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TGRG page ☆

Conference reports

Prospects for Transport in the New Parliament, Royal Geographical Society, London, 20 September 2001

Transport academics and practitioners from across Europe met at this event in London to review the UK Labour Government's record on transport policy and to discuss how transport policy should evolve over the next five years. *Prospects for Transport in the New Parliament* was the second special one-day conference to be sponsored jointly by the TGRG and the Universities Transport Studies Group (UTSG) and matched the success of the first such meeting held in 1996.

Professor Stephen Glaister of Imperial College delivered the opening address, entitled *UK Transport Policy 1997–2001*. Professor Glaister reviewed the performance of the government to date, analysing the ways in which transport policy had been developed through the 'signposts' of the Transport White Paper, Transport Act, Greater London Authority Act and 10-Year Plan. He welcomed the publication of the 10-Year Plan in the sense that it has the potential to introduce an element of long-term planning into British transport policy – a feature notably lacking in the past – but raised a number of doubts as to whether its aspirations will be realised. These included the susceptibility of the plan to Treasury cost cutting and the decline of engineering and construction skills resulting from historic under investment in transport infrastructure. He also suggested that the Plan was rail-biased and that ministers may have to consider additional expenditure on roads as they generally offer better value for money. Professor Glaister's analysis raised many interesting issues and prompted a lively question-and-answer session.

The second session of the conference focused on the prospects for individual transport modes. William Walton and TGRG Secretary Dr Jon Shaw (University of Aberdeen) reviewed the developing 'multi-modal' methodologies for addressing transport problems. In asking 'what's the point?' of such studies, they illustrated that there remains much to do to ensure that there is a genuine level playing field between competing road and public transport projects. In a second contribution, Dr Shaw summarised his work on the future of the crisis-ridden British railway network, analysing a range of options open to the government as it considers potential policy strategies. His argument, that an 'evolutionary' approach should be adopted, with train operating companies taking over increased responsibility for infrastructure maintenance, may be put to the test quicker than he had anticipated following the financial collapse of Railtrack in October 2001.

TGRG and UTSG member Dr John Preston (University of Oxford) then outlined the prospects for the bus industry under Labour. He argued that an increased role for bus transport was both desirable and achieveable and suggested that there was evidence to support the introduction of 'quality contracts' – such as those which have been in force in London since privatisation – and enhanced government support across the UK. Although to some extent these are envisaged by the 10-Year Plan, Dr Preston suggested that the government's target for bus patronage growth is too modest. Developing the bus theme, Dave Ashmore and James Arben (Steer Davies Gleave) discussed the potential for innovative guided bus modes to provide a quality public transport solution at less cost than light rail schemes. Their message, that more needs to be done to convince transport authorities and governments that guided light transit (GLT) systems provide value for money, found sympathy with some in the audience, although others favoured the implementation of full light rail schemes or more modest conventional bus priority and enhancement, rather than the GLT 'middle ground'.

The final two papers in the morning session focused on air travel. Arnab Majumdar (Imperial College) provided a very timely review of the options ahead for the management of air traffic control services in the UK. Arnab's review of the experiences of various public- and partnership-controlled air traffic corporations around the world provided an insightful analysis of the tasks facing the newly-restructured National Air Traffic Services (NATS). TGRG Chair Professor Brian Graham (University of Ulster) rounded off the morning session by discussing the choices facing ministers as they try to balance the rising demand for cross-European mobility with the profound environmental costs of air travel. His

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critique of the government's handling of this capacity/sustainability nexus revealed that Ministers' understanding of key issues in this area is in need of some development.

The afternoon session of the conference considered a number of broader policy themes impacting on transport. Professor Austin Smyth (Napier University) outlined the divergence in transport priorities already apparent between the devolved administrations in the UK and how this could generate conflict over the direction of 'national' strategic policy in areas such as transport taxation that are not devolved. Professor Smyth suggested that administrative conflict was always inevitable because Labour's transport policy was written from a southern English, rather than a UK-wide, perspective. Professor John Farrington (University of Aberdeen) offered a thought-provoking paper on the extent to which the government's transport policies had helped and hindered progress towards one of its other key policy aspirations, that of reducing social exclusion. He took time to examine the philosophical basis of 'need' in this regard and argued that some further attempt on the part of policy makers to define the problem of rural social exclusion should be made before policy approaches – especially those which focus on enhancing mobility – are implemented.

Dr Dominic Stead (Technical University of Delft) reviewed his research which had addressed barriers to truly 'joined up' policy making between transport and land use planning. Key among these, he argued, is the limited co-ordination between professions and government departments which exist currently. The TGRG's special guest, Professor Matthias Gather (Erfurt University of Applied Sciences), compared the performance of the UK and Germany's governments in developing their respective transport systems. Transport capital investment in Germany has been and is significantly in excess of that in the UK although, to the surprise of most of the audience, Professor Gather showed that the UK's performance in achieving public transport patronage growth over the last decade has, in relative terms, been better than Germany's! This, of course, was undoubtedly helped by the very low level of public transport readership in the UK in 1990 – in other words, from such a low base it is easier to show a large relative improvement – but this did not stop Professor Gather from suggesting, tongue-in-cheek, that perhaps Germany, in pursuit of a more sustainable transport system, should follow the UK's policy example rather than the other way around. (Only one or two delegates missed the irony.)

The final session of the conference was dedicated to the keynote address, delivered by Professor David Begg, Chair of the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT). In his usual captivating style, Professor Begg offered his thoughts on the performance of the government in terms of its transport policy since 1997. Acknowledging the feeling in the audience that ministers had to date largely failed to deliver on their promises, he argued that increased (and perhaps inevitable) public hostility towards elements of a sustainable transport agenda, such as fuel price increases, had starkly underlined the adage that politics is 'the art of the possible'. He insisted that the political, academic and practitioner communities would now have to restate the case for sustainable transport if the government were to rebuild the kind of supportive consensus which existed prior to the 1997 general election. During a lengthy question session, he reassured the audience that CfIT would hold ministers to account – there had been some suggestion that the Commission was 'not independent' from the government – where they failed reasonably to promote integrated solutions to transport problems.

The TGRG would like to thank the speakers for their contributions, the participants for generating stimulating debate, the RGS and UTSG for their generous financial support and Dr Iain Docherty for organising the event. Further details of the papers delivered at the conference are available from Dr Docherty by email at i.docherty@socsci.gla.ac.uk

Joint session with TGRG at the AAG Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, March 2002

TGRG has a full programme organised for its joint session with the Transportation Geography Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers at the latter's 98th Annual Meeting in Los Angeles in March 2002 and a report of events at this conference will appear in volume 10 of the *Journal of Transport Geography*.

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