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London Report: Respectable Saboteurs

In Britain, by what is becoming an increasingly obvious irony, the government's Department of the Environment (DOE) builds the roads. Its various road construction units are the moving force behind the gradual unrolling of concrete ribbons over more and more of England's green and pleasant land; and of late people have begun to grow bitterly dissatisfied with this state of affairs. The focal irony is that the DOE also exercises responsibility for the planning inquiries which must be held if local people object to road construction. The consequent conflict of interest, which has not hitherto yielded to reasonable public challenge, is resulting in a phenomenon seldom witnessed in Britain: blatant physical disruption of public inquiries by frustrated objectors, among them some of the most influential dignitaries of the besieged communities.

The conflict actually began much earlier in the process, with the forecasting procedure for future traffic patterns and densities. Such forecasts have for years been used by the DOE as the basis for planning continual additions to Britain's motorways and service roads. In Britain, however, it is nearly impossible to lay out the route of a major road without carving a swath through or immediately in the vicinity of cities, towns, and villages. Throughout the 1960s, urban and near-urban motorway building led to devastation on a scale which would have made the Luftwaffe proud. Finally, in the early 1970s, the citizens of such target areas roused themselves to challenge the road-builders. To their astonishment, they were told it would be assumed in public hearings that the road in question would be built; the only question for the inquiry to consider was where to put the road.

For a time, this device worked. Objectors to a given route found themselves at odds with others from neighboring alternative routes. By thus dividing the opposition, the DOE and the road-builders continued for a time to conquer and concrete. But the objectors were learning. In 1973, a wide-ranging coalition of interest groups came together to challenge the primacy of road transport: railway unions, amenity groups, environmental organizations, and others formed Transport 2000, a group whose objective was to redirect the unstated national transport policy away from roads and back to rail and other forms of mass public transport.

Aided by Britain's economic difficulties, Transport 2000 and local objectors began to make headway against the tide of concrete. The road program faltered, despite vigorous efforts of the British Roads Federation, one of the largest, best-funded, and most politically sophisticated lobbies in Britain. But, although fewer in number, the motorways crept onward. The approach used by the DOE planners was to construct short segments of motorway, first in comparatively innocuous locations, gradually linking them together until the only gaps occurred at the most contentious locations. No overall plan was offered in detail; the hope seemed to be that, if the motorway grid was filled in with subtle increments, almost no one would notice. However, the hope has now been revealed to be futile. Plenty of people are noticing, and they are not happy.

At last, in 1975, the ground-swell of dissension came together into a surge of concerted confrontation. Independent analysis revealed that the DOE's traffic-forecasting procedures were, in effect, circular. To put it simply, they assumed a certain growth in the vehicle population, which would necessitate a concomitant growth in the road mileage, which would in turn lead inevitably to the anticipated growth in the vehicle population. John Adams, of the Geography Department at University College in London, was the leading de-mystifier of the traffic-forecasting merry-go-round, and his meticulous testimony began to surface at one public inquiry after another. In due course, the DOE officials, growing frantic at this lese-majeste, issued an extraordinary edict: They declared that the traffic forecasts used to justify road proposals were in fact government policy and could not be questioned at inquiries.

However, by this time, a growing number of the planning and transport correspondents covering such inquiries were well versed in the details of the criticism. The DOE decided that these correspondents would

have to be given special treatment: they were invited to a closed, off-the-record briefing about traffic forecasting, to set them straight about the presumptuous Adams and his associates. Unfortunately for the DOE, any number of the said correspondents instantly let Adams know of the forthcoming seance, and when it took place, his fellow critic Mick Hamer of Friends of the Earth was somehow in the audience, The DOE's efforts to persuade the correspondents to accept the official line foundered in the cross-fire.

By early 1976, the DOE had to admit its difficulties. A special working party was set up, with the purpose of re-examining the basis of traffic forecasting in light of conflicting land-use requirements, increased fuel costs and new emphasis on public transport and rail freight. Adams, to the satisfaction of many, was co-opted onto this working party, which is now meeting. However, motorway plans which originated in the old regime were still grinding onward, with construction units showing no sign of wavering. A lecturer at Sheffield Polytechnic, John Tyme, finally decided that matters had gone far enough. In his view, the legislation, more than fifteen years old, under which motorway inquiries were held was being consistently flouted by the DOE. The laws required that the department present a detailed description of the entire plan and of the plan's anticipated effects on the community; and Tyme considered that the DOE had signally failed to do any such thing. Accordingly, he declared, motorway inquiries of the traditional kind were simply illegal.

In mid-1975, he and his colleagues advanced this thesis at a major inquiry. But it carried little weight with the official side; the DOE inspector holding the hearing gave it short shrift. Pressure began to mount. Finally, in early 1976, a highly controversial proposal - a plan to construct a chunk of motorway through the Aire Valley in Yorkshire - was scheduled for a hearing. John Tyme and his associates, fed up with the stubborn refusal to acknowledge the force of their argument, opted for direct action. When the hearing convened, the hall was jammed with chanting, singing demonstrators who shouted down officials and refused to allow the inquiry to open. Police were called; demonstrators were forcibly ejected, and many were arrested. But on successive days more and more uproar prevented any progress in the hearing. Of course, the confrontation also attracted nationwide attention from the news media, and the highly articulate objectors took every opportunity to present their case. Eventually, after repeated official endeavors to proceed were thwarted, the Aire Valley hearing was adjourned; at this writing, it has not reconvened.

Flushed with the success of their methods, Tyme and a growing band of those with similar convictions were soon involved in an even more controversial hearing concerning placement of the final link in the M3 motorway, which had been built up on either side of the picturesque cathedral city of Winchester. The link which would close the gap was proposed to run through open land in one of the most tranquil public sections of the city, and local people had exhausted every official avenue of protest. When the hearing was convened, Tyme was on hand, by invitation from the Winchester objectors. Once again, a bitter and outspoken confrontation took place, in which one of the leading participants was the headmaster of Winchester College, one of England's oldest and most prestigious schools. This time, however, the confrontation bore more substantial fruit. After three days of disruption, the inspector ruled that the DOE must produce a genuine cost-benefit analysis of its proposals and of the alternatives put forward by the objectors, including numbers to justify the real need for the motorway. The hearing was thereupon adjourned, until the DOE could prepare and put forward the necessary additional information.

In May, the British government published a "consultative document" on national transport policy, the first such effort to be forthcoming. In the opinion of many transport commentators, the document, if it did nothing else, betrayed the shallowness of the thinking underlying present policy on transport. Among other oversights, it failed even to allude to the possible complications following recent and future increases in the cost of fuel. John Tyme's direct-action methods provoked a barrage of letters in the *London Times*, both attacking and defending his actions in the context of democratic procedure. Whatever the merits of the case, he and his associates have at least won time for the re-appraisal which is already long overdue. It seems likely that henceforth all new roads will have to be built in a new and more responsible direction.

