



New and Different or the Same Old Policy? Assessing Bus Privatisation in Melbourne

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Abstract

In 1993, the Victorian government privatised most of Melbourne's publicly operated bus services. On the basis of the alleged success of this policy, the remaining public bus services, together with rail and tram services, are now in the process of being privatised

This paper assesses the results of the 1993 privatisation. Two hypotheses are explored. Firstly, that privatisation would lead to the introduction of innovative, customer-responsive services, thereby increasing patronage and providing an overall community benefit. It has been widely reported that this was indeed the result of the Melbourne privatisation. The second hypothesis is that privatisation would make little difference to service quality and that instead the private operator would demand an increased subsidy or resort to the 'easy' option of 'cream-skimming' (competing with other public transport operators – mainly the parallel rail service – rather than the car), and provide a net community disbenefit.

The evidence shows that the second of the above hypotheses has, contrary to public reports, been proven correct. The new private operator did introduce a number of changes to services on taking over from the government. Some of these were positive from a passenger point of view, some negative. The overall result, however, has been a decline in patronage during the private company's period of incumbency, in contrast with the increase in patronage recorded over the same period on Melbourne's train and tram systems, which remained publicly operated. The private operator has responded to this decline in patronage by reorganising the suburban portion of its network to more explicitly compete with the parallel rail service, and by renegotiating its contract with the government to achieve an increased subsidy. Although National receives a smaller subsidy than the public operator did, areas of the Public Transport Corporation's tram and rail services have achieved even greater savings over the same period.

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Introduction

To say that there has been a debate over the merits of increased competition and private sector involvement in urban public transport among Australian transport researchers is probably to overstate the case. Rather, there has been for some years a near-consensus among commentators that increased competition and private sector involvement are the key to improving financial performance and service quality. The general view remains that expressed in the Industry (now Productivity) Commission's 1994 report on Urban Transport, which stated that competition "is the most effective way of securing the lowest possible operating costs and the service improvements that people value most." (IC, 1994, pp. 9-10)

Considering that only a couple of decades ago, it was widely accepted that urban public transport is a natural monopoly, it is surprising how little dissent occurs from the current consensus. A rare example is David Hensher who, although generally supportive of private sector involvement, has noted that the experiences with deregulated and planned public transport in both British and Brazilian cities suggest the existence of "economies of service integration" which may mean that urban public transport exhibits at least some of the characteristics of a natural monopoly (Hensher, 1994, pp. 58-61; Hensher, 1998).

In a paper presented at the 21st ATRF, I argued that the competitive model of public transport, far from being a new idea, had already been tried and proven unsuccessful in Melbourne, and that the lack of planning accounted for Melbourne public transport's dramatically poorer performance than the public monopoly system in Toronto (Mees, 1997). I described the current Victorian government's policies as a "return to the failed policy of competition", in which different public transport operators competed against one another, rather than the car, producing inefficient, inflexible public transport which failed to respond to the diverse travel needs of a "post-modern" city.

At that stage, the Victorian government had announced the impending privatisation of Melbourne's publicly-owned rail and tram systems, along with a small group of bus routes which remained in public ownership. This policy was justified, in part, by the claimed success of the privatisation of the majority of Melbourne's public bus routes, which occurred in 1993. This paper assesses the 1993 privatisation to gauge the degree of success.

During the course of this assessment, critical comments are made on some changes introduced by the National Bus Company. The argument is not, however, that the company has behaved improperly or incompetently; rather, it is that the company is responding rationally to the perverse incentives created by privatisation.

Degrees of privatisation

Introducing competition and private sector involvement to public transport can take a range of forms (Neutze, 1997, pp. 198-200). At one extreme is 'full privatisation', where competing private operators plan and operate services, set fares and support themselves from the fare-box (usually with additional reimbursement from the public purse for the revenue foregone from concession tickets). A good example is the 'open slather'

introduced by the British government in 1986 for urban bus services outside London. At the other end of the scale is 'contracting-out' of particular functions with continuing public planning and control. Public transport operators have always done this for some services (few employed their own electricians to change the lighting in head office, for example!), but recently many cities have extended contracting out to the actual provision of services. The public operator retains the planning and financing role, and sets and collects fares. Vehicles usually carry the public operator's livery and from the passenger's perspective, this arrangement is almost indistinguishable from full public operation. This is the situation in the Greater Zurich area, where the public Zurcher Verkehrsverbund plans and finances public transport, but contracts out operation to a large number of public and private operators.

The Melbourne privatisation model falls between these extremes, providing a case of what Neutze characterises as 'private provision of [services] and collection of revenue under government control'. The private operator plans the services and collects the fares (plus concession reimbursement), but is protected from competition from other bus operators and subject to regulations designed to ensure the provision of minimum levels of service.

History

Street public transport in Melbourne was originally provided by the private sector. The Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company opened a cable tramway system from 1885 to 1891, with electric tram lines added subsequently by municipal tramway trusts. Following expiry of the MTOC's thirty-year franchise its network, together with the municipal systems, was taken over by a new statutory corporation, the Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramways Board, which operated from 1919 until 1983, when it was replaced by the Public Transport Corporation. Unlike public operators in other Australian cities, the MMTB's sphere of operation was defined primarily by mode. Thus, while public operators in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth were all granted monopoly rights over street public transport within a certain radius of the city centre, with private firms serving outer areas, private bus operators in Melbourne provided service to both inner and outer areas, subject only to restrictions introduced in the mid-1920s prohibiting direct competition with trams (see Mees, 1997 & 1999).

The MMTB's primary responsibility was to operate trams, and its first major task was the conversion of the cable tram system to electric operation, a process which began in 1924. During the conversion, the MMTB used motor buses, which had recently become available in Australia, as temporary replacements for trams. The conversion process was suspended for in 1930 as a result of the Depression, and recommenced five years later. By this time, many transport experts were arguing that the remaining cable trams should be replaced by buses, not electric trams, and so this was the fate of most cable routes over this period. The last set of routes to close, in 1940, were those along the main city shopping artery, Bourke Street, but electric trams were introduced into Bourke Street in 1955.

The other former cable routes remained served by buses and, with some extensions and additions, comprised Melbourne's publicly operated bus routes. For decades, "tramway buses" operated along inner city roads like Lygon and Rathdowne Streets. Carlton,

Johnston Street Collingwood and Punt Road/ Hoddle Street. Some route extensions saw the MMTB's territory expand as far as suburban LaTrobe University. As former tram routes mainly serving the relatively densely-populated inner suburbs, these routes were provided with tram-like service levels and, for many years, even conductors. A sharp distinction thus arose between service standards on public bus routes and the more numerous privately operated bus services.

The rapid rise of car travel following the end of petrol rationing in 1950 saw the operators of all modes of Melbourne public transport facing increasing financial problems which culminated, in the early 1970s, in the Victorian Railways, the MMTB and the private bus operators all becoming reliant on government subsidies. One consequence of financial stress was the collapse of a number of private bus operators. Initially, this resulted in either the cessation of service or a takeover by other private firms, but in 1967, the Withers family, who operated a network serving the rapidly growing Eastern suburbs, fell into financial difficulties. No other private operator had the capacity to absorb such a large operation, and the routes in question were too important to simply close, so the government of the day instructed the MMTB to purchase Withers' entire operation, including the main depot in the Eastern suburb of Doncaster.

The Withers routes were of two types: typical cross-suburban services which ran to railway stations, and direct services to the city centre from areas remote from the rail system. These latter radial routes ran 'over the top' of the MMTB's North Balwyn tram route on their way to the city centre, and were prevented from picking up passengers in the area of overlap. Perhaps surprisingly, the MMTB, on taking over the Withers network, did not transform the city routes into feeders to the tram, but continued to operate them in competition with its own trams. In 1977, the Eastern Freeway opened connecting Doncaster to the city centre, and the MMTB rerouted some of its radial services to the Freeway and introduced additional Freeway services, some of which began to compete with the nearby rail service. The Withers routes, like other private bus services in Melbourne, were much less frequent, and had more limited hours of operation, than tramway buses. Although the MMTB increased service levels on the Doncaster-based network following the takeover, they remained considerably lower than on the inner city, ex-tram group of routes.

The Coalition government was elected in Victoria in October 1992. January 1993 saw the commencement of a "public transport reform program" which saw significant cost reductions to rail and tram operations, and the privatisation of most of the MMTB bus routes, which by now were part of the Public Transport Corporation. In August 1993, the National Bus Company successfully tendered for the Doncaster routes and most of the inner city routes, or about 80 per cent of the PTC's bus operations. The company was effectively given a monopoly over bus services within the Doncaster region, plus the right to operate routes in other areas traditionally served by the MMTB. Although supposedly subject to regulation designed to enforce minimum service levels (which have never been disclosed), National was left free to make its own changes to the network it inherited, and to compete against tram and train services in its franchise area.

National purchased the PTC's bus depots in Doncaster and North Fitzroy and most of the vehicles, but operated them mainly with newly-hired staff. National was permitted to sell its own bus-only tickets, as well as the multi-modal tickets available across Melbourne, and was reimbursed by the government for the revenue foregone from concession tickets and from honouring multi-modal tickets. National commenced operating the services, to the PTC timetables, on 28 December 1993, but introduced a completely new route structure and timetable in October 1994. Another major route and timetable revision occurred in June 1995, followed by minor timetable revisions in early 1997 and 1998, and then a major route and timetable revision in March 1999, following the opening of an extension to the Eastern Freeway.

Assessing the results

Assessments of the 1993 Melbourne privatisation have been uniformly positive. The Victorian government states:

The introduction of innovative new and improved services has seen annual patronage rise steadily, consistently averaging 15 per cent above the levels previously carried by the Public Transport Corporation, with more than 14 million passengers carried... in 1996-97. National Bus has introduced some 80 new services, allowing greater frequencies, extended hours of operation and improved services to railway stations and regional shopping centres (Transport Reform Unit, 1998, p. 10)

The story has been taken up by others. Consultant Roger Graham told the ACT government in 1997 that National had increased patronage by "in excess of 20%" (Graham, 1997, p. 14), while Ian Wallis told the opening session of the 1997 ATRF that "National Bus patronage increased by in the order of 10% over the first two years, principally in the off-peak: this resulted from increased frequencies, new vehicles and improvements in quality aspects." (Wallis, 1997, p. 14)

When the plans to privatise the rest of Melbourne's public transport were announced in March 1997, Tony Richardson of RMIT's Transport Research Centre supported the government's policy in a feature piece in *The Age* (12.3.97, p. A12). Again, the National experience was extolled, in by now familiar terms:

Since taking over these services from the Met in late 1993, [National] has dramatically changed and improved the service. New buses, new routes, new timetables, friendly drivers and a company-wide commitment to acting upon feedback from customers has resulted in a significant improvement in service. This has been followed by a growth in patronage, improvement in staff morale and a happier bunch of customers.

The story sounds almost too good to be true. The principal objective of this paper is to assess whether this is the case. Two hypotheses are considered. Firstly, that privatisation would in fact lead to the introduction of innovative, customer-responsive services, thereby increasing patronage and providing an overall community benefit. The second hypothesis is that privatisation would make little difference to service quality and that instead the

operator would eventually resort to one of a number of possible 'easy' options: either demanding an increased subsidy, or 'cream-skimming' by competing with other public transport operators – mainly the parallel rail service – rather than the car

Patronage

The claims of an increase in patronage since National took over the service were difficult to assess for some years, because the figures were commercially confidential, and National declined to release them. But in 1998, the Victorian Auditor-General released a series of patronage figures (see Table 1).

Table 1 National Bus Patronage

Period	Patronage (million boardings)
1993-94	12.6
1994-95	14.5
1995-96	15.3
1996-97	14.6
1997-98	13.9 (projection based on first 9 months)

Source: Auditor-General (1998), p 83 (Table 3.3D).

The patronage figures show two major trends, as the Auditor-General notes in his report. Firstly, patronage levels in 1997-98 were indeed some 15 per cent higher than in 1993-94, but patronage has fallen steadily since 1995-96. At first glance, this seems to confirm the widespread claims that National did increase patronage compared with the figures when the services were operated by the PTC, but in reality it does not.

The 1993-94 figure is a calculation based on counts covering the 6 months of the financial year in which services were operated by National. These counts were used as the basis for the full year's figures, because no reliable passenger counts had been made on PTC bus services for some years. They do not provide a reliable estimate of patronage during operation by the PTC for the simple reason that passenger numbers fell significantly during the first months of operation by National, as a result of severe "teething problems" which accompanied the changeover to private operation in December 1993 (see below, under 'service quality'). Those who attended the 1994 ATRF may recall National's General Manager describing some of these problems, and the fall in patronage, during the concluding panel session. Over the following year or so, these problems were at least partially resolved, particularly following the route restructure of October 1994, and patronage recovered, accounting for the significant increase in 1994-95 and the further small increase in 1995-96.

It is not possible to conclude from the figures in Table 1 that National achieved any increase in patronage at all over the numbers carried by the PTC. Annual reports of the PTC give some information about PTC bus patronage prior to the National takeover. Although this is based on ticket sales and must be treated with some caution, it is the only basis upon which an assessment of National's performance relative to the PTC can be made. In 1992-93, the PTC's bus division carried 22.1 million passengers, and two years later, the remaining services carried 6 million. This suggests that the section handed over to National would have been carrying in the order of 16 million passengers annually in 1993, compared with just under 14 million currently.

What can be concluded is that there was an initial sharp drop in patronage following privatisation, followed by a (most likely partial) recovery, and then a return to patronage decline, with the overall result most probably being a fall in patronage compared with public operation, not an increase.

The results are unlikely to be due to demographic changes, given the short timeframe involved. In any event, the population of the areas served by National increased slightly between the 1991 and 1996 census. Over roughly the same period, public transport patronage across Melbourne increased significantly. Passenger numbers on publicly-operated trains rose by 6 per cent, and on trams by 15 per cent (Auditor-General, 1998b, Table 8D, p. 109). Patronage on the portion of the public bus system that remained in public hands remained at roughly 6 million per annum (from PTC Annual reports).

Service levels

Precise comparison of service levels is complicated by the fact that each network change introduced a different route structure, but it is possible to present an overall picture for the three types of route National inherited from the PTC. The general picture for radial routes from Doncaster depot has been for increased off-peak frequencies and expanded hours of operation, especially for Eastern Freeway services. There has been less change on local Doncaster routes, but some have seen improved off-peak services and extended hours of operation. By contrast, there has been a gradual reduction in service frequencies on the inner city routes, which had historically received higher service levels than the Doncaster routes. The pattern is illustrated in Table 2, which shows service levels on three representative routes, which have not changed structure (although some route numbers have altered)

The picture is not complete, however, without mentioning one additional measure taken by National which, for a short period every year, results in a dramatic reduction in service quality compared with the PTC era. National introduces a summer holiday timetable from Christmas to mid-January. Many operators take account of reduced work and school related travel by reducing peak-period service levels over summer, and both the MMTB and PTC did this. But National's holiday timetable reduces non-peak services as well, which is odd, given that holiday periods might be expected to produce greater demands outside peak periods. For example, the summer timetable for route 200 (cf. Table 2) has the last bus departing at 10:50 pm on weeknights, compared with the usual time of 12:03.

Table 2 Changes in service levels, 1993 to 1999

Type	Doncaster radial		Doncaster local		Inner city	
	1993	1999	1993	1999	1993	1999
Route No	264	307	367	367	201/3	200
Frequency (mins; average)						
Peak	5	8	20	20	5	10
Weekday inter-peak	30	30	45	30	10	15
Weekday evening	-	-	-	-	20	30
Saturday frequency	-	60	60	40	12/15	20
Sunday frequency	-	120	80	120	15/30	15/30
Last bus (p.m./a.m.)	6:20	6:45	7:22	7:42	12:05	12:03

Source: Compiled from timetables. 1999 figure for route 200 is the combined frequency of routes 200, 203 and 205.

The reduction in service is sharpest on Christmas Day. The PTC provided the normal Sunday service on this day, but National's timetable provides a very restricted service, and on some routes no service at all. On route 200, the Christmas Day service comprises 8 departures, with the last at 4:58 pm; by contrast, the PTC used to provide 40 departures, with the last at 10:58 pm. Christmas Day services on route 246 along Punt Road drop from 41 in each direction under the PTC to zero.

By contrast, the situation on government-operated trams and trains has been one of increased frequencies, largely as a result of a 1996 government election promise to upgrade Sunday services to Saturday frequencies and hours of operation. This has meant a doubling of Sunday train frequencies and a 50 per cent increase for trams.

Service quality

Statistical information on service quality is difficult to come by, and is frequently unhelpful in any event. Statistics such as vehicle-kilometres operated and number of trips run simply record what the service operator provides; they do not report service quality from the perspective that matters, namely that of the passenger (see Mees, 1999, Chapter 9). The following account is therefore necessarily subjective, relying on media reports and the author's own experience as a regular user of the services in question, both before and after privatisation.

The changeover to National operation created chaos, which was widely reported in the press over the first half of 1994. There appear to have been three main factors at work:

- ◆ National drivers were inexperienced, and possibly inadequately trained. For some weeks, there were regular reports of drivers asking passengers for directions. Drivers also appeared to have difficulty coping with traffic conditions.
- ◆ The difficulties with drivers were exacerbated by the fact that National withdrew from the Automatic Vehicle Monitoring system the PTC had used to keep track of trams and buses and respond to delays. Although the AVM system was far from perfect, it did improve the reliability of bus services.
- ◆ Reliability problems were exacerbated by the cumbersome process initially used to enable National to claim reimbursement for passengers showing multi-modal tickets, on many routes comprised the majority of loadings. Patrons were required to state their destination and be issued with an NBC ticket for the trip, in contrast to the previous practice of simply showing a valid multi-modal ticket to the driver. The change annoyed many passengers, created conflict with drivers and produced substantial delays to services.

Over the course of 1994, National attempted to address these problems. Driver skill levels improved and a less cumbersome system of accounting for multi-modal travellers was introduced. The October 1994 route restructure broke the busiest, and most delay-plagued, route (No. 200/201, from Bulleen-Garden City) in two, and introduced other measures designed to improve reliability. Most of the initial problems were eventually resolved, although National's services, especially along congested inner-city streets, remain noticeable less reliable than when operated by the PTC, presumably reflecting the absence of the AVM system.

Statistical evidence on punctuality was, like information on patronage, withheld from the public on commercial confidentiality grounds, until publication of the 1998 Auditor-General's report. The punctuality target set for National by the government was 95% of services within 5 minutes of schedule, the same target as for public bus operators. National's performance was 92.7% in 1995-6, 91.7% in 1996-7 and 91.2% in (part of) 1997-8 (Auditor-General 1998a, p 83; Table 3.3C). By contrast, the remaining public bus operation achieved 96.2% in 1995-6 and 95.9% in 1996-7 (PTC Annual Report 1997, p. 22. No figures were published for 1997-8, owing to privatisation).

One factor that has also worked against user-friendliness is frequent major changes to network structure. From late 1993 to mid-1995, National patrons had to deal with three quite different networks, and 1999 has seen further revision. While flexibility is no doubt desired by patrons, so also is predictability. Network instability is thought to have been a major factor behind the poor performance of privatised bus services in English cities (e.g. Mackie et al, 1995).

As for whether National's drivers are more friendly than previous PTC staff, the writer has not noticed any improvement in this area.

Route structure

National has, over time, increased the emphasis on providing express bus services from the Doncaster area to the city centre. This emphasis increased following the opening of an extension to the Eastern Freeway opened at the end of 1997, taking the freeway as far as Springvale Road, some 20 kilometres from the city centre. National announced the purchase of a fleet of extra-large buses to operate an express service along the freeway to the city centre, with a reported travel time of 38 minutes. Only a mile from the end of the freeway, straight down Springvale Road, is Nunawading station, from which trains can reach the city centre in 25 minutes, 13 minutes faster than the time claimed for the freeway bus. In addition, the trains also serve intermediate destinations containing five large shopping centres, Melbourne's biggest suburban employment centre (Box Hill), and Swinburne University, all of which are adjacent to stations. None of these locations are anywhere near the Eastern Freeway.

Currently, the majority of local residents who work in the city centre travel there by train, so the express bus will attract most of its patrons from trains, not cars. Why would any traveller use the express bus in preference to the faster train? Because the station is difficult to reach: car parking is limited, and the feeder bus service along Springvale Road is of poor quality. The feeder bus is also operated by the National Bus Company. Because National receives three times as much revenue for transporting a passenger to the city centre as to the rail station, the logic of the market would dictate the provision of a poor quality rail feeder bus to force passengers to use the freeway express. This is not to suggest that the company has adopted a deliberate policy along these lines; merely that market signals create pressure for it to move in this direction.

The new timetable introduced in 1999 has not followed this logic completely, however. Additional Eastern Freeway express services, including a number commencing at railway stations, have been introduced, but the resources to operate these routes appear to have come from reductions to inner city service levels, rather than from Doncaster area rail-feeder routes. But if the radial services are successful, they will reduce demand for the feeder services, creating pressure for service reductions. And curiously, the feeder bus along Springvale Road has been rerouted to make a long deviation through North Nunawading, which adds almost 10 minutes to trip times for passengers destined for Nunawading Station, so the bus-rail trip is now slower than using the Freeway express.

National is now explicitly marketing its services as an alternative to the train (as well as the car). Full-page advertisements in local papers in March 1999 proclaimed:

Sick and tired of costly delays and endless traffic jams on the eastern Freeway?
Fed up with getting to a railway station for travel to the city? Our new and
exciting Eastern Freeway services will answer your prayers!

The advertisements feature a table showing the travel times from various points to the city centre by freeway bus, compared with the bus-rail option, showing the superiority of the former. One of the points shown is on the rerouted Springvale Road feeder bus route which now offers, together with the train, slower city travel than the freeway bus.

Call on public funds

The Victorian government estimated in 1993 that the contract with National would reduce the government subsidy paid for the bus services operated from \$28 million per annum to \$18 million. The Auditor-General found in 1998 that, from 1994-95 to 1996-97, payments to National were \$16-17 million per annum (in addition, National collected \$6-8 m p.a. in fare revenue), so the savings target was actually exceeded. But in 1997, National renegotiated its contract with the Department of Infrastructure, resulting in a jump in the public subsidy to \$20 million for 1997-98. The new agreement incorporates an allowance for escalation according to the CPI, and for a maximum annual subsidy of \$28 million, leading the Auditor-General to conclude that "the revised payment structure incorporated in the new service agreement is likely to result in a decrease in the future savings to be achieved by the arrangement." (Auditor-General, 1998a, p. 82)

Even under the revised formula, National is receiving a subsidy some 28 per cent lower than the PTC was paid in 1992. But the sections of the PTC which were not privatised have reduced their call on public funds by an even larger amount, 39 per cent for trains and 31 per cent for trams, with further savings to be made in the tram area from automated ticketing (calculated from Auditor-General, 1998b, Table 8B, p. 105). The Auditor-General (1998b, Table 4B, p. 35) found that the total government appropriation for public transport fell by 43 per cent from 1991-92 to 1995-96.

Of course it may have been the case that there was greater scope for savings on government trains and trams, than on buses. The remaining government buses also reduced their call on public funds over this period, but a comparison with National is not possible because the remaining government bus routes were privatised in 1998 and information is not available on the level of savings achieved.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that the second of the above hypotheses has, contrary to public reports, been proven correct. The new private operator did introduce a number of changes to services on taking over from the government. Some of these were positive from a passenger point of view, some negative. The overall result, however, has been a decline in patronage during the private company's period of incumbency, in contrast with the increase in patronage recorded over the same period on Melbourne's train and tram systems, which remained publicly operated, and in particularly stark contrast with the claims of patronage increases made by the Victorian government and some other commentators. The private operator has responded to this decline in patronage by reorganising the suburban portion of its network to more explicitly compete with the parallel rail service, and by renegotiating its contract with the government to achieve an increased subsidy. Although National receives a smaller subsidy than the PTC bus division did, the PTC tram and rail divisions have achieved even greater savings over the same period.

Rather than launching Melbourne public transport into an exciting new era, the first round of privatisation appears to have returned at least a part of the system to the traditional pattern of inter-modal competition, patronage decline and rising subsidy.

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