

1997? We'll just keep on driving

KMB boss aims straight ahead

By FRANCIS LI

If there are people, there is a need for public transport. This is how the chief executive of the territory's biggest passenger carrier views the future of Hongkong.

"We believe whatever happens in 1997, there will still be people in Hongkong," says the general manager of the Kowloon Motor Bus Co, Mr Lawrence Louey.

"Nineteen ninety-seven is not a stopping point, we just keep on. In fact, we have never talked about the 1997 question in our board meetings."

The company is now celebrating its 50th anniversary, but Mr Louey said he was "not very proud" of its earlier performance.

He said the company was formerly too firm in its belief that commuters were willing to "put up with less comfortable journeys if it meant cheaper fares."

He said the company's current policy is to improve

services while keeping fares at an acceptable level.

But he cautioned: "It must be a moderate spacing of improvement, otherwise its effect on fares will be too high for the public to accept."

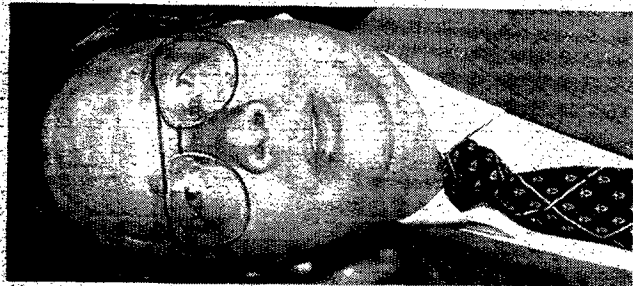
That was proved early in 1980, when the public mounted a series of protests against a 100 per cent fare rise sought by KMB.

Mr Louey said the steep increase was deemed necessary when "an ambitious development plan" to improve bus services in a short period of time at a high cost was forced on the company.

At that time, the Commissioner for Transport was Mr Alan Armstrong-Wright.

Fortunately, Mr Louey said, a review launched by the Government finally scaled down the programmes and trimmed the cost, leading to a smaller fare rise.

He said a repeat of that episode is unlikely as the incumbent Transport Commissioner, Mr Peter Leeds,



Mr Louey

"is more down to earth."

Mr Louey said he would welcome a similar review in future as KMB "has nothing to hide."

The company had maintained fares between 1971 and 1979 before raising them in 1979, in 1981 and again on Sunday.

He said the company was

able to maintain fares for so long through overcrowding, low inflation, stable oil prices and the conversion to one-man bus operations.

The company has said it will not seek another fare rise in the next 18 months, following the latest 18 per cent increase.

On current economy measures, Mr Louey said KMB will deploy more buses during the peak hours and withdraw them at off-peak times to reduce costs.

"The company is also trying to keep down maintenance costs by enforcing a preventative maintenance programme," he said.

Buses which have defects reported will undergo a thorough inspection every three weeks, with emphasis on brakes and the steering mechanism.

There will be a minor overhaul every six months and a major overhaul every 12 months.

"In this way, we can prolong the life of spare parts by good servicing and we can strengthen spare parts when they are about to wear out," he said.

Previously, he said, a bus would only be serviced when it broke down.

Despite the competition from the Mass Transit Railway and the Kowloon-Canton Railway, Mr Louey expressed confidence in the continued viability of KMB.

"We will still be viable if we keep careful watch over our bus scheduling," he said.

And KMB is working closely with the Census and Statistics Department on population movements, in

particular in new towns, he said.

Mr Louey said the new bus fare is still low compared to alternative means of transport, and more convenient.

As agreed with the Government, Mr Louey said, KMB buses will continue to play a dual role—as feeders to the MTR and KCR, and as links between major estates and urban Kowloon.

He said that the company's relations with its workers had been "very good," apart from a mass walkout by 10 per cent of the workforce in 1967 due to political movements.

At the request of the drivers, Mr Louey said, all bus cabins in the 2,400-strong fleet will be fitted with fans this summer.

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