



Transcript

On The Buses

Broadcast: 21/11/2003

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QUENTIN DEMPSTER: That great modern god, the car -- expensive, inefficient, dangerous, but personally empowering -- has our political policy makers flummoxed.

This week, former premier Barrie Unsworth produced the latest review of one part of our failed and underfunded public transport system -- the buses.

Predictably Mr Unsworth's recommended some fare increases, less discounting, a \$30 co-payment for school student travel, off-peak-only pensioner concessions, new, speedy strategic bus routes, 10-minute frequency during peak hours and a rationalising of private bus contracts.

The big question -- does Mr Unsworth guarantee all this will get more people using public transport to reverse the trend to choking car pollution and road gridlock?

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Even though buses are subsidised by taxpayers by more than \$600 million a year, the relatively cheap fares have not been a winner when it comes to patronage.

Why is this?

BARRIE UNSWORTH, BUS REVIEW CHAIRMAN: People won't sit in buses if they're stuck in a traffic jam.

Now, I travel by bus every day, and this morning, just to reinforce my own thinking on this, I was coming down the Warringah freeway in the bus lane, looking out at the cars.

99 per cent of those cars carry one person -- the driver.

Now, they're congesting the roads, whereas the buses in the morning peak, and you'll see this contained in the report, transport more people across the Sydney Harbour Bridge than all of those cars.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Barrie Unsworth, former premier of New South Wales and a former transport minister has been dusted off for a difficult job -- redesigning the State's public and private bus networks at no additional cost to government.

The rub -- some fares will rise above CPI.

BARRIE UNSWORTH: We estimate that to bring the STA fares, that's the Government fares, up to the private bus fares, it would only involve increasing fares beyond five or six sections, so it would be the long-distance routes where there would be an increase.

What we're recommending is that increase be determined by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Authority and it be done over a 5-year period.

So I would suggest that the fare readjustment, to have a common fare, would hardly be felt by the travellers on the Government buses.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Barrie Unsworth says he got many of his ideas for fast, frequent bus and transit lanes from Perth where the public and private operators use ring routes to take people where they want to go regionally -- universities, hospitals, schools, commercial and shopping centres and sporting

facilities.

The Unsworth review revealed the enormity of the policy problem.

This is the market penetration of the bus industry, public and private, in the total New South Wales travel market in the 10 years 1991 to 2001.

The patronage of Sydney buses dropped from 6 per cent to 5 per cent.

Newcastle dropped 4 per cent to 2.5 per cent.

Central Coast dropped 4 per cent to 2.5 per cent.

Wollongong dropped 2.7 per cent to 1.9 per cent.

All this in a decade when our population grew substantially.

Rail travel maintained its 5 per cent market share through the decade.

But now look at that aspirational symbol of personal freedom and success -- the car.

Trips per day in Sydney, 1991 to 2001, went from 7.8 million to 9.5 million, an increase of 22 per cent.

Mr Unsworth, even with a low-fare regime, bus patronage has been falling across the State.

Do you now guarantee that your plan for bus priority and greater frequency will get more people out of their cars and on to public transport?

BARRIE UNSWORTH: We believe that if we could arrest the growth of private car usage, that it would be a great victory, so that what we want to do is provide travellers with a bus transport option.

Many people are using their cars today, because they have no alternative.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Well, tell us, by what quantum, by what percentage do you expect patronage on the buses to improve if your recommendations are adopted?

BARRIE UNSWORTH: Well, again, it's one of those situations where at the present time patronage on buses is diminishing.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Well, stick your neck out.

If you reckon your plan is going to work, by what percentage do you think you can get people back on to the buses?

BARRIE UNSWORTH: Again, if we can stop people failing to use buses -- there's been a 20 per cent loss of patronage on private buses over the last 10 years.

Now, if we can get people back on to the private buses, obviously, we're going to generate more patronage for the bus operators in Sydney.

We'll do that, firstly, by having a common fare scale, having common concessions.

The pensioner groups in western Sydney are delighted with the proposal that their concession ticket be extended into the private bus area.

That would increase patronage.

If we can improve the bus priority system, more people will travel by bus just to commute to their jobs.

It's very difficult to answer your question and give you a specific number.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Registering, insuring and running a car is extremely expensive.

Public transport makes great sense in environmental safety and efficiency terms.

Doesn't your report fundamentally fail, because you don't address the psychology behind people's preference for the car?

BARRIE UNSWORTH: Well, people only prefer the car because it takes them to where they want to go.

Currently, the bus system in many cases doesn't take them to where they want to go.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Mr Unsworth, you were the transport minister 20 years ago.

Why is your plan now, going to be any improvement -- I'm sorry, this is unfair, there has been population growth -- BARRIE UNSWORTH: No, no, no, I've got an answer for that.

Well, I presided over the system as it then was, the system that was divided between private and public buses, established suburbs and growing suburbs, but we didn't have a long-range plan.

I've developed a plan for the future.

I've said to the Government if they adopt the plan and if they move towards its implementation, it may well be it will take 10 years to bring this about, but Sydney will have a much better bus system than they've had in the last 20, 30, 40 years.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: And diminished traffic, road gridlock?

BARRIE UNSWORTH: We would hope there would be a very good example of buses whizzing along priority lanes and demonstrating to people that there is a better way to go -- travel by bus.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: The Unsworth interim report is available on the Transport Department web site.

We're now expecting big decisions on buses and trains from the Carr Government early next year.

You'll probably hear all about it on your car radio when you're stuck somewhere in a traffic jam.