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The Corporate Memory of the Museum as Strength for the Future.

This paper is not an "official" view of the Wellington Tramway Museum (WTM); but it is built on some personal reflections over a half-century of tramway interest. It also tries to deal with the fact that we are living in something of a paradox these days. There is now more interest, and more public funding, in "Heritage" today than ever before. Either in spite of this, or more likely because of this, there is a risk that the core factor which explains what we have collectively achieved in our own sector of "heritage" may be being downplayed. That core factor I will call "enthusiasm".

What I'm saying may well be challenged or thought to be either irrelevant or perhaps even counter-productive. It's not – I believe that enthusiasm in the sense used in tramway museum circles of the mid twentieth century remains a useful context for being successful with all the challenges, opportunities and practical issues in this conference's agenda, here in one of the world's truly great tramway places.

Warren Doubleday's "Call for Papers" for this conference noted that "we would like to know how your museum intends to, or plans to, survive the challenges of the new Rail Safety Acts and the like". The answer is, of course, that we'll all need to be more businesslike and process-driven and I'm confident that all member Societies are doing

just that, each in their own way. There's nothing particularly wrong with that just so long as we don't lose the plot and throw out (or let wither away) the core ingredient which has made us effective in the first place – enthusiasm. What I am suggesting is that the scale of these current challenges (ageing membership, and stricter legislative context for both "safety" and "governance" – and I think the latter brings the greater risks, as I'll go on to later on) can tend to diminish the usefulness and value of what our Museums have already achieved. These are times when "heritage" has an increased social and economic value, so that a "marketing" approach could see some of our tangible assets used in ways which actually diminish their intrinsic value (rather like what happens with old buildings where they are "preserved" but only as facades to a modern structure behind the front door). If we actively keep asserting our personal enthusiasm, and the good features of our amateur approach, there is in fact influential professional support for us out there. Sir Neil Cossons, a former Director of The Science Museum in the UK and a key adviser to New Zealand's national museum Te Papa when this was massively re-configured in the 1990s, had this to say at the 50th anniversary of our friends the TMS at Crich last year: "No conventionally-established national or local authority Museum could have done [what the TMS has done] or would even attempt it now". Our Museums need not be too defensive in asserting their practical contribution to the understanding of "heritage". Otherwise, a newer generation used to a more formalized and theory-driven notion of "heritage" may be inclined to marginalize our contribution by brushing it off as just an unfortunate or even misguided effort by the COBROS (crusty old blokes in rusty old sheds). Then they will wonder what Graham Stewart was talking about when he acknowledged our volunteers in the dedication to his latest book "From Rails to Rubber".

Here in Australia and New Zealand, some of our tramway museums are now approaching or have entered their second half-century of existence. Several of our museums have now successfully operated longer than many "conventional" city tramway systems. These tramway museums have also successfully operated longer than many "conventional" public policy frameworks of the sort which keep spawning new safety or accounting regimes. At the time that our older tramway museums were first begun, their subject matter was felt to be conventionally quite outside "accepted" notions of cultural heritage – what John Shanks has called the "old bones" view of museum correctness. That makes the personal work which the likes of Arthur Perry (in Australia) and Graham Stewart (in New Zealand) and their smallish band of peers did in recording tramway history through the post-war decades all the more admirable, because it would not have been generally regarded as being cloaked in any patina of "cultural heritage". They did what they did because of their personal enthusiasm and because of a belief that it was worth doing, for its own sake – and they enjoyed doing it. In the same spirit, we've personally enjoyed salvaging those old tram bodies, laying trackwork with primitive tools and (away from the museums themselves) ferreting out relics from defunct tramway systems. It's now become all rather more formalized. In New Zealand there is even the OCVS (Office for the Community and Volunteer Sector) which exists, so its website tells us, "to inspire co-operation and superb relationships between the government and community and volunteer sectors". There is indeed a "Government Policy on Volunteering" which "strives toward a society with a high level of volunteering, where the many contributions people make to the common good through volunteering and fulfillment of cultural

obligations are actively supported and valued". It all sounds a bit like some Soviet-era Young Pioneers thing, which I'm sure it isn't – but there is still a risk for us in Tramway Museums because future support from public funding may require us to fit our societies into rigid moulds of this sort. The new safety regimes, and the implications of the new Charities Act for tax-exempt status, will keep requiring us to change the way we work. The risk is that, in fitting in to the new "officially-required" frameworks, we might downplay the older style of enthusiasm which I believe was the core factor that allowed us to achieve what we have so far.

What presents the marketing opportunity for us is not so much the trams themselves, as the nostalgia of a somewhat more stable society which they remind people of. This nostalgia thing is, of course, a very fuzzy area all largely irrational in the strict sense – but then, so is enthusiasm and so are a lot of the really important things of life. The French historian Marc Bloch put it elegantly, but well: "the shortcomings of memory – a mirror blemished with opaque spots, deforming the image it reflects – and of the intellect – like a basket with holes which, in motion, drops parts of the memories it has gathered and, standing still, takes in only extraordinary occurrences". There is a growth in the number of small niche museums in our communities, some seemingly based on little more than an equating of "old" with "historic heritage" as a way of attracting public sector funding. The longevity of many of our tramway museums, and the fact that we collectively have learned from the experiences of those which have failed along the way, is a strength in itself which we can bring to this burgeoning heritage sector. We can encourage the promotion of our "historical context" value to official heritage bodies,

rather than the promotion of the particular cars or technologies which really inspire our enthusiasm. In some cases – e.g. the Cable Car Museum in Wellington and the Christchurch Tramway – a judicious collaboration between the volunteer and official sectors can be of benefit to both. There is a risk of capture if we rely too heavily on public (i.e. official) funding, so we must remain vigilant to ensure that our real core values, of the sort which can't really be documented or measured – dogged enthusiasm, and the sheer enjoyment of the voluntary effort – are not put at risk in the quest for financial security. There is a timely article about this in the May 2006 issue of the UK *Railway Magazine* discussing the less attractive implications of state control of the Isle of Man narrow-gauge steam and electric lines. Has the soul been sold for a mess of potage?

It's this general point which leads me to think that the growing insistence on organizational systems (governance) may be more of a risk to our viability than the "safety" aspect (although the two are inter-linked). I mentioned earlier the OCVS in New Zealand. There is another situation which might at first sight seem harmless enough, but which could well put the strength of our real asset – our enthusiasm - to the test if we don't place a high enough value on it.

In 2005 *Museums Aotearoa*, the organization which seeks to represent at official levels, issued "A Strategy for the Museum Sector in New Zealand". The aim of this is "to establish a unified vision and clear goals for the sector". The Strategy goes on to solemnly observe that "there appears to be only a limited amount of research into the

effectiveness of the sector in recent years" despite a belief that "museums contribute to the development of social capital".

The 2005 Strategy notes that "within the total of approximately 500 museums in New Zealand, it is estimated that over 400 comprise volunteer-run agencies". Seeing this as a problem, it concludes that "a key to the viability of small museums to maintain and enhance their operations for the future will come from seeking the closer co-operation and involvement of local government". Well, that may be so, but it certainly points to the need for us to enter any such closer engagements proud of our past achievements and continuing to value the sort of enthusiasm and camaraderie which made those achievements actually possible. In his paper to the 2000 COTMA Conference at Ballarat, Bill Kingsley described his first encounter with SPER in 1967 in those terms. That's about the same timer as I first encountered the Australian tramway museum scene – also at SPER – and, like Bill, I too "was made to feel very welcome in a relaxed atmosphere". What I mean is this: in the pursuit of public funding we need not shrug off that amateur enthusiasm of the past. We need not slavishly seek to align with Museums Aotearoa's official definition, which is that "a museum is an institution which is primarily engaged in collecting, caring for, developing and interpreting the natural or cultural heritage of Aotearoa / New Zealand". The shared interest in, and enthusiasm for, trams is the core factor for success: not some belief that old trams are worth preserving because of their expression of cultural values.

Our history of successful volunteerism is a strength we should be proud of, without being either smug or dogmatic about it. One of the ways we can be proud of it is, of course, to value our own archives – the point I made in my paper to the 1998 COTMA conference in Christchurch (I hope you haven't forgotten that!). Those COTMA member museums approaching or past their own half-century are not just reminders of the "classic" urban scene, but are in a way now museums of themselves. As the Maori proverb puts it, we go forward facing the past.

Reiterate the value of sheer enthusiasm even when the context seems to place more importance on measurable objectives or on risk avoidance, or on governance structures. There is room for both!

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