

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Transport Policy - How should road congestion be managed?

Held at The Royal Society on Wednesday 9th March, 2005

We are grateful to the following for support for this meeting:
Department for Transport and Lloyd's Register of Shipping

Chair: **The Earl of Selborne KBE FRS**
House of Lords

Speakers: **Mr Graham Pendlebury**
Director, Road and Vehicle Safety and Standards Directorate, Department of Transport
Dr Archie Robertson OBE
Chief Executive, Highways Agency
Professor David Rhind CBE FRS FBA
Chairman, Statistics Commission and Vice Chancellor, City University London
Professor Anthony May OBE
Emeritus Professor, Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds

MR. PENDLEBURY said that in devising and implementing transport policy tensions arose in simultaneously achieving greater throughput, protecting and enhancing the environment, and ensuring higher standards of safety. Increasing capacity through better management of the existing infrastructure, or creating new or improved infrastructure, should serve all three objectives. Most benefit lay in the development of Intelligent Transport Systems, (ITS) which would affect the behaviour of drivers. There were various tools, which could be used, which depended on successful technology – e.g. road user charging. Electronic vehicle Identification would be valuable, but might meet public resistance if it were seen as too intrusive. A Co-operative Vehicle Highway System (CVHS), which allowed information to be shared between vehicles, would greatly increase capacity and help safety. But it had to be sufficiently flexible to cope with changing consumer pressures and rapid change. "Vehicle trains" could be the end result; but the public would have to accept a high degree of intervention for success to be possible.

DR ROBERTSON said his priority was to apply effective technology to road management. The Highways Agency (HA) controlled 2.8% of the road network, but 1/3 of all traffic, and 2/3 of freight traffic used it. The Government were clear that we could not build our way out of congestion, so the solution to congestion must depend on influencing driver behaviour. The HA had been in the lead in developing technology, but had always to consider the question of risk. Better information was the key, and the 7 regional HA centres, replacing 33 police centres would be of great help. People wanted safe roads and reliable journey times, and better information, rather than faster journeys. He described queue protection, ramp metering, active traffic management, motorway on-line assistance, and the development of a National Traffic Control Centre, which would enable strategic Traffic Management measures to be implemented. But, were we too risk averse? Should greater risks be taken with taxpayers' money? Should more be spent on technology and less on tarmac?

PROFESSOR RHIND described the revolution that had taken place in the use of geographical information. Its use was essential for managing congestion. Unfortunately, US companies now dominated what was now a \$19bn business, conceived in the UK. But the technology was there, both to be used to plot all types of information on the foundation of the superb UK maps, and to give real world information to help mobile navigation. The problems lay in the use of the information, most importantly in the use of Government data. The US government did not claim copyright for data it collected, but the UK situation varied. "Trading Funds" – such as the Ordnance Survey – had to pay their way, i.e. cover their costs. They therefore had to charge for map data. Some Government departments kept copyright but did not charge; some local authorities charged. For interaction to take place using such data, special deals had to be arranged. This was time wasting and inhibited joined up use of data, such as addresses and speed limit data, for managing traffic and other purposes. The government must look at the financial structure of trading funds, and consider data use in a transnational context.

PROFESSOR MAY outlined the nature and costs of congestion, and the approach and conclusions of the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAE) report. UK congestion costs were the highest in the OECD – 40% more than Germany. Vehicle traffic produced 21% of global warming gases, which were closely linked to health problems. The RAE were clear that a long term holistic approach was needed, which accepted that congestion was part of wider problems; better management and road pricing were not the only solutions. 25% of the population do not have cars; public transport fares were the highest in Europe; and a 50% increase in road traffic is forecast. Meeting these challenges demands a vision, which would underpin sustainable prosperity, enhance the environment and health. It was crucial to look at transport as an integral system, as any change in one area triggered changes elsewhere. Pricing, infrastructure, technological change,

management and land use were all part of the equation. The principle was that users should pay true costs of their journeys. For road users this meant distance based charging, with higher rates in congested or environmentally sensitive areas. This would replace fuel duty and taxes. New infrastructure could be built taking account of the demand signals and revenue generated. Public transport should follow the same principle, but buses needed a London type regulation, and rail investment should be concentrated on bottlenecks and light rail use. Better governance was needed – the Department of Transport should set a national strategy which could be implemented regionally through National Road and Rail Corporations.

Principal themes in the ensuing discussion were the gap between long term planning and strategy and the inevitable short-term horizon of Ministers, and public scepticism about governmental policies and forecasts. The two were interlinked. Ministers would only be likely to commit themselves to long-term struggles over policies if they felt that there were public demand for them. Such demand only grew from public understanding of the problems, and an acceptance that solutions had to be built on a long-term strategy. There were various views about whether such public understanding existed, and how far it would go in supporting measures, which would undoubtedly inconvenience some. On the one hand, there appeared to be public support for the London congestion charge, but, on the other, Edinburgh had failed. The vociferous campaign against speed cameras should be opposed by anyone who had safety at heart, but there was little evidence of this. The public would never believe that the revenue from a national road pricing scheme would be ring fenced and used for transport purposes (look at the Road Fund), nor that the Treasury would sufficiently reduce fuel and other duties to compensate for what would be regarded as yet another tax. There was certainly a great gap between what politicians saw as key public concerns, and what surveys revealed about the public's interests – whereas 60% of urban dwellers were concerned about traffic, and only 40% about the NHS, politicians saw the NHS as the greatest political concern.

Again, public scepticism was fuelled by politicians' and media misuse of arguments and statistics – 50% of the public think official statistics are twisted for political advantage. Untrue, but how do you change perceptions? Yet there was a consensus amongst politicians of all parties that a transport strategy based on proper charging and a long-term vision was necessary. Many speakers agreed that a proper communications strategy was essential, if the public were to accept that beneficial outcomes would result from the new technologies, which could effect transport choices and behaviour. Such a strategy must be based on a comprehensive view of transport policy: it would not be successful if it concentrated on only one aspect – e.g. reducing demand for vehicle travel, which simply gave the impression that the public would be asked to pay more for a reduced service. It would have to be honest about certain consequences – e.g. closing some rural rail services, or making some car journeys more expensive – and set out ways of dealing with these consequences. It would also need to be more attuned to health and environmental issues (on which some speakers thought the RAE report not sufficiently strong). There were also different views about the public's understanding

and willingness to accept new technology. Much of the technology had been around for some time, but there was a strong reluctance to accept any technology, which appeared to put information about the private affairs or movements of individuals, in the hands of government (perhaps the success of the London CC, which in theory did give such information, marked a change in this area). If an individual were able to choose whether or not he could use the technology, he would be much more likely to welcome it, than if its use were imposed on him by the Government.

Speakers also took varied views about possible life style changes, which affected transport usage. While some thought that flexitime working, home working and so forth could lead to significant shifts in time of travel, others were sceptical – people like to work together and meet at the same time. Some thought that an ageing population might use more public transport, others thought that increasing physical infirmity would lead to more of them wanting to use the car. But many agreed that plans based on changing patterns of land use, or housing density would take many years to have effect; and social conditions changed so rapidly that there was always the possibility – indeed probability – that ideas would change before full effects of changes could be felt. But it was important to be realistic: while there were strong views that total vehicle traffic should be reduced in absolute terms, this was simply not possible without asking people to make drastic changes in their way of life; smaller changes, which involved e.g. shorter journeys, or making more use of alternatives would be acceptable. But these would reduce the rate of growth of traffic, not reduce the absolute level. The travel patterns of individuals were very variable, and little was known about how individual journeys would be affected by changes. A database was needed. The use of real time information could significantly affect the timing of individual journeys.

One speaker plaintively inquired how it was that the UK had gone from being a world leader in transport in the 19th century, to becoming a laggard in the 21st. Possible answers might be the enervating and persistent political infighting over the ownerships of different transport modes, public apathy, and frequent Ministerial changes. But we should not despair; the recent transport White Papers showed an increasing awareness of the real problems and a willingness to learn at least some of the lessons from the past. But it still needed to be appreciated that delivering coherent transport policies over the long term required central and local government and private industry to work together to common goals.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KCB

For background information see

The Highways Agency strategy document - Making better use of the existing network - www.highways.gov.uk/aboutus/corpdocs/corp_plan/2001/s02-2.htm
NAO report on the Agency - www.nao.org.uk/pn/04-05/040515.htm .
DTI Foresight Project looking at Intelligent Infrastructure Systems - www.foresight.gov.uk .
Royal Academy of Engineering – Transport 2050 - www.raeng.org.uk/news/releases/shownews.htm?NewsID=256

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