

Political Economy

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"It follows that there is no simple, unambiguous link between transport provision and local regeneration." (Dept. of Transport Standing Advisory Committee for Trunk Road Assessment, 2006)

The influence of two fatal accidents in the Assembly's 'firming up' of plans for the M4 relief road is symptomatic of a piecemeal, reactive and partial approach to transport development in South East Wales.

In the light of the two horrific events on the M4 during August and September, the thoughts of public agencies turn naturally to how to avoid such events happening again. Secondly, and arguably less important, has been a consideration of how to deal with the indirect costs of such accidents, here related to the severe congestion experienced the day after each crash. Unlike earlier fatal accidents (and consequent M4 closures) at junctions further West, these particular accidents led the Minister for Economic Development and Transport to conclude that the need for an entirely new motorway is even more urgent, and he has responded with an indicative timescale for its development. It is worth reproducing part of his responses here:

"[the M4 relief] will avoid one of the oldest and most heavily trafficked parts of the motorway network in Wales and also provide more alternatives during closures of the network in that area."¹

"There will be a business case looked at this year and if that is a robust business case, then there's a possibility of a business inquiry in 2009 then hopefully we could start the work in 2010, with an anticipated completion date of 2013."²

The Conservative AM for South Wales East had already commented after the first accident that it proved the need for an alternative and he made a further pronouncement after the second accident that consequential delays would have a 'severe and detrimental effect' on attracting new jobs and investment to South Wales.

It is difficult to discern a logical link between the recent closures of the M4 and the need for a new road to ease congestion. The accidents themselves were, of course, *completely unrelated to congestion*, both occurring in the early hours of the morning. It is a well known inevitability that the closure of any piece of key transport infrastructure will cause significant delays and costs, but this reality does not implicate the necessity for a duplicate link. If this was the case, and this point is not made flippantly, then the UK would have an entirely duplicated rail, road and air infrastructure to manage the consequences of accidents, floods, terrorist threats and other incidents which beset the system from time to time.

Thus, the happenstance of two fatal accidents occurring on an 11 mile stretch that would be duplicated by the new M4, rather than on the remaining 64 miles of motorway in Wales where no such relief is planned, seems to have prompted at best muddled thinking and at worst opportunism. More specifically it seems to have reversed the thinking of Plaid Cymru, whose transport

spokesman stated in 2004 that the M4 relief road would be a 'short term solution that would store up problems for the future'. Yet the fact that the road closure resulted in 10 mile tailbacks that were seen as extremely unusual and damaging may, in fact point more to the generally *good* functioning of the existing infrastructure in the absence of any incidents or breakdowns. With the new road priced at the point of use, and the existing M4 free, the new link would only be used at times of extreme congestion or following an incident. Levels of traffic outside peak hours would be minimal, raising basic questions about both the appropriateness of developing infrastructure that is very likely to be under-used across sensitive and flood-risky areas; and about the financial return on investment that is likely for public and private sector partners.

A number of the above points were made in the 1999 Ove Arup Common Framework Appraisal study³ on the options for the M4 around Newport. This Welsh Office commissioned study considered five potential scenarios for development, including doing the minimum possible; building the new road; improving public transport; imposing traffic demand management and a 'hybrid' approach which incorporated the latter two. On virtually all metrics, covering congestion and traffic reduction; accident reduction; the environment and the economy the 'hybrid' solution was preferable. Indeed, the new road returned the lowest economic 'net present value' of all scenarios, although this in part was in due to the 1999 assumption that the new road would be free to use. Further, whilst Arup agreed the road would have some economic benefit, new build was the only scenario that increased CO₂ levels at rush hour.

In the light of the above report, and notwithstanding the problems of pinch-points (sometimes dangerous and always inconvenient) on the M4 at

Brynglas, one is prompted to ask why the Assembly would push for a new road having uncertain benefits and requiring a 73 Hectare 'land-grab' from Sites of Special Scientific Interest on the Gwent Levels, when there are other options. Further investigation of Arup's 'traffic demand management' scenario provides some clues as to the nature of these options; road tolling existing routes; closures of some slip roads, and increased parking charges in urban areas. However, these more environmentally responsible alternatives are much more difficult to sell to business and voting constituencies (particularly following recent citizens' revolts in Cardiff on these very issues). The new road is, undoubtedly, relatively 'policy simple' (though expensive and controversial), requiring little complex cross-department or cross-institutional policy development and agreement, or any of the extensive 'selling' to the public and business that any enforced move away from private transport would entail.

The way in which the Assembly constructs the 'business case' and 'business inquiry' for the road will be illustrative. The range of alternatives and outcomes against which the relief road is considered, as well as the assumptions relating to usage, funding methods (and hence payback times) will have a huge influence upon whether the project appears firstly, at all viable, and secondly, the 'best' solution to the M4 problem. The Assembly must show that it takes full account of its own Sustainable Development Scheme and Action Plans in formulating transport policy for Wales. In this context, the current debate, centring on (unproven) references to the importance of the road for regional competitiveness, investment and employment does not bode well for the upcoming and even more important decision on the Severn Barrage, over which the Assembly will have an important influence.

The forthcoming decision on the M4

relief road gives the Assembly an opportunity to show that it is intent on building a competitive Wales that can also cope with the challenges of climate change. It might also be an opportunity for politicians to signal, more generally, that they are prepared to compel their constituencies to face some tough decisions regarding unsustainable travel and consumptive behaviours, perhaps at the cost of some electoral success. Politicians could also actively seek partnerships within and outside the current Government to develop a cross party consensus that gives political space and time to properly consider these critical issues and developments. But, this is a Government that is helping fund a £6m new link road that will be used primarily, probably *solely*, for a three-day golf event in 2010.

And coming back to the Barrage...

A multi-million pound government study has been set up to ensure the Barrage is viable and does not breach EU guidelines on wildlife habitat protection (rather than ensure the Barrage does not damage wildlife habitats, which is a different thing altogether). The Barrage is hoped to provide 5% of the UK's energy needs (or perhaps energy wants?) by 2020. It appears from reports in the Western Mail that both the Assembly and the Welsh Office support the 'principle' of a Severn Barrage. It might be suggested that the Assembly in particular would do better, in advance of any detailed investigation and environmental impact assessment, to support the 'principle' of renewable or tidal energy rather than the 'specifics' of this particular barrage from Lavernock to Brean Down.

Endnote

¹ Welsh Assembly Government, 19th September 2007.
<http://new.wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/cabinetstates2007/190907iwj/?lang=en>

² BBC Wales, 20th September, 2007.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7003690.stm>

³ Well worth a look at
<http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/transport/roads/NewRoads2/M4/?lang=en>