

comment & analysis

“ In terms of soft power — its ideational and normative influence in the world — China’s power is still trivial compared with America’s.
KAI HE • 14

WHAT SINGAPORE SHOULD ADOPT OR AVOID

Key lessons from London’s bus services

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Two weeks ago, I headed to London for a trip sponsored by the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to learn about the bus system there, armed with a sceptical attitude.

London’s bus system has often made the news for the wrong reasons. Fare hikes, choking traffic and bus driver strikes — the most recent was in 2012, which was over demands for a £500 (S\$1,060) Olympics bonus and brought services to a halt — often make the headlines there.

But what I saw surprised me. Despite heavy traffic, the bus system is efficient (most of the time) and seemingly runs like clockwork.

In Aldwych, in the heart of London, bus service 11 — which cuts through some of the city’s most famous landmarks such as Westminster Abbey and Trafalgar Square — shows up every three to four minutes.

A check with the live bus arrival board at the bus stop showed that other buses arrived as frequently and were as punctual.

LESSONS FOR SINGAPORE

The Government has pushed hard to improve the bus system here, launching the S\$1.1 billion Bus Service Enhancement Programme in 2012 to increase bus capacity and the recent bus contracting model to improve services.

There are promising signs. The LTA’s public transport satisfaction



The London system, of course, is not without flaws. Issues with drivers’ welfare, the huge passenger load and vehicular traffic could introduce snags into the well-oiled system. TODAY FILE PHOTO

survey released in March indicated that the proportion of those who were satisfied with buses went up to 88.3 per cent, from 86.4 per cent in 2012. Bus ridership climbed 3.4 per cent last year to 3.6 million a day.

Still, Singapore can do well to learn a few things from the English.

My take — keep routes short, look after the welfare of drivers, enforce bus lane rules strictly and keep bus

performances tight.

Over here, lengthy waits and complicated routes are common grouses.

Many analysts have pointed to more simplified routes as a more effective measure to reduce bunching or bus gaps and this is true in London’s system.

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Service 11’s, for example, is 11km long.

There is also some duplication, with a few services plying the same stretch, giving commuters more options.

In comparison, many bus routes here span long distances. SBS Transit’s service 51 travels 38km from Hougang Central to Jurong East, passing through Geylang, Chinatown, Commonwealth Avenue and West Coast. Service 30 traverses a similar distance, plying between Bedok and Boon Lay and passing through Old Airport, Pasir Panjang and Teban Gardens Roads.

SMRT’s service 858 travels from Woodlands Regional Interchange and loops at Changi Airport, covering a distance of about 73km.

Dr Alex Erath, a Future Cities Laboratory senior researcher, found in recent studies on bus systems in Singapore that splitting a long bus route into two parts can potentially increase reliability by 35 per cent. To me, it seems almost common sense that a long route means it is subjected to more unpredictable traffic conditions and unreliable service.

Culture also makes a difference. Londoners are a more laid-back bunch. Disruptions from strikes or

● Joy Fang is a senior reporter at TODAY.

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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