

Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 197

Andy Johnson presented a short series in the Express recently giving the results of the Comprehensive National Transportation Study (CNTS) done by Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB). His version of the report was dated November 2006. I am responding to his comments on the Rapid Rail Project.

As far as I am aware, the CNTS was never accepted by the Client, the Ministry of Works and Transport (MOWT). In fact, the then Minister of Works and Transport, Colm Imbert, responded to questions in the Senate on July 3, 2007 that *“the final report was sent back to the consultants because the ministry was not satisfied with the quality of the report. The firm of Parsons Brinckerhoff was giving us an undertaking to remedy the defects in the report. The time period given was a period of 90 days which would elapse in approximately 30 days from now. We are awaiting the remedying of the defects in the report.”*

In February 2005 PB was awarded a contract to conduct the CNTS, the first such study in nearly forty years, and their contract was later expanded to include investigating the feasibility of light rail transit. In January 2006 Government varied their contract with PB for the CNTS which was made by the Central Tenders Board (CTB) in February 2005, in order to get PB to be their consultant for the rapid rail project procurement. The rail project was then handed to NIDCO in June 2006, and a Sole Select contract was established with PB. To date, it is not public knowledge why PB was favoured as the best rapid rail consultant to advise the Government.

In their quest for a speedy introduction of rapid rail, the Government erred by creating a conflict of interest in inviting PB to be their rail consultant while PB

was already contracted for the CNTS. PB, in turn, completely discredited themselves by accepting the invitation, when they could easily have reminded Government that part of PB's responsibility was to evaluate alternative modes of transport for appropriate selection. Would this great international transport expert not have known that a full transportation and economic feasibility study was required for rapid rail? So, PB was the consultant for the CNTS as well as the rapid rail consultant. Isn't it tortuous logic that rapid rail would be recommended?

Further, even before the CNTS had delivered anything of substance, the Transport Minister stated at the Informational Meeting for the Trinidad Rapid Rail Project at Crowne Plaza, POS on March 14, 2006 that *“the Government has decided that the preferred mode of mass transit is rapid rail as it is appropriate at this time to re-introduce rail...and Government believes this ... and is committed to fast-track the rapid rail project.”*

In September 2006 the Government fired PB from the rapid rail contract because a consultant on the PB team *“has had an association with one or more of the tenderers for the [rapid rail] project.”* Questionable professional ethics seem to have been the trademark of the rapid rail project, the largest infrastructure project ever attempted in the history of TnT,

Next, I want to comment on the public transit expertise that PB used for the CNTS. PB stated in its website that it *“is currently working on or has completed over 80 major investment studies—far more than any other firm,”* and that it *“has more than 400 planners in more than 250 offices on six continents—all backed by thousands of other professionals in related*

disciplines.” They have a staff of 9,000 across the world.

Yet, could PB not supply the CNTS with some of its top staff? In fact, some of the key specialists for the CNTS were not even employees of PB. For example, in a pivotal area as public transport or transit, their expert, was the Operations Manager of Campus Bus Service for a US University. Now he may well be an experienced bus transit expert in the USA, and would be ideal for a national school bus transportation system, but (1) did he have experience in para-transit in third world countries like ours, and (2) did he have experience in rapid rail, which he would have had to assess for TnT? And why must PB send a part-timer for one or two weeks at a time to conduct analysis of such a critical component of our transport system? Surely PB could have treated TnT with some priority and respect!

In other words, PB sent a series of contracted part-time individual sub-consultants to undertake occasional work on such a major public investment, or put another way, PB had a “pick-up side” to conduct the CNTS. Small wonder that the then Transport Minister kept making excuses for PB. Surely Government technocrats could not have been impressed with PB's results?

All is not lost. I believe the CNTS data collected is quite valuable and should be retained. But their recommendations should be reviewed.

The fact remains, if increased public transport development is the way to proceed, and I believe it is, then it is very important that the investment in such systems is made in a rational way. There is need for sensible selection and funding of technology and assessment of alternate transport systems to determine which is most feasible in

economical, social, environmental and sustainability terms.

Underlying the last Administration's approach to project development is the assumption is that it is the product rather than the process which is indicative of a country's development.

The ideas proposed should not require that we design our transport system around any particular technology, but around the needs of the customer. This begs the question why have we opted for the highest level of technology (rapid rail) when we cannot effectively run the simplest form of traditional transit service?

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