated by the dissatisfaction that stemmed from the service cuts that ACTION was forced to make from 4 December last year. That date has been called ACTION's blackest day. It was not.

ACTION's blackest day by far was 1 July 1988. On that day the carefully crafted operating systems that had given Canberra a public transport system that people in other Australian cities could only dream of were cast aside. In 1981 ACTION's average speed of 31 km/h was in fact bettered by Sydney's total system and equalled that of Melbourne's trains.

Under the new regime feeder buses no longer pulsed in and out of the interchanges every half-hour during the day to make seamless transfer with the quarter-hourly 333 intertown express, and at double the frequency in peak times. Peak services from the interchanges after 6pm ran at intervals as long as 50 minutes where formerly they ran every fifteen minutes until 7pm. Area buses no longer ran at night. Nighttime services ran at random intervals and interchanges simply became common waiting areas and the former feeling of security was lost.

In the intervening period, some aspects of the former system have been reintroduced, but the system remains a shadow of its former self. Even the *Review of ACTION's Services* presented in May 1997 did little to improve the situation. Indeed it proved a disaster as far as services in Belconnen west of the interchange were concerned. The number of routes was slashed and formerly direct routes replaced by routes that meander all the way to interchange travelling almost three times the direct road distance. The Sustainable Transport Plan lamented that door-to-door travel times by bus were almost twice the average for cars. In Holt, even with the bus stop only three minutes walk away, the bus times to the interchange approach four times that by car.

Suggestions that there is a place for light rail or O-bahn should be dismissed out of hand. At great expense, and by their very nature, they are only capable of serving the intertown route and at no greater speed. Similarly, real-time information systems are no substitute for system whose operating principles are simple and easily understood.

Such extravagant notions simply divert attention away from the real need – to go *back to the future*. Nothing less than a return to the former operating systems will give Canberra the rapid transport system it needs and once had. We may not be able to expect the same *level* of service, but the same *principles* remain applicable.

1. How well ACTION meets the needs of different segments of the community while recognising its role as a mass transport provider

Advocacy and support groups for people with particular needs will no doubt have taken the opportunity to put their views about ACTION services to the committee. Accordingly, this submission will comment on aspects of the service that affect three sub-groups within the general population: school children, young people travelling at night and senior citizens.

School children

The school bus services that are an integral part of ACTION operations do more than merely transport the students around.

Watching a school bus in Canberra pass by one is struck by the fact that the students are always in their seats with none of the horseplay that turns travel into a nightmare in Melbourne where there are no government-provided school bus services. (One mid-afternoon train service is run express through the stations where large numbers of students would otherwise board). Until recently, too, ACTION drivers had 'their own bus' which they drove over a period of years. It was 'their' bus and they took pride in it, developing a positive relationship with their passengers, young and old. This good feeling is still manifested in the Canberra practice, almost-unheard-of elsewhere, of passengers of all ages thanking the driver on alighting. Things that make this city unique need to be nurtured

Young people travelling at night

A feature of ACTION's services in the years 1977 to 1988 was system of half-hourly Area Buses that ran from the interchanges after 7pm, connecting with the intertown 333 express. They did not follow a fixed route but took passengers to the stop nearest their home. These were replaced in by irregular route services that meant long waits and a feeling of insecurity. They were restored a year so ago under the name Flexibus but were again withdrawn. This time, however, the replacement route buses do operate at hourly intervals. Area buses were not universally praised, especially in Woden-Weston Creek, but they worked well for West Belconnen and gave parents a great sense of assurance that their children could use the bus and arrive home safely.

Senior citizens

Older people form a significant part of ACTION's off-peak patronage, but there seems to be perception in the community that they are unlikely to place much value on their time. This is apparent in the route structure that ACTION had to adopt following the Graham Review with its circuitous outer suburban routes. Older people do have better things to do with their time than sit on a bus for as long as it takes to gather up all other passengers. Many older people in full possession of their faculties no longer have the financial resources to own and operate a car. The bus service

is their link to the wider community to which they can and do make a significant contribution. The attention that is being paid to the safety aspects of older people's driving enhances the case for making the transition from driving to being driver as gentle and convenient as possible. Tapping into this market would also seem desirable from an environmental perspective. Advocates of frequency over directness seem to think that having a half-hourly service, as opposed to an hourly service, somehow makes up for the long time spent on the bus. The fact is that people in general, and not just older people, can arrange their daily schedules and make appointments to suit an hourly bus service that is reliable and direct.

2. How ACTION compares with other bus transport providers in other Australian jurisdictions

The short answer is 'well'. The long answer is that it used to be the leader. ACTION had a long history of 'firsts', most notably with the introduction of articulated buses in the mid-1970's as the backbone of the intertown service at a time when they were still a novelty elsewhere in the world, having originated in the then West Germany.

In terms of fare collection ACTION was among the first, or was perhaps the first in Australia, to adopt a flat fare system, paying once for each boarding. Pre-payment of fares with "Fare-Go" paper (and later card) tickets into a fare box was encouraged with great benefits to speed and time-keeping. Some 90% of fares were paid in that way because paying by cash incurred a penalty. Boarding times and delay at stops have been documented as by far the lowest in Australia. As a result both speed and reliability were enhanced. Recent changes to the fare structure mean that it again favours pre-payment.

ACTION also led the way in terms of occupant protection in the unlikely event of accident with the roll padding of seat backs to protect passengers from injury in the event of accident or sudden stop, something that has yet to become Australian standard practice. Energy-absorbing bumper bars were another first. The design of Belconnen Town Centre also incorporated Australia's first significant busway, the two kilometres linking Eastern Valley Way and Coulter Drive.

With regard to overall speed of services, the 1991 publication by Peter Newman and Jeff Kenworthy entitled *Towards a More Sustainable Canberra*, using data collected from around the world, documented ACTION's superiority in comparison to almost all other Australian cities. It is noteworthy that Melbourne, which is routinely referred to by light rail advocates, came in as having the slowest overall speed for public transport of the 33 European, North American, Asian and Australian covered in the study with its trams having by far the lowest average speed of any form of public transport in Australia.

ACTION's reputation as a leader was also recognised in the 1984 publication by the Office of Road Safety *Planning for Road Safety* that quoted ACTION's operating standards as a model for how public transport could be provided efficiently in the low-density Australian urban environment as a means of reducing car travel

3. ACTION's service in the context of the sustainable transport plan

The Sustainable Transport Plan asserts "The low-density city form makes it difficult and expensive for the public transport system to serve a wide range of needs." From 1977 to 1988 ACTION disproved that assertion.

The Minister has commented that it is all very well to hark back to the 'gold-plated' service Canberra enjoyed when the federal government was paying for it.

Whilst The Commonwealth Auditor-General had been critical of ACTION's level of service in the lead-up to self-government, the Bureau of Transport Economics (BTE) had concluded that the *only* increase in subsidy to public transport in the capital cities that could be justified was to *increase* the frequency of bus services in Canberra, this at a time when off-peak services ran half-hourly.

It should always be borne in mind that the decisions that affected ACTION's standing so badly were taken during the interregnum between the abolition of the House of Assembly on 30 June 1986 and the coming of self-government in 1989.

To return to The Sustainable Transport Plan, it simply gives up on the outer suburbs. This is an equity issue that the plan does not even mention. Rather it gives the impression that the outer suburbs exist only to provide housing for people who cannot afford to live anywhere else, quite ignoring the preference of any well-off people who value the proximity to the open countryside and the quieter environment of the outer suburbs, as well as the influx of people from the Riverina and from Sydney who are happy to settle there for the same reason. A striking illustration of this point is to be found in the most recent Property Guide in the Canberra Times (19/5). The luxury house featured on the cover was in the South Tuggeranong suburb of Banks and of the remaining three houses that were featured one was in Banks and another in Conder.

In the writer's submission on the draft plan, the point was made that

"The plan, designed as it is, to complement the Draft Spatial Plan, seeks to reinforce a city-form that, as the authors see it, will be good for public transport without regard to the expressed preference of many people, especially those with families, to live in the suburbs and be close to the open countryside"

In terms of its relation to the Draft Spatial Plan, the comment was made that

"The major weaknesses of the current document stem from the fact that unlike the Y-Plan, the Draft Spatial Plan does not have at its heart the specific transport strategy that public transport operated along a central corridor to a series of strategically placed major employment destinations while private traffic flows are directed around the places where people live. A major objective of the Y-Plan was to reduce the extent of road infrastructure by balancing peak transport flows in each direction".

These principles were undermined when the Department of Administrative Services was stripped of its power to direct the location of Commonwealth Government offices. This suited the departmental heads, who wanted to be 'near the action.' It also suited the commercial and ideological interests of important pressure groups whose interests often overlapped.

This coalescence of interests has led to a series of unintended but nevertheless unholy alliances that have delivered a triple whammy to the concept of Canberra as a new sort of city that would not have the problems faced by cities that had not developed in a pre-planned manner.

First, it suited the development lobby that saw the prospect of rising property values in Civic, leading to a premature overbuilding of office blocks that simply left Civic with a bigger dead heart after 6pm. Secondly, it pleased the dark green lobby that had always regarded a suburban city as no city at all. Thirdly, it was seen as a way to 'revitalise Civic' that in the 1980's was seen to have fallen behind the new town centre as a retail hub.

The emphasis on building up Civic that was implicit in all this meant that ACTION had to take buses off suburban feeder services in order to give priority to bringing larger numbers of office workers into Civic. Frequency on the intertown route became a dominant consideration and throughout the day buses ran half-empty every five minutes while services to the outer suburbs were sacrificed.

It was particularly unfortunate that this emphasis on servicing Civic should have come at a time when ACTION was remedying what had been the only weakness in its service provision. The commendable decision had been taken to put bus services into new suburbs at a much earlier stage in their development than had been the case in the past. In this way it was hoped to influence travel patterns for the journey to work towards the use of public transport.

Indeed, to this day the outstanding difference between public transport provision in Canberra in comparison to the other cities around Australia is that here public transport runs to all suburbs all day, seven days a week, with the only exception that Sundays services do not operate at night. Again the comparison with Melbourne is instructive. Peter Newman recently commented that Melbourne was two cities in which an inner core was surrounded by an outer ring where weekend isolation was greater than in any other city, there being no public transport at all after 1pm on Saturdays or at night.

With regard to influencing the modal split for the journey to work, one further point might be made. The Sustainable Transport Plan acknowledges the "dynamic relationship between public and private transport systems" and the need for a "comprehensive and integrated approach to car parking management". The need for such an approach is evident since pay-parking was implemented at the Belconnen Town Centre with no complementary improvement to bus services.

The burden of this analysis is simple. Do we want a city based on the equity that provides well for all its residents, including families with children, or a city where all the goodies are concentrated in the centre for the benefit of those who with different priorities and financial circumstances. Targets that are set in the context of a sustainable transport plan, or the spatial plan, that does take give high priority to equity need to be seriously rethought.

4. Principles and key priorities for future service planning

The key priority for ACTION must be to regain the public's confidence that the bus system will take them where they want to go, when they want to go, in reasonable comfort, in a reasonable time and within acceptable financial constraints.

Financial background

It would seem appropriate to deal first with the matter of finance because it informs the setting of overall priorities including public transport provision.

Comparisons with the states that have informed the Grants Commission process for the distribution of Commonwealth funds as they affect public transport may be inappropriate in the case of Canberra. Perhaps the expenditures prior to self-government better reflected the amount of money that was required to create a new type of city based on equity, efficiency and environmental responsibility that would serve as a model of what could be achieved in urban planning in an Australian context. The current crisis in regard to the provision of public transport in both Sydney and Melbourne as a result of under-investment provides evidence of the extent of this financial shortfall.

The extent to which comparisons with the states prior to self-government were deficient, as shown in the findings of a report by BTE in 1985, was noted earlier (*Occasional Paper 71, Benefits of Urban Public Transport Subsidies in Australia*). Undertaken by an academic from the University of Liverpool, it had found that "Service level increases are not justified except very marginally in Canberra".

Also relevant in the financial contest is praise the BTE report's gave to praise ACTION's encouragement of pre-payment that resulted in boarding times way below those of the State capitals, with consequent benefits for reliability. It could well be that the current fare collection system that requires validation of pre-paid and cash-purchased tickets needs to be rethought because of the deleterious effect on trip times. A degree of fare evasion may be a small price to pay for a fast reliable service.

Deficiencies of the current ACTION network

The preference shown in this submission so far is clearly for the feeder-interchange-express model. This preference stems not only from operational considerations but also from considerations of 'legibility' in the minds of potential users.

Under the feeder-interchange-express model a passenger who is unfamiliar with Canberra, a new arrival or visitor, can board the bus, get to the interchange and then be directed to the appropriate bus. As an example, what use is the destination sign that reads 'Conder/Banks' to a new passenger boarding on Southern Cross Drive who wants to go to Civic, or indeed to someone at the City Interchange who wants to get to Tuggeranong. Having to know the coding of the 'hundreds' digit of the route number is not reasonable. Road authorities recognise that "signs are for strangers".

Anything that turns public transport into a club where only the regulars know the rules is to be avoided. This shortcoming is particularly evident at the City Interchange where a multitude of buses show Woden Interchange as their destination. Only one group of these – those forming the intertown service – will run 'express' to Woden. The others can take many times longer, particularly the Route 34. The situation is the same for passengers travelling to Belconnen.

Prior to the Graham Review the intertown route could be distinguished from others because articulated buses were used on it most of the day. Perhaps the intertown route needs to be clearly badged as such. In Perth express services did, and may still, carry a fold-up roof-mounted sign 'express' above the headboard. The introduction of dot matrix destination signs provides the opportunity for the words 'express' or 'limited stops' to be incorporated. At a minimum, intertown stops should proclaim themselves as being part of a rapid transit system.

Conflicting Objectives for the Intertown route

There is a pressing need for the intertown service between the Belconnen and City Interchanges to again become an express service rather than the hybrid it became post-Graham. The current route via College Street and Haydon Drive sacrifices the intertown route's major function of providing a fast journey for the majority of passengers to the minor function of giving a much smaller number of passengers access to institutions along the way. These could be equally well served by selective extensions of feeder routes and by improvements to other routes on the city side.

The journey time for the intertown service when it operated via Eastern Valley Way and Belconnen Way was 14 minutes in the off-peak and 17 minutes in the peak. The current route takes 18 minutes and 19 minutes respectively. As it happens the intersection of Eastern Valley Way and Belconnen Way had earlier been modified, using federal funding, to facilitate bus operations. (Similar modifications were required at the Haydon Drive intersection when the route was changed, but buses travelling away from the city must wait in a long queue to turn right whereas the queues are much shorter at Eastern Valley Way).

It might be noted that the trip time for the intertown service between the Woden and City Interchanges has remained unchanged. Whereas, it used to take longer, now it is quicker than the Belconnen leg, so increased traffic cannot be adduced as a factor in increased trip times.

Making West Belconnen routes more direct

The extent of the cuts to services in this area has already been briefly noted. Some specifics would now appear in order.

The Belconnen suburbs south of Southern Cross Drive – Page, Scullin, Weetangera, Hawker, Higgins and especially Holt suffered badly from the changes made after the Graham Review. (It is noteworthy that all the routes affected entered the town centre via Lathlain Street where a well used stop is located near the red bridge linking to the back of Belconnen Mall. Significant numbers of passengers use this stop at all times of the day yet they were not included in the figures for arrivals at the Belconnen Interchange contained in Appendix A of the review report.

In the southernmost of these suburbs, two routes –17 and 44 – now do the work of four (six) former routes – 409, 410, 441/2 and 407/8 (the latter being a loop service that covered more northerly suburbs as part of the loop). This has resulted in trip times blowing out by 50% from Holt Shops and Higgins Shops (route 44) and by over 100% from Higgins Shops (using route 17).

It was of interest to note that during the debate about a route for a transitway it was evident that a return to the pre-Graham feeder routes would, have produced a time saving *ten* times that would have resulted from the building of a transitway with the current feeder route in place. Nevertheless the idea of reserving a future corridor - the Northern Option -was supported.

A new Bus Rapid Transit System for Canberra

The current through-routing model is not conducive to good timekeeping with delays in one part of the metropolitan area affecting services on the other side of town. It is also confusing for people not familiar with the system. It is also unlikely that many people ever make the entire journey from one end of town to the other. The longest routes, those from the southern edge of Tuggeranong to the extremities of West Belconnen, take one and three-quarter hours, a quite unreasonable duration for drivers. In Sydney this would be the equivalent in distance, if not in traffic density of a journey from Hurstville to Hornsby or in Melbourne terms from West Footscray to Dandenong.

Thirty years ago the Commonwealth department responsible for running Canberra's day-to-day services and the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) worked on the "*Field of Dreams*" concept – that if you build it they'll come. Passengers flocked to ACTION in droves with patronage increasing by 60 % in the four years from 1977 to 1981. The same approach needs to be taken today...

One of the driving forces behind the growing centralisation of Canberra around Civic has been the OECD report *Urban Renaissance Canberra: A Sustainable Future*. It is perhaps appropriate to think that ACTION too will soon have its own Renaissance.

Conclusion

A Renaissance for ACTION

Principles for Bus Rapid Transit for Canberra

1. Service based on intertown express and feeder bus model with 'seamless' transfer at interchanges
2. Synchronised arrival and departure times for express and feeder services at interchanges
3. Minimum hourly frequency of feeder bus services timed to connect with minimum quarter-hourly intertown express services
4. Transfer time at interchanges between feeder and intertown services of no more than 5 minutes
5. 'Memory' timetables with arrivals and departures at interchanges at the same time each hour
6. Fare structures and fare collection methods to encourage pre-payment of fares, making services speedier and more reliable
7. Intertown services to run express by the shortest route
8. Feeder routes to run directly to their interchange once they are outside the suburb of origin and the next suburb
9. 'Badging' the intertown express service as bus rapid transit by using predominately articulated buses, preferably in distinctive livery
10. 95% of all residences to be within 400 metres of a bus stop
11. Bus service to new suburbs at an early stage in their settlement
12. Bus priority at traffic signals where this would facilitate bus operations
13. Peak hour express services from outer suburbs by-passing interchanges
14. Route planning to make maximum use of dual-carriageway roads as they are provided, e.g. William Hovell Drive, once Glenloch Interchange is opened
15. Buses that provide high ride quality.
16. Weather protection at all high-patronage stops, especially in town centres