

BIC COLUMN JUNE

It's time.

Those words are usually identified with the short lived Gough Whitlam Labor Government of a bygone era, which given the recent federal polls doesn't look as bygone as we might have thought.

In the context of this column it means something entirely different.

I believe it's time to redefine the way that we – the community, our governments and the people who direct them, our parliamentarians – look at passenger transport in Australia and the role that buses play in moving people.

This need for change becomes more crucial against the backdrop of the upcoming Federal election, which looks like it's going to be a close run contest.

This will be an election where the Australian voters' current ambivalence for the leaders of both major parties, according to the polls, will see the party with the soundest policies win the day.

As operators you can assist in this process by asking this simple question of any candidate you encounter during the election.

“If you are elected and if your party is elected, what are you going to do for public transport? “

In the 80s Margaret Thatcher famously remarked that anybody over the age of 30 who found themselves on the bus could consider themselves a failure.

This type of thinking, and the negative connotations it carries has coloured the way that passenger transport policy relating to buses has been created in Australia since the motor car became the primary form of transport.

The belief that catching the bus is a worst case scenario rather than a genuine transport alternative is still the fundamental basis on which our policy makers operate and the lens through which the majority of our community views the role of buses in our cities and regions.

If you can't drive get a lift, if you can't get a lift catch a taxi, if you can't catch a taxi then get on the train and if you can't get on the train you'll have to catch the bus.

Since its inception in Canberra the BIC has been, through our lobbying efforts, working to change this 'train' of thought and to highlight the vital role buses play in public transport generally, the role buses play as the prime connector and integrator of services and the efficiencies that can be gained through simple measures like bus priority and bus rapid transit.

In our messages to the government the BIC has identified the complementary nature of bus transit to rail based public transport and the role that buses play in moving people who have no other way of retaining their independence and mobility.

The reality for many Australians is that there are no real transport choices besides the bus and for many more Australians there is no transport choice except for the car.

This is why it is so important that we start to look at the bus as not only a 'worst case scenario', but to start thinking about its role as a primary source of road-based transport which can compete with the car for market share more effectively.

We have seen a massive growth in patronage in the last decade and this is reflected in the record growth in our industry, but the question remains how much of this is what I would call an "enforced" usage rather than a realisation of the goal of making the bus a genuine alternative to the car.

The concern with this trend is that patronage is being swelled by 'reluctant' users, who will move back to a car if it becomes cheaper or worse still if capacity and coverage of bus services is inadequate their quality of life is significantly reduced in comparison to using their a car.

Rapidly rising demand also leads to bandaid fixes rather than real solutions. For example increasing the number of buses on the road without employing priority measures simply results in time spent waiting in buses rather than time spent waiting in cars.

Competing for a genuine market share means more than attracting the patronage of kids who are travelling to school or the elderly or those who have been forced onto buses by the rising cost of owning and operating a car.

It also means more than presenting a moral choice about the environmental benefits of taking public transport.

Making the bus competitive means offering services that are safe, clean, convenient, time-effective, frequent and reliable; services that reduce the perception gap between the convenience of the car and the bus.

An added bonus is selling the idea that buses offer the financial, social and environmental benefits of public transport usage.

How do we do this? There are a range of measures within a broad policy framework outlined in the *Moving People – Solutions for a Growing Australia* policy the BIC recently released with the Australasian Railways Association and International Public Transport Association.

The full report is available on the BIC website www.ozebus.com.au.

In a nutshell our report identified investment, innovation, planning, research and public awareness as some of the keys to improving our transport networks.

Most importantly we need all of these factors working in unison to achieve the genuine change we need to see ,as an absolute minimum outcome, the bus becoming a no-brainer as an occasional transport choice change for Australians.

At BIC we are under no illusion that we have all the answers, there needs to be a frank discussion about how we can achieve this goal between the industry, policy makers and parliamentarians.

We are engaging in a discussion with both major parties and the Greens (who could be very important in this next election if the polls are correct) through our lobbying in Canberra, about the role any Federal Government which is elected in 2010 will take in assisting the states develop better passenger transport systems and raise the bus up as a genuine road-based transport choice.

The BIC also held a national workshop series to promote our policy document.

The workshops were so successful that the BIC has been invited to present the report to the Standing Committee on Transport, which is the council of Director Generals of Transport reporting the Australian Transport Council (ATC), the group bringing together all of the Transport Ministers from around Australia.

We see this as part of a continuing dialogue with policy makers which is why the industry's input into is so important at events like the BIC National Conference.

But don't forget your part. At every opportunity you have to speak to your local Federal Member and candidates, attend a political party function; ask the question.

“If you are elected and if your party is elected, what are you going to do for public transport? “

BIC National Conference

The 2010 BIC National Conference will be held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Sydney from Sunday October 25 to Wednesday October 27.

This year's Conference theme, along the lines of our report is *Moving People – Solutions for a Growing Australia* and our program is shaping up as our strongest policy forum yet. A full conference brochure will be made available to the industry soon. If you have any further queries about the Conference call the BIC on (02) 6247 5990.

We urge you to book your flights and accommodation early to avoid inconvenience.

The Four Seasons Hotel, one of Sydney's premier venues, is where all plenary sessions for the Conference will be held and a special deal is available to all of you attending this year's Conference. To book accommodation at the Four Seasons call (02) 9250 3100 and refer to the Bus Industry Confederation rate to take advantage of our special Conference accommodation deal.

We also have a deal with the Sydney Harbour Marriot, located in the heart of the Circular Quay area, and 2 minutes walk from the Four Seasons Hotel. Call (02) 9259 7000 and refer to the Bus Industry Confederation rate to take advantage of our special Conference accommodation deal.

I look forward to seeing you there.