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An echo from the past

THE Executive Council has made a significant break with tradition in its decision to dole out \$40 million in hard cash to cover the "losses" suffered by the Kowloon Motor Bus Co because of the delay in granting the company fare increases.

But the idea behind some form of subsidy for public transport companies can be traced back four years when a hint of such a possibility was dropped by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Derek Jones.

In a forum called by the Hongkong Section of the Chartered Institute of Transport, Mr Jones was replying to a question from the floor on the possibility of subsidies for public transport which might face losses as a result of the future operation of the Mass Transit Railway.

Mr Jones noted that the traditional Government attitude was that public transport should pay its way.

But he was quick to point out that this, however, "did not mean that this policy was immutable."

Mr Jones might have dropped the right or wrong idea but apparently he did so at the wrong time inadvertently.

For my informants later told me that he raised a few eyebrows among his colleagues at the Government Secretariat.

If the \$40 million cash award to KMB can be seen as a subsidy, in addition to the forthcoming scheme of travel concessions for students, it was ironic that it was Mr Jones who announced it last Friday after he had been purportedly under pressure for having talked about the subsidy possibility four years ago.

Mr Jones was of course announcing the handout on behalf of Exco and it would be interesting to find out if the decision was unanimous.

The circumstances in which the Government opted for this course of action — namely that it had to face a significant opposition against the fare increases concerned — were apparently different from those in which Mr Jones mentioned the subsidy possibility in that, for example, he had the potential impact of the MTR operation in mind.