

ROADS TO RUIN

Alliance

Roads to Ruin

The Government is returning to large-scale road building. Many of the Schemes proposed would mean more traffic in towns. Also under threat are nationally or internationally important habitats, well-loved landscapes and unique archaeological sites. The Conservatives, far from challenging this, are promising to match or increase this programme.

Broken promises

In A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England (1998) Labour promised that:

- There would be "no presumption in favour of new road building as an answer";
- There would be "a strong presumption against new or expanded transport infrastructure which would adversely affect environmentally sensitive sites"; and;
- That "alternatives will be thoroughly investigated first".

Gavin Strang, then Transport Minister, made it clear when he said that:

'Building new roads will be a "solution of the last resort"
- Gavin Strang to the British Roads Federation 25 September 1997

These policies are now being weakened. In parallel, policies in the Government's White Paper on the Future of Transport, A New Deal for Transport - Better for Everyone (1998), aimed at managing traffic growth have been watered down. The Government is now expecting traffic to grow by 17% in the next ten years, despite huge investment in transport.

In the 10 year strategy for transport expenditure, Transport 2010 - The 10 Year Plan (2000), the Government has earmarked £29 billion for:

- 360 miles of motorway/trunk road widening and junction improvements
- 30 trunk road bypasses and 80 major junction improvements
- 200 major local road improvements
- all schemes in the national trunk road programme (41 at the current time).

Ministers have since either approved, or are considering further, funding for 93 schemes. Far from promoting a thorough investigation of alternatives, Ministers now appear to be starting with the premise that road building is the answer to traffic problems

"There will be a strong presumption against new or expanded transport infrastructure which would adversely affect environmentally sensitive areas or sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Nature Reserves".

DETR, A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England, 1998

Road building doesn't work

The 10 Year Transport Plan is intended to reduce congestion on inter-urban trunk roads to 5% below current levels by 2010, against a predicted 17% growth in overall traffic.

However, according to Professor Phil Goodwin, an adviser to the Government on the Transport White Paper, investing £29 billion on new roads will only speed up inter-urban journeys by one second a mile, and they will be slower in many places.

All the evidence shows that increasing road capacity can simply attract new journeys onto the road network; evidence that Labour accepts. Furthermore, this additional traffic adds to congestion costs.



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“Since new roads can lead to more traffic, adding to the problem not reducing it, all plausible options need to be considered before a new road is built”.

DETR, A New Deal for Transport - Better for Everyone, 1998

Forgotten lessons

In seeking to reduce congestion by building more roads, Labour has forgotten the influential research findings of eminent government advisory bodies:

● the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in Transport and the Environment (1994) described the cycle of continual road building facilitating continual growth of road traffic as environmentally unsustainable.

● the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Roads Assessment (SACTRA) in Trunk Roads and the Generation of Traffic (1994) showed that in certain circumstances the provision of new roads could increase existing traffic levels because motorists use them for journeys they would not previously have made.

● SACTRA in Transport and the Economy (1999) warned against the assumption that building roads brings economic gains. Indeed better road links can harm a local economy as these areas are opened up to competition from afar.

Labour accepted all of these findings but is now ignoring them.

Road building harms people and their environment

Road traffic is bad for you. Pollution from motor vehicles causes many thousands of premature deaths every year. It is also one of the fastest growing sources of emissions leading to climate change. Technology will not solve this. The extra traffic generated by new roads and the trend towards bigger cars, are already eating into the benefits from cleaner and more fuel efficient vehicles.

Many planned roads would damage some of the best countryside and most valuable wildlife and heritage sites. Schemes currently under discussion would affect at least 28 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (many of which are also designated as being of European or international importance), 5 current or planned National Parks, 8 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 2 World Heritage Sites.

But the possible damage does not end there. Road building also generates pressures for greenfield development that is poorly served by public transport, sucking jobs and facilities out of towns and villages to fringe sites and the countryside. Such locations are mainly accessible by car and lorry, adding to traffic, creating pressures for more roads and eroding rural tranquillity.

Road building will also add to social exclusion. Most traffic on inter-urban roads starts and ends on local roads near people's homes. It's the poorest families who face the worst traffic and the greatest risk of deaths and injuries from road crashes. Child pedestrian casualties in Britain are among the highest in Europe. More car-based development will make life harder for those without cars.

Catering for traffic growth will make it harder to encourage motorists to walk, cycle, or catch the bus or train. Fewer passengers will reduce revenue and undermine the Government's efforts to provide high quality public transport.

There is an alternative

Recent problems with the railways have shown the need for more rail investment and better public transport and the Government's planned investment is welcome. But public transport on its own is not an alternative to car use.

Most journeys are short, local trips and seventy five per cent of all journeys are less than five miles. The Government has made welcome moves in the direction of funding local transport measures that give people a better choice. However, we need a transformation in the rate of delivery of small scale localised transport solutions and the importance attached to them. This would provide everyone with a genuine choice and improve the quality of life. Examples include:

- Safe Routes to School
- Green travel plans and tax breaks for employers offering such schemes
- 20mph zones in towns and 30 mph limits in all villages
- Home Zones and Quiet Lanes
- Comprehensive cycling networks
- A transformation in the quality of the walking environment in our towns and cities
- Traffic calming and management measures to increase the liveability of areas affected by traffic
- Comprehensive bus priority networks
- Improved public transport information
- New high frequency local bus and rail services
- Improved security and staffing on buses, trains and stations
- More travelcards and discount tickets
- Extra rail freight terminals
- Upgraded rail freight links, especially to ports
- Making better use of the existing road network through measures such as lower and better enforced speed limits

Improved transport alternatives and demand management measures have succeeded in reducing traffic levels in town centres. We now need comprehensive packages of measures to reduce road traffic across the wider network, including the inter-urban roads.

Central and local government must also ensure that transport investment, land use decisions and other strategies work in concert as opposed to against one another. An environmentally sustainable approach to transport planning will support the Government's plans for creating an urban renaissance and breathing new life into the countryside, with better local access to services and employment.

Back to the future

The prospect of a new large road programme undermines Labour's claim to put the environment at the heart of government. It also works against the Government's stated objective of reducing social exclusion and promoting access for all. The road building approach will not work, not least because it is far too controversial to try and push through environmentally damaging road schemes. It will be far quicker, cheaper and more effective for the Government to try other ways. It is not too late for the Government to reject road building as a primary solution and renew its commitment to its own Transport White Paper.