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TGRG page

As I write, the United Kingdom is one week away from a general election. Transport, it seems, is of little interest to the major political parties. This is odd, because almost all of us are affected by the state of the transport system on a daily basis in one way or another. Labour has little to say in its policy documents beyond 'more of the same' (www.labour.org.uk); the Conservatives position themselves more as the motorists' friend but with at least a nod to the environment (www.conservatives.com); the Liberal Democrats are more progressive, advocating road user charging and a presumption against road building (www.liberaldemocrats.org.uk). But the fact remains that transport, despite the poor nature of much of Britain's road, rail, air and maritime infrastructure and governance, has remained off the main campaign agenda. *Rail* magazine columnist Christian Wolmar offers an explanation: "transport never gets much of a say in elections...because it is a long-term issue largely seen as a negative and therefore the politicians would rather we forgot about it." Many others in the transport community (and beyond) feel frustration about this.

One of the most depressing aspects of British transport policy, and one which should concern all the major parties, is the fate of Light Rail Transit (LRT) in England (the Scottish Executive is pursuing its own plans in Edinburgh under its devolved powers). Only two years ago, Richard Knowles, Editor of the *Journal of Transport Geography*, wrote in his chapter in the TGRG's *A New Deal for Transport* book that England was on the verge of a light rail renaissance. Now, as a recent piece in *Railway Strategies* magazine observes, "the prospects for light rail in Britain do not look promising." Despite the evidence that LRT schemes are very successful at promoting modal shift and tackling congestion, the government's view is that LRT does not offer good value for money. This is Treasury-speak for 'it is not cheap' but, as with the views of many of those economists and accountants who, as the saying goes, know the cost of everything and the value of nothing, it is also nonsense.

LRT is relatively expensive to deliver in England compared with other countries, but this is a lot to do with the unnecessarily cumbersome and costly methods of procurement and risk allocation the Treasury insists upon to fit in with its creative accounting obsession. The means of appraising LRT schemes in Britain (which focus rather narrowly on costs and revenue recovery rather than wider benefits) also makes LRT seem more expensive than it actually is. Other cost inflation arises because there is a lack of standardisation between schemes across the country, and because over 90% of the cost of utility diversion must be paid for by the LRT scheme (compared with 60–80% in Germany and nothing in France). Fare box revenues can also be impacted because there is a lack of integration between other modes of transport—especially bus—and land use patterns and policies. Unfortunately, the likelihood of ministers addressing these crucial points is slim so long as it suits them to shy away from LRT investment simply on grounds of pounds spent, an oft-relied upon justification in a country which claims to aspire to European levels of public services but which wants to pay US-style levels of taxation.

The interesting thing is that in the United States, that car-lovers' paradise, LRT schemes are being pursued with vigour and proving spectacular successes. Cities such as Portland, San Diego, Washington, DC and Los Angeles have all developed well-supported networks. In Denver, location of the most recent Association of American Geographers' conference, voters in the Regional Transportation District have just sanctioned a 0.4 cent in the dollar sales tax increase to fund a $4.7 billion expansion of the existing LRT network. Even white, middle-class drivers—precisely those who are usually regarded as the biggest opponents of higher taxation and public transport—recognise the virtues of LRT: a great deal of support came from suburban Republicans, in some cases more so than from the 'traditional public transport constituency' of Democratic inner-city neighbourhoods. The entire package of three LRT lines, three heavy rail lines and an express busway will be built and operational by 2016 as the funds are committed and the implementation schedule has been designed with built-in recovery time.

So while the Treasury preens itself on the complexity of its latest funding mechanism or appraisal scheme, England again lags behind much of the rest of the developed world in realising state of the art public transport

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schemes. London, the venue of the upcoming Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Annual Conference, may be the exception since its transport matters are controlled by a directly elected Mayor who has already shown himself to be something of a visionary. Judge for yourself if you are attending the conference, and we can discuss this and other matters at one of the TGRG's four paper sessions (see www.abdn.ac.uk/tgrg for details). But persuading the rest of the UK's population of the case for, say, road user charging in the absence of more widespread LRT and other (expensive) public transport initiatives seems unthinkable. So long as the madness at the Treasury and Department of Transport perpetuates, members of the TGRG can rest assured that the changing nature (i.e. increasing number and lengthening duration) and geography (i.e. affecting more and larger areas) of traffic congestion in England will remain a key topic of study for many years to come.

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