

FORGIVE THE BRITISH BUS



THIS is a tale of love and sex and buses. Well, actually it is mainly about buses, but the other two do have important walk-on parts.

I have to confess that between buses and me, it was not love at first sight. As a child even thinking about buses made me sick. My stomach began to heave as soon as anyone mentioned the word 'bus'. There were probably worse travellers. It was just that I never met them. There were times when I would rather ride into town on a Rottweiler than a corporation bus. But ride into town we did and it taught me three important things.

The first was that my mother had infinite patience. We would get on a bus and within a couple of stops we would be getting off so I could be sick or 'have a breather'. The second lesson was that it was really lucky if you lived on a busy bus route. Less than five minutes passed

mentally hand-slapping mirrors as they pass. The trouble is, though you can find them in abundance in Europe, there aren't that many in Britain.

I discovered this after Nottingham City Transport brought a new bus to try out in the city earlier this year. It was a dream - low-level access for those with mobility difficulties, spacious, sleek as a kitten, stylish as you please. There was only one problem. It was French.

'Where is your loyalty?' came back the public response. 'What about buying British?' It was a challenge that I have since taken up with council bus undertakings and the information that came back both saddened and appalled me. There is a stark truth we must face about the bus manufacturing industry in Britain — basically, we no longer have one. One major and serious bus manufacturer survives in Britain and even that seems to get its aluminium chassis from Switzerland. New buses invariably come from Germany, France and Scandinavia.


THERE are two reasons for this. The first is that bus privatisation in Britain brought with it a collapse in demand for new buses. Wheelbarrows with engines were brought back into commission in the gold rush pursuit of quick profits in the free-for-all which was called deregulation. The Government could have halted this by specifying a proportion of new buses in any fleet and a minimum rate of new-for-old bus replacement. They didn't. Check with any of the major operators and see what this has meant in their bus replacement programme.

The second reason is equally clear. A colleague in the Dutch parliament said simply (about the rescue of DAF in Holland) "our government stepped in because this is an industry we want to keep. We will sell to you when you can no longer produce for yourselves." How many sectors of industry could we say this about, where the lack of a national strategy has meant the squandering of jobs and skills and prospects in Britain?

So, as continental buses prepare to sidle up to your granny, whispering sweet nothings in her ear and

promising journeys of quiet delight Britain seems locked into bus competition based on 'Happy Shopper' prices, poor replacement rates and inevitable imports.

I suddenly realise that there is a lot that still makes me sick about buses.

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