

I believe I received a good appreciation of the politics of implementation of national transportation policy back in 1996. I was chairman of a Ministry-appointed committee to update the 1986 National Internal Transport Policy. I was then employed with the Ministry of Works and Transport, and the committee comprised other MOWT technocrats and key stakeholders from the public and private sectors.

While the report may have contained useful material, it was never formally adopted by the Minister and taken to the Cabinet level due primarily to two reasons:

1. It recommended that the then recently introduced foreign-used car industry be managed, and went on to detail how that should be done, and what would be the consequences of not doing so; and,

2. It recommended appropriate operations for the Priority Bus Route (PBR).

These two issues were both rejected by Minister Sadiq Baksh. I was disappointed and discouraged. But, after many years in the transportation sector, dealing with technocrats and politicians, I can now sympathize somewhat with the difficulties in decision-making. Minister Baksh and other Ministers after him have to grapple with the voter demand concerning several issues, such as, cheaper cars to access reasonable transport, and their suggestion of “obvious” solutions of more roads, lanes, and the use of the PBR to solve traffic congestion, etc.

At that time, the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway (CRH) was still four lanes wide—two lanes in each direction. The traffic whose ratio of autos to public transport vehicles was 40:60 immediately received an improvement in traffic flow, but which rapidly deteriorated to a ratio of 60:40. It is well known the world over that traffic is never sustainably

relieved by more lanes. It has often been compared to slackening one’s belt to deal with an overweight problem.

I could easily say that I told them since 1996 that that would be the result, but what satisfaction would that give?

Current Minister Jack Warner faces a daunting task:

1. Motorists want immediate solution after more than 10 years of frustration;

2. Despite perceived easy access to cars, most people still do not have access to transport, and public transport is further delayed by the numbers of cars on the road; and,

3. The need for places to park all these cars.

In addition, the voters want him to implement what they believe are the solutions, including: (a) Build more roads and lanes, (b) Open up the PBR for all motorists, (c) Create one-way couplet with the Eastern Main Road (EMR) and PBR, and (d) Permit the establishment of alternative public transport—Auxiliary Transport Association.

How can Minister Warner tell this car-crazy population that a sustainable, cost-effective solution to the traffic and transport problems can only be achieved through a balanced and integrated approach? And that it will take about two years to start receiving meaningful results, and yet remain popular?

The continued high car ownership is supported by several policy measures not the least of which is the relatively low price of petrol, highly subsidized at present to a total of more than \$2 billion annually. Broad-brush removal of fuel subsidy will result in serious hardships for transit operators, and perhaps goods operators, and ultimately higher prices for consumers of transit and goods. And, many persons in society view the cheap fuel rate as one of the few

perks that they receive from Government Administrations that waste public funds on many irrelevant programmes.

However, a continued high level of fuel subsidy is unsustainable, if only because of its impact on increasing car ownership.

Measures undertaken by countries that have successfully implemented balanced and integrated transport solutions are as follows: (a) Development and management of the transportation system (with the emphasis on public transport); (b) Congestion reduction (with emphasis on the systems of traffic management and parking in urban centres); (c) Establishment of minimum levels of accessibility for communities; (d) A system for prioritizing investment projects in the transport sector; and, (e) The financing of transportation infrastructure and facilities and rationalising of subsidies.

The Singapore Public Transport Council recognized that *“The government has to take an important role in defining the role of public transport and pursuing policies that encourage and favour their use over that of private transport. This is unlikely to be a popular measure among the many car owners and aspiring car owners, but unless such a stand is taken, public transport will always be viewed as the mode of ‘last resort’ and as a residual mode for those with no access to cars.”*

To be concluded next week.

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