



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND
ENVIRONMENT**

(Reference: ACTION buses and the sustainable transport plan)

Members:

**MR M GENTLEMAN (The Chair)
MR Z SESELJA (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 8 MAY 2007

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr H Jaireth (Ph: 6205 0137)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

WITNESSES

CONNOLLY, MR SCOTT, Secretary, Transport Workers Union, Canberra **1**

SCOTT, MR MICHAEL, Transport Officer Representative, Transport Workers
Union, Canberra **1**

SMITH, MR RAY, Drivers Representative, Transport Workers Union, Canberra **1**

The committee met at 2.35 pm.

CONNOLLY, MR SCOTT, Secretary, Transport Workers Union, Canberra
SCOTT, MR MICHAEL, Transport Officer Representative, Transport Workers Union, Canberra
SMITH, MR RAY, Drivers Representative, Transport Workers Union, Canberra

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment's inquiry into ACTION bus services. The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings.

Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on the record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attach to parliament, its members and others necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing.

For the information of visitors and other members, if any members here have decided to refer this privileges statement to the committee chairs meeting for a reduction in its size—

MR SESELJA: I think we have almost got a majority.

THE CHAIR: Mr Connolly, would you like to make a presentation to the committee?

Mr Connolly: Yes, thanks. I might make a few introductory comments. First, I will talk about our organisation and who we appear on behalf of. I will deal briefly with some key points around your terms of reference. I am accompanied by Michael, who is a transport officer who has been with ACTION for—

Mr Scott: Sixteen years.

Mr Connolly: And Ray, who is a driver and one of our delegates, who has been with ACTION for in excess of 26 years?

Mr Smith: Twenty-nine.

Mr Connolly: There is almost 50 years of corporate experience, including my three

years in the ACT. There is an enormous amount of corporate knowledge from our perspective.

We appear on behalf of the Transport Workers Union of Australia—the Canberra branch. Our members form the overall majority of workers at ACTION across all areas. Drivers, transport officers, people in administration areas, mechanics, cleaners and fuellers are all members of our union. We have over 2,500 members in the ACT—and their families; we appear on their behalf in addition to those that just work at ACTION. Many are commuters, obviously, and many have children that rely on ACTION bus services.

We also appear in relation to representations we have made to the community over the past 14 months, since the announced proposed cuts—or the first rumours of cuts—to ACTION bus services. We have conducted an extensive community campaign. Our drivers have conducted two commuter surveys, reaching out to the community. We have received well over 3,000 surveys that our drivers and commuters have collected and returned to us. We appear on behalf of the people who have returned submissions to us in terms of the views that they have expressed in those surveys.

Let me deal with your terms of reference. The first point is about how well ACTION meets the needs of different sectors of the community while recognising its role as a mass transport provider. We look at the community in various sections: the commuters, both off-peak commuters and peak commuters; schoolchildren, as a particular part of the community that are provided services; retirees; students and unemployed people, apart from those on direct school runs; and the workforce in terms of the ACTION staff that provide the services.

Let me go briefly to the December network changes in 2006. In our view, ACTION was on a path where it was meeting the needs of all of those areas and all those parts of the community—or, if it did not meet the needs, it had capacity and flexibility to meet growth demands and fluctuations. Pre the much contested reforms of last December, we were confident that—given the environment we live in, with the budgetary pressures on ACTION and the territory government—there was a system in place to adequately meet those needs. Also, importantly, there was a plan in place that had the confidence of the workforce and, I believe, the confidence of the community—confidence that there was a strategy for growth to meet community needs and expectations about public transport.

As we said prior to the changes, the current network, unfortunately, in our view fails to meet all of the needs—with perhaps the exception of dedicated school services; that may be an exception. The drivers might be able to give you some more feedback on that, but I would say that that would be the only exception, if any. In our view, in every other area the service at present fails to meet the needs. There are constant complaints of overcrowding. Some of our delegates from one of the depots are not here today because of an experience they had this morning. They are trying to work it through. A bus was cancelled and that led to overcrowding. Our delegates are trying to work through that issue this afternoon. It was—was it a 30?

Mr Scott: A 30 bus route.

Mr Connolly: It was a 30 service, one of the intertown or express services. A major commuter service was cancelled because of a lack of buses. We are trying to work through that issue. This is a daily experience. As recently as this morning we were having services cancelled. Obviously that is impacting directly on the community—on those commuters and, in my particular experience, on staff who are forced to deal with those issues.

There are issues regarding service frequency, obviously—with runs being cut outside the shoulder, the frequency of services off peak. Anecdotally, drivers are telling us—and the guys here can back it up—that this is probably the worst network they have seen in 30 years. Ray has almost 30 years experience. There are issues with late and dead running, and changes to the network mean that shortages or the cancellation of services are resulting in services habitually running late and drivers being forced to increase their dead running. That is just inefficiency, in our view, and adds to the frustration of the drivers. We believe that there is poor integration of the service in regard to interconnectivity and, I guess, an effective public transport network. We would not say it is a network at the moment; at best it is a disjointed system compared to where it was.

We have been very public about the impact on the workforce—the level of assaults we have had. We have just made public the experience relayed to us. We have had at least six assaults on transport officers and drivers since the introduction of this network. There have been serious assaults. That spike is very much, in our mind, a direct result of community anger and frustration at this network change. Drivers who work in other bus services that provide commuter services in the ACT mid-week and perform work for ACTION on the weekends—and there are quite a few of them—are relaying directly to us that the anger and frustration are directed very much at ACTION and ACTION drivers; they are not encountering it in their other places of employment that provide the same services to the community.

Obviously there is community anger and opposition. Overwhelmingly the survey responses we received about what people thought about the proposed changes showed overwhelming opposition from the community. We had almost 2,000 surveys returned. Most recently we surveyed people about what they thought about the changes and improvements needed; again, overwhelmingly people said that there was a need for urgent improvement to the bus services.

Fortunately, we believe that, despite the frustrations, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. The minister's announcements last week—I think it was last week—of upgrades and safety, with some incremental changes to peak runs and some of the minor tinkering of the network that has happened since February this year, are starting to repair the damage that has been done. We certainly welcome safety announcements, in particular, as a step in the right direction to address the very serious concerns of not only our members but the community.

Where to from here? Our view is, very critically, that the pre-December 2006 network, or its equivalent, must be returned to as a matter of urgency. We also have a view that, if anything, it is going to be more than that now. There has been damage to the network and to the service and the credibility of the service. In our view, to make that up is going to be the 10 million or whatever the cuts were—six to 10 million—plus

whatever is needed to repair the damage or go towards repairing the damage.

We also believe that the workforce needs certainty. We are in the midst of EBA negotiations at the moment. One thing that would certainly add to confidence and moving forward would be for those negotiations to close as quickly as possible. That would allow people to move forward with certainty, with clear job and career prospects for the future. The workforce—600 to 700 of them—are a critical component of these services to the community.

We also believe that the program pre December last year—with appropriate planning and strategic thought about the network—needs to be returned to as a matter of urgency. We would say that that needs to be done in consultation with the workforce—and, critically, the community. That is one thing that has been missing in these latest reforms.

You asked for some input about comparative analysis. There have been numerous attempts at comparative analysis of bus networks across the country. The most recent, as far as I am aware, was about 12 to 13 years ago. The Bus Industry Council commissioned two reports which became known as the BIC 1 and 2 reports. There has not been anything since those reports, to our knowledge. There were some recent studies in New South Wales, but they were specific to New South Wales. Those reports made some recommendations and comments about ACTION. We do not think they have relevance any more.

As we said at the time, and as that report acknowledged—I think there is a report stemming back to the 1930s, and one of our colleagues in the room has experience from that period—Canberra is unique, both geographically and in the nature of the service. You are talking about a sole public transport provider. That is what ACTION is to the territory. Regardless of the pressures in terms of alternative modes, the reality is that its cost-effectiveness and efficiencies mean that it is probably the only public transport mode in the territory—because of the nature of costs and infrastructure needs. Keeping those things in mind, we would say that there needs to be a recognition of that and a proper analysis of the needs of the Canberra community and the needs of Canberra in terms of a proper and efficient public transport network and bus network.

Your third point is about the ACTION services and the sustainable transport plan—its appropriateness. I will make some comments about that. Our understanding—and keep in mind that we were not involved in the plan; from our point of view, that was a critical failure on the planning side of things—is that the targets were nine per cent by 2011 and 16 per cent by 2026. We would say that targets are essential. Regardless of whether those targets are appropriate or not, we would encourage the use of targets where they are appropriate. We say that particularly because of the increasing demand by commuters and the need for a viable, effective and efficient public transport system. Environmental fuel costs are realities for commuters out there and for our members. There is enormous pressure. People are looking for a viable public transport network. I think that our targets go towards providing that provided they come with a commitment to deliver on them.

In terms of progress towards implementation of both of those targets, we feel that the

unfortunate developments over the last six months have not helped to maintain the confidence of the service. We feel that it is very unlikely that we will meet the nine per cent target given the realities of the last six months. We were not involved in the implementation of those targets, so we say that only anecdotally. But we do say that, critically, the absence of workforce and community involvement in the establishment of targets is one of the problems. Lack of proper consultation and involvement with the community is something that we believe must be addressed if we are to go forward.

It is particularly disappointing to look at where we were 12 months ago compared to where we are now. Twelve months ago we would have said that we were confident of reaching those targets. There was a plan, and there was confidence amongst the workforce and, we believe, the community about reaching those goals.

Let me make a final point on the viability of targeting or not. One issue we identify constantly is that it is very hard to track public transport usage in the ACT. The ticketing system at ACTION is not a reliable source of data. The ticketing system is—what is a nice way of saying it?

Mr Scott: Very old.

Mr Connolly: It does not work.

Mr Scott: Yes.

MR SESELJA: Very unreliable.

Mr Scott: Very unreliable.

Mr Connolly: It is a problem that needs to be addressed in one form or another, both in the context of assessing our progression towards these targets and also in the context of revenue streams, obviously. We believe that for the provision of a reliable service you need an effective, efficient ticketing system.

MR SESELJA: How is passenger data collated at the moment if the ticketing system is not up to it?

Mr Connolly: I have no idea.

MR SESELJA: You do not know?

Mr Connolly: No idea.

Mr Scott: It is not accurate at all. They are going off the data off what you call our driver module. They use a module and a Wayfarer system, a validator. They are getting the numbers off that. But a lot of the time they are not working. We have constantly got drivers calling up where there are module errors—problems with the module. As soon as there is a jammed ticket—if any of you catch buses—that is not recording the data from anyone. Our drivers cannot charge fares. If you have a blocked ticket, you cannot just say to one lot of commuters to get on a bus and put

your ticket in, because it is jammed. So the other people get on for free as well; otherwise it causes—

MR SESELJA: Delays.

Mr Scott: It causes problems. So there is no accurate recording whatsoever. I work in the ACTION radio room, and I am constantly getting calls about jammed tickets and module failures. Basically, the system is a very old system which came from the Wayfarer system. It is very old and antiquated. Other public transport systems are using much more modern systems—using scans like the supermarket system as the ticket system. It is not really accurate. The only way they can do numbers is manually, like at schools. They send our transport officers up to do numbers that way, and do counts—like the old manual way of counting, using people to get the data.

MR SESELJA: So it is more of a guesstimate then? Is the data that we get on passengers more of a guesstimate?

Mr Connolly: I think so, yes.

Mr Scott: Yes.

Mr Smith: With regard to the modules, they recently got, I think, 10 new ones in, but I think they are still short. When we get down to the afternoon runs, as well as a shortage of buses, there is a shortage of modules, so drivers are going out without the equipment to collect fees. As Michael was saying, he is getting reports—and I have experienced it—that the Wayfarer system and the validators are breaking down. I believe that there is starting to be a shortage of Wayfarers and validators coming out of the electrical section of the workshops where they repair them. I think there is a shortage there.

THE CHAIR: So are there two things occurring there? One is that you are not getting the actual data relating to passenger numbers. But also, if you cannot validate—

Mr Smith: You are not collecting the revenue.

THE CHAIR: You are not collecting the revenue.

Mr Smith: Yes. To me, that is a concern personally; there is nothing worse than if I cannot collect a fare. It is just something that bugs me. I like to collect my fares.

Mr Scott: It does upset our drivers. I take calls regularly from drivers. A lot of our drivers are very frustrated about that. They feel that they are not doing their job properly; they are not collecting revenue like they are supposed to be doing. It does cause a morale problem and there is discussion over that. I believe they did purchase some new validators—not new, but second-hand validators—from up north somewhere in Queensland. They are doing everything as a quick fix at the moment to try and fix the problem. Basically it is all budget driven. Every time we raise this with our management or whoever, we always get that same answer: it is a monetary problem.

Mr Smith: Yes, and with the modules, it becomes—I have lost my train of thought.

Mr Scott: Going on to modules and what Ray said about the radio room, at least three drivers this week have gone out on the road without a module. The problem with the system is that they have to get the modules from overseas. They are constantly ordering in new ones. Usually they get a batch of about 30 of them and what happens is that when they get to Australia 10 or so are not working. They are constantly going up to our electronic workshops, which ties up a lot of our electronic guys in trying to get the system working.

Basically the whole revenue system is costing us a fortune. The maintenance is unbelievable. They are constantly trying, when they can, to repair the validator system. There are two systems. There is a Wayfarer system, which is the driver's console. Then there is a separate validator which takes the ticket. At the interchanges they are constantly having supervisors go out to change the validators when they have stock. Until recently, there were only four validators in the south region which they could use, so drivers were constantly calling up saying, "We need a new validator." They are told, "Sorry, continue on; don't charge any fares." Unfortunately, as I have touched on before, if a driver allows half the people who have purchased tickets on for free and then there are the people paying fares, you get into a conflict situation. This is causing considerable problems.

Mr Smith: Yes, and what if the Wayfarer course collapses and you cannot issue a ticket for the cash fares? You cannot collect cash fares without a receipt; that is not in the rules.

THE CHAIR: I am very concerned about something you said in your opening statement, Mr Connolly. You talked about safety for drivers. I imagine that concern is for patrons as well. You mentioned that there had been six incidents since the change to the network last year. You did say that some of the security upgrades would alleviate a little bit of that problem. Do you see that the frustration with patrons has been key to or instrumental in this sort of activity?

Mr Connolly: Most definitely. Safety is always an issue, and it probably always will be. I guess the reality is that it is about managing your risks. We work in an industry where we are out in the public area. Members, drivers and TOs are potentially exposed to volatile situations on a day-to-day basis. It is about what we are doing to manage those risks. We believe that the announcements of last December—and the reaction of the community to those, with the cutbacks, particularly off the peak, and with your day-to-day commuters—have certainly directly impacted on the spike in assaults that we have had—assaults and abuse by passengers.

We have had six serious assaults. A guy is still in hospital with broken ribs. Last week and the week before, there were two assaults. One fellow literally had the door broken in at the Woden interchange. People kicked the door in to get in and assault him. We have always had these situations—two or three a year that are serious. But six in the space of six months? The feedback we are getting is that it is a direct result of these changes to the network.

MS PORTER: Have you noticed any other variables that could be contributing to the

rise in frustration by people? Are there factors in the assaults other than the frustration—like someone trying to get money or something like that? Have you noticed any other variables?

Mr Connolly: With the spike over the last six months we have not. There are always situations and there are always triggers, but we have noticed recently that there has been a general increase across the board with frustration and the venting of that at our members in response to the network.

We most recently saw it this morning. A guy who was supposed to be here today copped the abuse of 40 or 50 people who were missing their bus because there was a breakdown; that meant that his bus was overloaded, and he could not carry the whole load. They are the individuals out there on the front line dealing with that every single day. We believe that that is a direct result of the changes—or has been exacerbated by the changes. We noticed that in perhaps a doubling of these serious assaults.

THE CHAIR: So how is the morale of the employees of ACTION?

Mr Smith: It has just got lower. Personally I am a bit concerned about the morale and the absenteeism that goes with it. We have heavy shifts, with unreasonable timings. That goes with the loadings, of course; it is a combination thing. What also occurs is the toilet breaks. We tell the blokes they have to go to the toilet, but a lot of them do not do that because it is gelled into them that they have to try and keep to a timetable. They will just hold on.

THE CHAIR: Are you saying that they are running behind in the timetable and therefore—

Mr Smith: Yes.

THE CHAIR: And therefore they do not get an opportunity to have a break to go the restroom?

Mr Smith: Yes. Some do, and they just run late for the next one. If they are five or 10 minutes late coming in, they will go and have a toilet break; that is another five minutes that they are late for the next one, they are just chasing their tail.

And in the afternoon—even in the morning, actually—there is a shortage of buses. There are probably half a dozen to a dozen who are waiting for a bus. Possibly they will come down from the workshops. A lot of them come down on concession. That means that there are reliefs from the workshops with minor problems on concession. The bus goes out and does a run, and then it is returned to the workshop to get repaired. But in those situations, whilst they are waiting, time is ticking away: by the time they get to the starting point, they are late; they are under pressure and stress, and then away you go.

Mr Connolly: And the commuters are under pressure, so it adds to that cycle about there being more angst out there. The guys have a choice: they either wear the pressure themselves—you start, you speed, you try and make it up, or you do not take your breaks—because they do not want to cop the abuse of the passengers, or they

take their breaks, they do the right thing, and then they run the risk of copping the abuse out there on the front line. It is catch 22 for our guys. Nine out of 10 of them are out there trying to do the right thing, but you can only do that up to a point. You are just going to get the shits. Absenteeism is up and morale is at an all-time low—certainly in my experience.

Mr Smith: And from a road safety point of view, you convert to using an aggressive type of driving instead of a defensive type of driving. In other words, where an amber light comes up and you would usually slow—I have done this myself, and I should not do it because I am an ex-trainer and everything—you think, “No, I can just catch that light. I am going to just keep trying to catch up on the timetable.” I had an incident several weeks ago where the amber light went and I thought, “No, I will go through.” There was a lad—I think it was a handicapped lad—just on the corner of the kerb in there. He anticipated too. He started to walk across the road. It frightened me. I thought, ‘Whoops, no. I can’t do that; I’ve got to back off here. If I am going to run late, I am going to run late. I cannot afford to risk having an accident and running a pedestrian over.’ That really pulled me back a bit. That is what concerns me—that you go to the aggressive stage of driving, to try and keep up with the timetable, instead of using defensive driving, which is what a professional driver is supposed to be doing.

THE CHAIR: Any questions, members?

MS PORTER: I just want to go back to the buses that are being repaired. Are you saying that there are more buses needing to be repaired at the moment?

Mr Smith: Yes.

MS PORTER: Is this unusual and why would that be?

Mr Smith: Mainly Belconnen, because over at Tuggeranong they have got the influx of the new gas buses and of course once they get, say, 10 new gas buses over there they transport 10 of the old ones to Belconnen.

THE CHAIR: It is a better place to live down there, too.

Mr Smith: That is right.

MS PORTER: Why is Belconnen being discriminated against in this way?

Mr Scott: It goes to the history of it. If you are not aware, the gas buses can only be fuelled at Tuggeranong, the newer buses. This is the problem. It cost about \$2 million to set up the gas fuelling station at Tuggeranong. That is why the newer buses are out that side. Our buses are doing more and more miles. They are getting older—wear and tear. Over considerable years they have cut back on the workshop staff and the maintenance crew.

I am an ex-workshop tradesman panel beater. I came to ACTION from outside as a tradesman, so I have got a history of the workshop side of things as well. Constantly, everyone is struggling to keep the maintenance up to the buses and all those little

problems keep festering. As Ray, the delegate for the drivers, said, the drivers continually complain, like about the amount of maintenance on bus seats; they need a lot more maintenance on them.

THE CHAIR: On the drivers' seats or the—

Mr Scott: The drivers' seats. We are getting drivers now with a lot more injuries, with back injuries. It is a constant problem.

Mr Smith: Yes, that has been a contentious item for quite a while. We have been pushing for a replacement bus seat, new bus seats. They just keep repairing them. They do not come out as they were originally and a lot of drivers do—

Mr Scott: It is a major problem.

Mr Smith: It is increasing our compensation claims and amounts too.

THE CHAIR: Could I draw a little bit further into that. Does that occur on the new buses or is this simply the older buses that are being repaired?

Mr Smith: The older buses, at this stage.

THE CHAIR: So as the fleet gets reviewed they are okay, the new seats?

Mr Smith: Yes, they get brand-new seats on the new buses.

Mr Scott: At this stage we are not hearing much about the new buses; it is the older buses. I sat down in the meal room today with the drivers and they constantly come talking to me, as a transport officer supervisor from the radio room, about problems they are facing. There are so many issues that are happening—the thing with their seats, sore backs. As Ray said, a lot of the shifts now being introduced are longer, with less turnaround time. When I was driving, I had sometimes five or 10 minutes turnaround. A lot of these shifts only get a three-minute or four-minute turnaround. The 38 routes, which have constantly been in the paper—what we called the drug run or methadone run when I was a driver—are running late because of all the school kids.

That has caused a lot of problems too with a lot of school closures and things. A lot of schools are incorporated so a lot more kids are getting on particularly that 38 route, where the drivers are constantly running late—15, 20 minutes late. It is a major, major problem.

MR SESELJA: Sorry; did you say the school kids are going on the methadone run, or is that—

Mr Scott: Yes, it is the 38 route. We nicknamed it the drug run because we have a lot of intravenous users.

MR SESELJA: But there are now a lot of school kids using that?

Mr Scott: Yes, a lot of college kids catch those services because they are the only

services that pass and they are our most frequent services, every 20 minutes. But what happens when the general public want to get on is that there are so many college kids getting on that it is causing the drivers to run late. You've got it both ends: you have got Dickson College as well, so you have got the Dickson College children. It is constantly running late.

The new Canberra Centre bus stop is a major problem with buses going in; it is slowing our drivers down there as well—near accidents, near misses there. It is a major run that we have got major problems with, which Ray, as a driver, will give you more information about. As a radio room operator, I am constantly getting calls about that 38 route. It is nothing for it to be 15, 20 minutes late and then they have got to turn around and try and do another one back. It is just about the health and safety of the drivers, being pushed all the time, and the abuse the drivers get on that run in particular. That has been highlighted in the *Canberra Times*. It has been a major problem, with threats to drivers on that route, because it goes through the hospital as well. That is why we nicknamed it that run, because they go there for the methadone program.

Mr Smith: It is a multimix run; it is incredible. It is lovely for the amount of patronage we get—that is great. But it is a matter of trying to put in an extra amount of buses to finetune it in regard to timing and passengers. I think at one stage every 15 minutes we were running it, wasn't it?

Mr Scott: We were running it every 15 minutes—

Mr Smith: I think it was 15 minutes.

Mr Scott: and they changed it to 20-minute intervals. It was 15 minutes.

Mr Smith: Then it was the cutbacks, of course, but that is how much patronage we were getting before.

Mr Scott: Yes. Since 1 December, in particular, when school went back at the end of January, we have had an influx of calls on our radio system, with drivers getting abused and running late. The current radio system, where I work, is only about three years old but it is not adequate for the needs of ACTION. That is another major issue, our communications system. It has been raised on several levels. It is basically like a phone line system, and when the drivers call up, particularly during the afternoon and morning peaks, it is constantly jamming and you are constantly trying to keep up with the demand and workload, particularly with the drivers calling up with problems on the road. WorkCover was called in about it. Nothing much seems to have happened, but constantly we do all-calls to our drivers, like road diversions, police messages.

There are so many different community things that we do in the radio room—we have drivers, we have the systems cutting out, drivers are calling us, we are not hearing the all-calls, we are not hearing the messages. It is a major problem as well. They spent a fortune on a radio communications system that is not up to standard for our drivers' safety. If anything major happens, you have got to try and get a message out—when you can finally get a message out, because our system cuts out all the time. It is a major problem with the system.

THE CHAIR: Can we come back to discussion about the frustration of passengers waiting for late buses. There has been some debate in the chamber about the real-time notification program that was to go ahead. I have experienced it recently—not in the ACT, of course—where I was able to look at the board and see how far away the bus was. I felt that it was quite good. You could tell how far away it was going to be. On that particular bus route there was no route time set; it simply said how far away the bus was. There were several routes going at that particular bus stop. Do you think if that was installed that would alleviate some of the angst of passengers?

Mr Connolly: Yes. I really think at one stage it may well make a difference. But we have got problems with buses; we have not got enough buses to put on the road. So it is really a question of priorities from our view—facilities that are 30, 40 years old; interchanges that are in obvious decay. So if it is a question of where we spend our money I certainly would not be recommending we spend it there. To make a real difference to the immediate need, we need to put more buses on the road, reinvest in support mechanisms for drivers, buy another 10 buses. That is going to make a difference—more of a difference, we feel, than any new initiative. But we certainly would support it long term.

One thing that is critical for us is to get back to a plan out there, be it right or wrong; that is what is missing at the moment, in our view. There is not a commitment to resource and deliver on a plan for ACTION, for the community. The buses are one example of that—an appropriate vehicle replacement program. I am not aware of a facility upgrade program. I am not aware of a renewal of driver competencies and driver training as a regular program. These are all things that we believe are needed. We are getting more assaults. We should be minimising the risk, upskilling our drivers and their capacity to respond to those violent situations. We are not going to mitigate things with the community with cameras, with upgrades. But we can also do things by investing in our workforce, by upskilling them and their capacity to respond and minimise the situations. We would get more bang for our buck that way, we certainly feel, as part of the strategic plan for the company.

MR SESELJA: Mr Connolly, you spoke before about your survey and you mentioned that you thought that since the changes at the end of 2006 the only area of the community that was really being served reasonably well still was school kids. What has the survey shown about how other sectors have gone? In particular, does it show that one area of the community, say daytime captive users, are the most severely affected? What has your survey showed on that front?

Mr Connolly: To be fair, we have not got down to that level of detail. Anecdotally, the largest angst is from the peak commuters, because they are the most frequent commuters, asking for more buses on the road. But the assaults have occurred during the day peaks, the off-peak periods, with those day core commuters. The most vocal people, apart from us actively going out there, have been those out of the peaks that perhaps are most reliant on the bus network, who do not have a car as an alternative, who rely on the buses, be it out of habit, as a critical part of their place in our community.

An important part of ACTION's service is that it is not just a commuter service; it is a

community service. Our drivers take enormous credit in being there and being able to provide that service to the community, in addition to moving our commuters to and from work.

MR SESELJA: I apologise if I have missed it—I do not know if it was in the papers—but have the actual results of the survey been either provided to us or published anywhere?

Mr Connolly: Only in the newspapers, but we can provide those to the committee.

MR SESELJA: Will you be able to provide them for the committee, because that would be quite helpful?

Mr Connolly: Yes, sure, we can do that.

Mr Smith: In the off-peak period the majority of our fares are \$1.50, which indicates that these are the people that do not have alternative transport. The majority of our customers in the off-peak are people on social security and so forth. It is very rare that you get a full fare; most of those have gone to work in the peak hour. In the off-peak most are the \$1.50s; we sell a lot of those.

MS PORTER: I just want to go back to something I thought I heard you say, Mr Scott, on this matter of collecting fares. I thought you said upgrading or repairing the machinery and everything surrounding collecting the fares was costing a fortune. Did you say that or did I mishear you?

Mr Scott: Yes, it is costing ACTION a lot of money with the way the system is, how old the system is. It is tying up a lot of the time of our electronics technicians in trying to repair it and keep it serviceable on the road. Simple things like school kids bending a ticket will jam up these old validators.

Mr Connolly: The problem is that we are spending money managing the mistakes because we did not do it right the first time.

Mr Scott: That is correct.

Mr Connolly: That is an example—the ticketing system—where we are continuing to throw money after a system that is flawed. It may have been fine 10 or 15 years ago but we have not reinvested in it. We did the same with our radio network. I know we spent in excess of \$1 million last year trying to fix a problem of a new radio network that cost us in excess of \$1 million, because we did not invest the money properly to get an integrated system in the first time. The authority—it might have been an authority then; I do not know—

Mr Scott: It was an authority, yes.

Mr Connolly: WorkCover issued infringement notices; that is how bad the radio network was last year. We literally had drivers stranded out there. Heaven forbid we had that situation now. It is a little better now; we have put systems in place at enormous expense that were not budgeted for to provide a band-aid solution to our

radio network over the last 12 months. But last year drivers were out there, potentially blind, without a support network, exposed to the risks that are inherent in their job.

MS PORTER: Back to the fares, have you looked at other areas where they do not charge fares, and the cost comparison with that?

Mr Scott: No, we have not. What we have raised with ACTION management on numerous occasions is to look at other ticketing systems used, like in Sydney. It has been updated recently and that system follows through to the public and the private operators as well. The Sydney state transit buses have a reasonably new system which is a scanning system. It also has been followed through to the outer regions, like Westbuses and all of those areas that have school kids and public that use the same system, where you are constantly getting revenue in. We are just not collecting fares. If you look at any of our radio room reports, for every driver that calls us up we keep a log of where fares aren't being taken. It also covers our drivers, but it is a concern to us when the whole idea is to get subsidy in to help pay for all these things and it is costing us a fortune.

Mr Connolly: Integrated ticketing: my understanding was it was actually part of the plan that was endorsed. It certainly had our support, moving to an integrated ticketing system. The problem is that it is expensive, but it certainly has our support.

Mrs Dunne: I just want to go back to the point that Mr Smith made—that the people who travel in off-peak are concession fares. Are these people who have prepaid bus fares or are these people shelling \$1.50 out of their pocket? Are they the \$1.50 cash fares?

Mr Smith: It is \$1.40, actually, for the off-peak.

Mrs Dunne: Are they generally people who pay cash fares?

Mr Smith: Yes, mostly the pensioners and the seniors.

Mrs Dunne: And they do not buy a prepurchased ticket?

Mr Smith: No. You do get the occasional one that has prepurchased the ticket, but the majority of them just pay the \$1.40, yes.

Mrs Dunne: Following on from that and the issue about fare collection, integrated ticketing and things like that, do you see that there is a problem in take-up of ticketing? Is it a cost issue or what? I do not know how this compares but I think Canberra probably has a fairly high proportion of cash fares compared to lots of other jurisdictions, and certainly overseas where cash does not change hands particularly on the bus or whatever.

Mr Smith: Yes, at this stage.

Mrs Dunne: Is there a problem with people taking up prepurchased tickets?

Mr Smith: I do not think it is a problem. I do not think they have been educated in

getting that. I had one lass on my first run down at the Holt shops; for a while there she was getting a \$3 90-minute transfer ticket. I said to her, “You’d be better off with a 10-ride ticket. You know, you can save money.” It took her a while to cotton on; it was only last week that she said, “Look, I have got my ticket.” Especially in the school holidays we take a lot more cash, because the kids cannot use their school term ticket. And I think at weekends we take a lot. One chap had a particular weekend detail that was very, very busy; on his feedback form I think he took \$264 for the day, which is fairly high. I think probably \$50 to \$100 is the norm for Monday to Friday on a normal shift.

Mrs Dunne: Okay; that is interesting.

THE CHAIR: Mr Connolly, you said in your opening that you would like to see a return to the pre-December 2006 network. What about the other changes that have occurred with ACTION in, for example, the management structure and the position of ACTION within the government? Are you happy with the results that have occurred out of those cuts?

Mr Connolly: I would not say we are happy, but I guess, to be honest, the focus of our attention has not been so much on the management structures because, to be frank, there has not been any adequate management of the place in six to 12 months anyway. It has been reactive. To say the place is managed to a plan is certainly exaggerating. All it is, in our experience, is reacting to crisis after crisis. We certainly welcome any management structure that has the capacity to address the immediate concerns and then deliver upon returning to a situation where there is a capacity to respond proactively and meet demand and the flexibilities that are required of a growing population.

But as for the detail regarding TAMS and ACTION as an independent authority, we believe that perhaps that is certainly a disadvantage in the lack of management, lack of independence, that has come as a result of those changes. But we would certainly balance that with a dose of reality given the budgetary realities that we all face. If it is a question of efficiencies delivered in the management structure and efficiencies delivered to service the community, we would certainly favour the former over the latter.

Mrs Dunne: By efficiencies do you mean cuts?

Mr Connolly: Not to services or drivers, or people that I represent on the ground.

Mr Scott: I am a transport officer of ACTION buses in the radio room. Basically before, when we were an authority, our chief executive would deal directly with the minister, and we seemed to get more decisions made. We have now gone back to the old mentality where you have got several managers you have got to go through—hierarchies—to try to get any decisions made. Everything was focused on savings.

I was in the corporate office out there at Tuggeranong. They came in there like vultures and scattered. We had a skilled call centre staff—people trained in taking phone calls. Nearly everybody that ran our marketing section, all the way down, left in droves—all that experience and hard work gone. We had publicity campaigns in

the past, advertising about our ticketing systems, the cheapest way for fares—all that has gone because of budgetary savings.

Some of the experienced call centre staff were redeployed drivers; it was a career path for them if they had back injuries or whatever. All of them have gone. They have been moved to Macarthur House. Now you have just got phone operators there that have been thrown in the deep end and have no experience on public transport whatsoever. The amount of mistakes that have been happening—through no fault of their own, mind you—is because the experienced staff that had the knowledge of ACTION and the skills are all gone.

We have seen a corporate office with people that did care and had experience. We had people running operations that had experience in the operation of buses, not senior bureaucrats, public servants, that do not understand public transport systems. I must admit that recently they have made a change; they have put into an operational role a person that does know operations, but they have only just woken up now, through the public backlash of this new network going back to 1 December.

It upsets us, because at the time the TWU and the ACTION staff tried to explain what we could see happening. You are destroying all the hard work that we put into this public transport system and we have now got a system where what we said was going to happen has happened, and from a radio side of things the amount of abuse, the assaults, the safety—my colleague, as Scott said, being dragged out of the Woden interchange and assaulted. Another driver was assaulted recently outside the Canberra Centre and a TO, one of my colleagues, had to go in there and he got assaulted; two of them had to manhandle this person off the bus.

There is frustration with the whole network—the amount of people now having to wait for connections because they missed a connection because a bus was late. Okay, that always happened, but it is worse than it has ever been. There is the number of youth that are hanging around the interchanges now because they have got to wait an hour for a bus service. They have disrespect for people in our position. We try to help the public.

As you are aware from the paper, with the video surveillance system, which Scott raised before, some changes are being made which we do find positive: we are putting two staff in every interchange now of a night-time. I have worked in every interchange so I know what goes on. I am talking from experience: I have had near misses of being assaulted going out to violent situations out on buses and things like that. So at the moment we do see it as positive that they have two transport officers on of a night-time for the safety aspect; that we look after our drivers' safety, our passengers' safety. We are liaising with the police all the time in regard to fights and trouble happening in these interchanges. I think I have covered it enough.

MR SESELJA: How much of a police presence is there, say, in Woden interchange? The police are obviously just across the road, and after hours how much—

Mr Scott: Very poor.

MR SESELJA: Is there patrolling or anything of that nature?

Mr Scott: I believe it has been stepped up since the recent incidents, but before that it was very poor, and even a few years ago when that police station was right in the interchange we could not get anyone. From the radio room, we are liaising with the police all the time. We are constantly calling them up to attend to situations. Sometimes you could be waiting ages to even get through on the call centre so we just ring 000 now to try and get a response. In previous years there was only a desk sergeant in there and you did not have anyone to come to your urgent assistance.

Mrs Dunne: And are those calls logged? When you make a call to police response or 000 it is logged?

Mr Scott: Yes, all calls are logged. We have made some positive changes. Tom Elliott, the CEO of ACTION, spoke on the radio the other day. The trouble is that there was no formulation of all the information from the interchange's radio room, and they are putting in procedures now to get the accurate recording of all these incidents. Any calls that we make from the radio room side of things—there are four of us permanent staff on there around the clock; whenever the buses are on the road we are on—we record all incidents, phone calls to the police. There are a lot of issues we could raise. We could go on all day here. There are usually two or three incidents a week of rock throwing at buses. That is another serious issue. It is an accident waiting to happen before a driver gets seriously hit.

THE CHAIR: Has that increased since these changes or—

Mr Scott: I think, in all honesty, it is about the same; but it is a concern that it is just a matter of time before a driver or someone gets killed with throwing over overpasses like the Lyneham overpass. We are constantly onto police about that at the moment. A lot of different incidents happen in public transport. At school times you get a lot of egg throwing and things like that, but our major concern is bricks and rocks and things like that on overpasses. That is occurring and that is being recorded and sent to the police.

Mr Smith: We have a safety film on the side window for the driver, which takes the force of the stone or the rock.

MS PORTER: To clarify, this is people throwing stuff off—

Mr Scott: At buses, while passengers are in the buses.

MS PORTER: From the overpasses?

Mr Scott: The one over in North Lyneham, from Lyneham to North Lyneham. There have been a few incidents recently. The police are constantly going there because members of the public in cars have had it happen to them in that location.

MS PORTER: So there is no grille or anything to stop people throwing things like this?

Mr Scott: No, no grille there.

Mr Smith: They can come through a side window and injure a passenger.

Mr Scott: We are recording them and the police are getting that information on a regular basis. But just catching the offenders is the biggest problem. These are things our drivers are facing all the time. We put out all-calls to warn drivers to be on the lookout in a particular area when it happens. But there are just so many issues. Prior to 1 December we felt like we were going somewhere—that we were moving forward with the environment, that we were supposed to be enhancing public transport. As my colleague Scott raised at the start, for the environment we are trying to get more people on buses.

Canberra is expanding all the time, especially out in the Gungahlin area. We could go on all day with the problems: the planning with the roundabouts, the smaller roads for our buses trying to get through, making it even harder for our drivers to drive through roundabouts and things like that; the banking up of traffic since the network. I do not know if you can comment on that, Ray, but I find that the buses seem to be running later at certain places due to—

THE CHAIR: Are these schedules reviewed by ACTION management?

Mr Scott: Not that I know of.

THE CHAIR: If they continue to be running late, surely they would review?

Mr Smith: What happens is that we have what we call a feedback system or a suggestion system where the drivers fill out a form indicating their concerns, and where they can they indicate exactly where they are running late, and the scheduling section look at it. In some instances they get a supervisor out there to do a route profile. That means they ride on the bus and actually see what the problem is, then they send their suggestion to the scheduling section. Keep in mind that for the scheduling section to change a shift they may have to alter six shifts. It is like a sort of domino effect.

Mr Scott: Major job.

Mr Smith: One change, just to add 5 or 10 minutes onto a run, can take a whole day's work sort of thing. It is fairly involved and, again, it is a slow process, and of course the blokes get a little bit hypo and say, "Nothing's happening. Ring them up. I am bloody running late all the time."

Mrs Dunne: On the subject of scheduling, it was reported to me a while ago—and I do not mind who answers this—that when network 06 was introduced a lot of the drivers felt they made a contribution to scheduling by pointing out the things that you have just pointed out, Mr Smith. They are the people on the ground; they know where the bottlenecks are. They felt that a lot of that information was discounted in the scheduling and that much of the input that drivers made to the network 06 scheduling was disregarded because they were not professional schedulers; they were only bus drivers. Is that a reasonable characterisation of what happened and has the situation improved?

Mr Connolly: Yes, I think it is very accurate. “This is what’s happening and you are going to wear it” was the reality last time and it probably did not improve until February this year. We have gone back to a system of input being fed into the scheduling network on a daily basis, so there has been some—

Mr Smith: We have had a lot of shift changes in the last month or so. Prior to that, my colleague and that at Belconnen had spent 12 months reviewing all the timings on the majority of the runs, but, unfortunately, when the new network came in and with the cutbacks, that just went out the door. It was very disappointing because we tried very hard to bring the timings up to a reality situation and, unfortunately, with the new network that just got shelved.

Mr Connolly: As a bit of background to that, that investment that we organisationally made about going through the timings to do the scheduling was about moving the network forward, making it a reality. The reality is that it has probably been 10 years since we have had a proper review of the network, and Canberra has grown a lot in 10 years. There are an awful lot more roundabouts, lights, pedestrian crossings, schools—all of those have an enormous impact on driving a bus to a timetable. So it was agreed that there would be a complete review and overhaul—and all of that work was discarded because of the budgetary realities, which meant there was a forced acceptance, very reluctantly on the part of the drivers, of the network that was thrust upon them.

THE CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming in and presenting to the committee this afternoon. If there are any questions members can think of in the not too distant future we will get those to you and we will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can.

Mr Scott: Thanks very much for your time.

The committee adjourned at 3.38 pm.