

10th International Conference on Competition and Ownership of Land Passenger Transport (“Thredbo 10”): Conference Review

1. Introduction

This two-yearly conference is primarily concerned with the relation between public transport operators and their regulators. The 1st conference was held in Thredbo, NSW, in 1989, and generated sufficient interest for the participants to do it again (every two years.) The conference series is known as the “Thredbo series”, and for convenience the conferences are referred to as “Thredbo X”, where X is the conference number.

This conference was therefore Thredbo 10, and was held on Hamilton Island, Queensland, from 12 to 16 August 2007. It was only the second of the Thredbo conferences to be held in Australia, or the third in Australasia (Thredbo 4 was held in Rotorua, New Zealand, in 1995).

The Thredbo conferences are the brainchild of Professor David Hensher, of Sydney University. There were 133 delegates at Thredbo 10. Tables 1 to 3 show an analysis of these delegates. It can be seen from Table 1 that this was a popular conference with academics, often with an economic background Table 2 gives an idea of the international nature of the event, though locals dominated the delegates as was to be expected. (Thredbo 9 was held in Lisbon in 2005; Thredbo 11 will be held in Delft in 2009). Table 3 shows the preponderance of males.

Table 1 : Delegate breakdown by function

Operators	34	26%
Regulators	13	10%
Academics	46	34%
Consultants	24	18%
Other	16	12%
ALL	133	100%

Table 2: Delegate breakdown by geography

Australia	70	52%
Europe	34	26%
Asia/Africa	11	8%
South America	9	7%
New Zealand	7	5%
North America	2	2%
ALL	133	100%

Table 3: Delegate breakdown by gender

Male	111	83%
Female	22	17%
ALL	133	100%

2. Plenary sessions

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The conference was organized into eight parallel workshops, book-ended by plenary sessions. The first and last days were the days of the plenary sessions.

The first day was devoted to international overviews of progress since Thredbo 9. The Australian overview was contributed by Simon Barrett of LEK, who had just finished a review for the Australian Railway Association. He was followed by John Collyns (New Zealand), Phillippe Segretain (France). Luis Lindau (Brazil), Juan Muñoz (Chile), Chris Nash (European Rail), Michael Roschleau (Canada), Jackie Walters (South Africa) and Ed Dotson (China).

The Australian overview was basically an argument for the Commonwealth Government to take an interest in urban public transport. Hardly new, but the present Commonwealth administration has turned its back on it.

Juan Muñoz described what a stuff-up was made of the implementation of the Transantiago scheme, which was introduced prematurely (because its opening date had been announced). Chris Nash was unable to make up his mind whether European rail reform had worked or not, despite nearly 20 years of evidence. Jackie Walters had some horrific pictures of burned-out taxis, weaponry confiscated from train passengers etc – extreme violence problems are not common on public transport in Australia! The day had run over time and the Tail-End Charlie, Ed Dotson, got no questions.

After lunch on the first day, by way of variety, there was a staged “confrontation” between operators – all men – and regulators – all women. This session was chaired by John Stanley, of the Bus and Coach Association of Victoria, so you can guess who came out looking the better.

The next two days were given over to the eight workshops, operating in parallel, with the emphasis on discussion rather than the papers presented, and the fourth and last day of the conference began with the workshop chairs reporting back in plenary about what their workshop had found. See below.

The second session of the last day began with Heather Allen from UITP, haranguing us about the importance of public transport. Talk about preaching to the converted! Then Luis Lindau (again) talked about Latin American experience with BRT (Bus Rapid Transit), and QT’s Robin Barlow followed up with a description of the Brisbane Busway.

A round table after lunch talking about “the ideal contract” left no-one in any doubt that the bus operators wanted to make money, and that the ideal contract was a short one that was seldom referred to. This does presuppose a trusting relationship between the regulators and the operators, which may not exist everywhere.

The final session of the conference was started by Brendan Finn, from Dublin, presenting two contrasting case studies of informal transit, from Accra (Ghana) and Tblisi (Georgia). Then two Scandinavians, Oddgeir Oslund and Jan Jansson, looked at congestion pricing

and transport investment in Norway and Sweden. Many people were “conferenced out” by then .

3. The “Nations/Regions in Transition” Workshop

This workshop was considered by participants to be the one where papers that didn't fit into any other category were put. So on the first morning there were papers from Rostov (Russia), where they had successfully managed a transition from a command economy to a market economy; from me on Peak Oil (which is a transition everyone will have to go through soon, in my opinion); from my co-chair José Viegas from Portugal, on general outcomes of regulatory change; and – an outstanding presentation this, by Amal Kumara from Sri Lanka – one showing that after 100 years the regulation of Sri Lankan buses the country was roughly back where it started. It showed that nothing lasts for ever, and that new challenges will arise to disturb even the most stable situation. Like Peak Oil.

The afternoon had a South American flavour to it, with a paper describing experience in Recife, Brazil and – from another Brazilian – one reviewing trends in competition policy in South America generally. It was evident that Portuguese-speaking Brazil had a different approach to Spanish-speaking countries – the former tends to have a few large operators, while the latter has a myriad of small ones. A young Portuguese researcher then described a desktop review of integration barriers for informal transit, which sparked a lively discussion.

The second morning opened with a discussion of the transport needs of small rural cities in Finland. After a break the workshop proceedings concluded with a presentation from Dubai, where conditions were nearly ideal for transport planners. No constraints of money or of community opposition, only a great shortage of land for building on. Dubai is the fastest-growing city in the world and German consultants had designed a first-class bus system for it. But it is not yet accepted - “Just Do It” was the message.

The workshop finished at lunchtime, as many delegates had booked to go on an afternoon cruise.

4. Other workshops

There were also two workshops on the theme “What has been found to work”, three on the theme of “Risk and reward in public transport contracting”, and one each on: “Social exclusion” and “Analytical methods”. My knowledge of what went on at these is limited to the chairs' reports. (Delegates were supposed to remain in the workshop to which they had been assigned.)

For me the key point to have emerged from one of the “risk and reward” workshops was that almost anything will work. Much was made of a framework known as STO (Strategy, Tactics, Operations), with the view expressed that contracts are getting bogged

own in the minutiae of the T & O level whereas they should be aimed at the broader S & T level. The social exclusion workshop proposed changing the name of the conference to give more prominence to social exclusion but David Hensher turned this down. The analytical methods workshop made a plea for better quality data.

5. General

Hamilton Island was a great venue for an international conference, even if there were a limited number of flights to and from the island. The island buses were free, but most visitors hired petrol-driven buggies to get around. The speed limit was 20 kph, and the hire wasn't cheap (ranging from \$45/hour to \$85/day). There was only one hotel of significance, the Reef View, and the conference was held there. International delegates cannot but have been impressed – it didn't rain once!

The next Thredbo conference will be held in Delft, Holland, in 2009. Some of the delegates had been to every one of the “Thredbo” conferences, which – after the original meeting in Thredbo – had been held in Tampere, Toronto, Rotorua, Leeds, Cape Town, Molde (Norway), Rio de Janeiro, Lisbon and now Hamilton Island. They call themselves the “Thredbo community”. I had previously presented papers at the 1995 (Rotorua) and 1997 (Leeds) conferences. Then as now, I thought that the subject matter (the extent of concessionary payments in NSW – 1995 – and the way project choice is influenced by governments – 1997) was a bit outside the main theme of the conference but was something that should have been of concern to delegates.

At the Conference Dinner that concluded the event, I presented David Hensher with the Transport Engineering Medal for 2006 from Engineers Australia. He is the first non-engineer to have been given this. It is a sign of the times, transport engineers must now consider all sorts of things like social exclusion, transport energy and so on. He has undertaken to write his thoughts on the future of transport engineering for publication in TEA – I look forward to reading them.