

FRIDAY, MAY 18, 1973

A blueprint for public transport

Hongkong is not lacking in experts on the subject of traffic and public transport judging by the vociferous comments by all and sundry that regularly make headlines in the press.

But on one question all agree. That is, with the expiration of the bus company franchises very careful thinking is necessary before we decide how our main public transport concerns will operate from 1975.

For this reason it is to be hoped that there will be no rush by Executive Council to decide on the proposals put up by the Transport Department or the rival plan by the bus companies.

Indeed the subject is important enough to warrant the Government setting up a high-powered committee of inquiry to determine the form our main public transport services should take in the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. For these will have to dovetail effectively and efficiently with the rapid transit system as its various stages come into being.

Quite apart from the Transport Department's reported idea of giving an overseas public transport group an important role in running our bus services in conjunction with the existing companies, this committee should study other ideas.

The counter-proposals of the bus companies are worth considering and there are suggestions, such as one made by Mr John Marden, of forming a grouping of all Hongkong's public transport operations under one company or authority, giving it a much greater capital base, affording opportunities of better integration and co-ordination as well as forward planning, not to mention better liaison with a central transport and traffic authority.

And incidentally it would be far preferable to seek a total solution to the public transport problem including buses, ferries, trams, taxis and public light buses (if they are to survive in their present form).

The committee would also do well to hear the views of people like Mr Alan McFarlin, Manager of the Cross Harbour Tunnel, who has had long experience in Britain and who has proposed the establishment of a statutory body like the Passenger Transport Executive which would be a professional operating group, not a franchise or a legislative instrument or an advisory committee.

The fact is that in recent years Hongkong has been floundering with a system — or rather a non-system — that was outdated almost before it started.

To believe that the traffic conditions of 1960 would not change appreciably before 1975 and to then saddle Hongkong with 15-year bus franchises was the first major mistake.

Obviously, this must be replaced by a system that works. We need much more than greater efficiency in the existing companies, more teeth for the Transport Department and a few specialists in the TAC.

This would simply be compounding the errors made in 1960.