

Layfield and the Ringways

THE ROAD PROPOSALS OF THE LAYFIELD REPORT

A critique by

The London Amenity and Transport Association

and

The London Motorway Action Group

MARCH 1973

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The LMAG and LATA welcome most of the conclusions and recommendations on transport in the Layfield Report. On public transport, the environment, bus priorities and other management measures, the need to plan comprehensively, the Panel's recommendations are sound and valuable. But the same cannot be said about the most important recommendations of all, the proposals for major roadbuilding in inner London, and in particular the construction of an inner ringway. With these we emphatically disagree.

We have looked carefully in the Report for arguments to justify the approval of the inner ring and radial motorways and the other proposals for new roads. We have looked for penetrating replies to our own arguments against Ringway One and for serious consideration of our suggested alternative strategy. On all three counts we have been disappointed.

Our considered view is that the Panel, while grasping many aspects of the highly complex problem of transport in London, have failed to master some crucial points, and have disregarded their own statements that road planning must be coordinated with other transport planning⁽¹⁾. This memorandum sets out briefly why we have reached this view, and our consequent advice to the Secretary of State for the Environment.

(1) Report, paras 8.58, 8.59.

Travel demand

The consideration which has weighed most with the Panel is that considerable extra road capacity must be supplied to meet all or most of the demand that they foresee. They see this as an over-riding political necessity: to fail to provide the capacity would simply be unacceptable. It is presumably this belief which led the Panel to put forward its recommendations without properly specifying or costing the work that would be entailed.

It is, of course, incontestable that one of the starting points of any attempt to formulate a transport policy in London must be a consideration of the demand, if by this is meant the number and sort of journeys, in terms of purpose, time of day etc, that Londoners in the future will need or want to make. However, any discussion of this kind is completely lacking in the Report's chapter on roads (Chapter 12). It is indeed an astonishing thing that we are never told what travellers will use the recommended roads, when or for what purposes. Instead, the panel has based its views on what the demand will be on the GLC's traffic studies. It clearly regards these studies not simply as a means of predicting what traffic there would be if certain roads were built but also as a way of revealing what Londoners want and require. ⁽¹⁾ This, however, is not a possible interpretation of the GLC's studies, which consisted of a survey of travel made in one year, 1962, and a projection of the observed pattern into the future. The projection had regard to the changing size and characteristics of the population and also assumed that the road proposals were implemented. Such a procedure cannot reveal anything about what is desirable or necessary in London, except on the assumptions that the 1962 pattern was itself desirable, and that the plans postulated for the future corresponded to what a sound and comprehensive analysis of the problems would suggest.

(1) Report, paras 12.28 to 12.31

Neither of these assumptions is justified. The situation in 1962 was a thoroughly undesirable one in which many travellers had long, difficult and awkward journeys and many other people, particularly those without cars available, were deterred by prevailing conditions from making the journeys they would have liked to have made. The road plans tested in the GLC's studies were not derived from any analysis of London's transport problems. They were simply plans first suggested 30 or even 40 years ago at a time when techniques for surveying, forecasting and assessing travel did not exist. There is therefore absolutely no reason why the predictions resulting from these studies should be taken as desirable targets, still less as an over-riding requirement.

This mistaken interpretation of the GLC's traffic studies also leads the Panel to a misguided view of the purposes of traffic restraint: the difference between the travel "demand" forecasts of the GLC's studies and the travel volumes that can be accommodated on the roads proposed is taken as representing the degree to which Londoners' aspirations for mobility will be frustrated.

But for the reasons just given, the "demand" forecasts reveal nothing at all about what Londoners want. Traffic restraint is not, as this interpretation suggests, a purely negative measure forced on us by the difficulties of providing roads on the scale that would be desirable, and it should not be identified, as the Panel clearly does identify it, with the restriction of mobility. (1)
To the contrary, the whole purpose of traffic restraint, apart from its environmental aims, is to make movement easier. Too much traffic impedes movement on foot, by bicycle, by bus, by lorry and by car; planned restraint benefits all travellers, including those for whom the car remains the most

(1) Report, paras 8.3, 8.5, 8.10, 9.1, 9.11, 12.28(a), 12.30

suitable mode.

Even if it were the case that a considerable increase in total road capacity was justified, the question would still arise as to where and in what form it should be provided, which of course depends on what sort of journeys the roads are expected to accommodate. Although the Report says nothing about this, the Panel, by accepting the GLC's traffic forecasts (even with some reservations), has implicitly accepted the GLC's views about the kind of travel by road that must be provided for in the future. These views were that it was inter-suburban trips made for social purposes that would impose the heaviest demand on the transport system in the future.⁽¹⁾ In fact, no reasons were ever given to think that this rather new type of journey would be more important to Londoners than the essential journeys to work, to school, to shop and so on, which they make at present. Nor was any reason given to suppose that the right way to satisfy new "social" journeys was to provide inter-suburban roads. We developed this point in our evidence at the Inquiry⁽²⁾ and the Report contains no answer to it. Our conclusion remains that the whole idea of inter-suburban travel demand is largely a myth created by the fact that the road networks examined in the GLC's studies were of a form that encouraged inter-suburban journeys to be made. Of course, if such roads were provided, they would ultimately fill up, but so would any other roads that might be built in inner London. This shows nothing about what roads are wanted or needed.

The criticisms made above would stand even if the GLC's

(1) GLDP Inquiry Proof of Evidence E12/1, para 2.13.1

(2) Transport Strategy in London, Evidence of LATA/LMAG E12/20 (GLDP Inquiry)

traffic studies had been comprehensive and unbiased; they are very much reinforced by the serious deficiencies of the studies. The original surveys did not cover journeys made on foot or by bicycle. Nothing was recorded about the quality of travel; the mere fact that journeys were made was taken as an indication that the transport system catered for them in a satisfactory way. This distracted attention from the serious difficulties of travellers making their daily essential journeys and also from the case for improvements to the public transport system, which is the means by which the great majority of such journeys are made. The original surveys also had nothing to say about the conflict between traffic and the environment, or about accidents, which are essential aspects of the transport problem. In short, the whole study was from the very outset focussed on one aspect of the problem, that of car travel, to the virtual exclusion of all others.

Design principles

The Panel's proposals are clearly very much influenced by the principles which they think should govern the design of a road network. Firstly they believe that the road network should constitute a hierarchy consisting of four different grades of road, the top grade being motorways. Secondly, they believe that radial motorways must connect with orbital motorways. ⁽¹⁾ Since only two orbital motorways are proposed, and since the radials already extend within Ringway Four, they must therefore, according to this principle, be brought all the way into Ringway One. The Panel's arguments for tens of miles of radial motorway amount to little more than this.

We do not accept either of these principles. One cannot argue

(1) Report, para 12. 25, 12. 33, 12. 34

for motorways simply on the grounds that without them there would be no proper hierarchy. Indeed high-capacity, high speed roads with limited access points are positively not required in an urban situation. They are clearly best suited to relatively long journeys and therefore in the longer term contribute to the lengthening of journeys, whereas we believe that journeys, particularly those by road, should be kept short.

The second of the Panel's design principles is even less tenable. The argument that a radial motorway must terminate at an orbital motorway⁽¹⁾ is wholly fallacious. The alternative is for radial roads, as they get closer to the centre, to reduce in size at successive intersections with other roads. This makes good sense in traffic terms, since most of the traffic from the national motorway system is bound for destinations in outer London and this state of affairs should be maintained. Most travellers to inner and central London either make the complete journey by public transport or change to public transport at inter-change points in outer London or outside London altogether; this too should be maintained and encouraged.

Traffic relief and environmental benefits

The Panel's next argument is that the motorways are required to bring relief to central London and inner London. This is a vital argument since it is admitted that environmental benefits as great as the alleged traffic benefits are required if the vast cost of the motorways is to be justified.⁽²⁾ The argument is that the motorways will canalise long distance traffic and hence restore peace and quiet to the streets which now have to carry

(1) Report, para 12.64(b)

(2) Report, paras 12.61, M.47

it. This argument depends on the idea that future traffic volumes are largely independent of the road system which is provided; hence better roads will simply drain away traffic from the existing roads. Experience all over the world indicates that this is not the case. No cities, including those that have built extensive motorways, have found that motorways do in fact bring any long term relief to the other streets. All that happens is that the whole of the expanded road network rapidly fills up. Neither does experience indicate that the unbearable conditions which the Panel foresees in the absence of motorways are likely to come about. Once again the Panel has chosen to ignore our criticism of the GLC traffic studies, that they underestimate the importance of the well-known (if little understood) phenomenon of traffic generation, the process by which traffic volumes increase as a result of providing increased road capacity. ⁽¹⁾

Indeed, it is fairly clear that the new roads suggested would actually increase the pressure on existing roads. This is particularly true of journeys destined for central London. To provide radial motorways linking with an orbital motorway which runs as close to the centre as possible will encourage more car journeys to be made to the centre. The Panel would presumably say in reply to this that the pressure thus created can be contained by the traffic restraint measures that they advocate for the centre, namely parking control and some system of supplementary licensing. This has not been demonstrated. Indeed, under the Panel's suggestions, there would be more parking in central London than there is at present although less than the GLC originally proposed. ⁽²⁾

(1) Transport strategy in London, Chapter 3

(2) GLC's Evidence to the Inquiry, E12/1, Table 8.1 and Report, para 9.35.

The suggestions for supplementary licensing are described only in the haziest possible way.⁽¹⁾ It is difficult to foresee how they will work or what their effect will be. Anyway, even if these measures were effective, it remains true that the motorways create the pressure and the counter-measures have to be more strict than they would otherwise need to be.

The argument that the proposed roads will help to relieve central London of through traffic is not as plausible as it might at first appear. Firstly, the volume of such traffic is not fixed, and it is not independent of what roads are provided. The effect of building Ringway One and the radials will be to increase the total volume of through journeys by car including many that are at present made by public transport. Public transport, especially when radically improved in the ways suggested in the Report, could provide a fast and convenient service via the centre for many of these longer journeys, particularly outside the peak hours. Secondly, it is not clear how much of the through traffic will in fact take Ringway One in preference to routes through the centre, which are nearly always shorter in distance and sometimes in time as well. The GLC's claim that Ringway One would relieve the centre of through traffic rested on the assumption that present levels of congestion in the centre would be maintained.⁽²⁾ But if this were so it is hard to see what gain would be derived from removing the through traffic; certainly there would be no environmental gain except on the supposition that through traffic is somehow inherently nastier than stopping traffic. In any case, is it worth removing through traffic from the centre only to route it through inner London? Mile for mile, it may be

(1) Report para 9. 38

(2) GLC Report of Studies para 6. 255

less disagreeable for the traffic to be on a purpose-built road than on existing streets, although even this is not true in all respects, for example the noise is likely to be worse where the traffic moves faster. But the mileage is greater, the route runs through densely populated residential districts and at each end of the motorway journey vehicles will still have to make use of other roads.

In inner London the claims made for environmental improvements on the rest of the streets are unspecific and unsubstantiated. It is, however, said that in many places, although not in all, conditions would be better than they are today. ⁽¹⁾ We do not accept even this modest claim. The restraint measures envisaged for central London, such as they are, are not proposed for inner London and, even if some traffic diverts to the new roads, we see nothing to prevent traffic volumes on the streets of inner London rising once more to their present levels or beyond. The direct impact of the inner London motorway must also be considered.

Economic evaluation

When a project of the size and complexity of London's road plans is in question, it is not possible to consider all its effects simultaneously and to conclude on the basis of judgment whether on balance it is good or bad. It is therefore necessary to set out the ways in which the proposals will be beneficial and the ways in which they will be deleterious, and to assess the magnitude of these effects. All systematic attempts to assess Ringway One have produced highly unfavourable results. Its advocates have then argued that the effects which it was not possible to include

(1) Report para 12.58

in the analysis are positive and substantial enough to make the project worthwhile. In particular, it has been argued that the environmental relief that motorways would bring to other parts of London would be sufficient both to compensate for the environmental damage caused by their construction and use, and to turn a very unpromising transport investment into a desirable town planning investment.

We have argued above that we do not believe that the hoped for relief would come about. The Panel, relying on methods of traffic forecasting which we believe to be unsuitable for the purpose, thinks that there will be relief, but has given no description of how extensive it would be or what it would amount to. It is therefore quite impossible for them or anyone else to come to a "considered judgment"⁽¹⁾ on the benefits.

The position on the cost side is no better. It has already been mentioned that the Panel, although accepting the GLC's argument for a motorway on the route of Ringway One, albeit of less capacity than the one proposed by the GLC, has rejected the GLC's proposed design completely and has made it clear that unless the design standards which it stipulates are adhered to the recommendation to build the road does not stand.⁽²⁾ The Panel's recommendations would change Ringway One out of recognition (although housing loss might even be increased). For example, half of Ringway One was to be elevated in the original design - the Panel is apparently recommending that it should be below ground level wherever possible.⁽³⁾ Absolutely no estimate is given of what

(1) Report, para 12.61

(2) Report, para 11.35

(3) Report, para 11.30

difference this would make to the cost, or to the housing loss. ⁽¹⁾

Very little attention is paid in the Report to roads other than motorways, but what is said is extremely disturbing. The panel recommends that the GLC's secondary road proposals should be rejected "in toto"⁽²⁾ and instead wants a completely new network of "other principal roads" to be defined. It is thought that this network would amount to 300 or 350 miles of road, never less than four lanes wide, with some links of a motorway standard and with some grade separated junctions. ⁽³⁾ Some very important main roads would form part of this network, including new roads and bridges over the Thames corresponding to the western and eastern links of the former Ringway Two as well as existing roads such as Westway and the Blackwall Tunnel and its approach motorways. We are appalled that no estimates are given of the costs of building this network⁽⁴⁾ or of the physical and environmental damage that might be involved. This point affects the Panel's recommendations for the motorway network as well as the secondary roads ("other principal roads") themselves. One of the purposes of the "other principal roads" is to provide access to the motorways. ⁽⁵⁾ Until this network has been defined nothing can be said about where junctions between the

(1) In para 12.79, some estimates are given of the cost savings that will come about by reducing the scale of the primary network but nothing is said about cost increases from changes in design. See also para 12.56

(2) Report, para 12.67

(3) Report, para 12.69

(4) Report, para 12.79

(5) Report, para 12.25, Table 12.1

motorways and the rest of the road network will be provided and therefore about how the motorways themselves will function.

The Panel have ignored the effect of the motorways and other major new roads on public transport usage, and they have ignored the argument that the number of road accidents will be increased.

One other major point about economic evaluation must be made. Such an evaluation always involves a comparison between alternatives: one of the alternatives is chosen as the reference plan with which the others are compared. It is of critical importance to choose an appropriate reference plan, since it is obviously not much of a recommendation of a proposed investment that it shows a high rate of return when compared with an extremely indifferent alternative. In the GLC's tests, various road plans were evaluated against a "do-nothing" situation; the Panel in drawing on the GLC's studies implicitly adopts the same approach.⁽¹⁾ This is not an interesting comparison since no one has proposed doing nothing. A case for road building can only be made out by comparison with what the situation would be if the public transport investment which everyone agrees to be necessary was put in hand and if the existing roads were efficiently managed. The general point has been well expressed in the report of the House of Commons Expenditure Committee on Urban Transport Planning⁽²⁾: "The arguments used in favour of road building seem to us to be in error by presuming that the roads which we already have are being used in the most efficient manner in the context of the

(1) This point is made fairly explicitly in para 12. 57

(2) Volume 1, para 27 of the Second Report from the Expenditure Committee, Urban Transport Planning, HMSO 1973. (HCP 57)

total transport situation." The Panel's discussion of what constitutes a reasonable rate of return completely overlooks this fundamental point; in other words, the Panel disregards the ways in which its own admirable suggestions, outside the sphere of roadbuilding, would improve the situation.

Our suggestions for central and inner London

A transport strategy for London can only be formulated on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of all the problems that transport involves and a systematic study of the options open. We set out our views in Chapter 8 of Transport Strategy in London; here we can only briefly summarise our conclusions, with particular regard to road building.

For central London, there is now a wide measure of agreement on strategy. It is neither possible nor desirable that more than a small proportion of the vast number of journeys made to and within the centre every day should be accommodated by car. The right strategy is to improve the alternatives as far as possible and to limit car use. As we put it in Transport Strategy in London (para 8.4.5):

" Central London should be regarded as a unique area of outstanding attraction into which one would not usually contemplate taking a car. The right to take one's own personal transport into the city centre should be regarded and treated as a privilege only one step removed from the right to take it into the compound of the Houses of Parliament or Buckingham Palace."

To implement this policy on the roads requires a substantial improvement in conditions for buses and pedestrians, which

in turn requires a reduction in present traffic volumes. New roads are not required; the road problem is exclusively a problem of management.

The physical and environmental constraints which apply in inner London, although less extreme than those in the centre, are nevertheless very stringent. The other vital consideration is that even if car ownership should increase to the levels predicted, cars will never be available for the majority of journeys made by residents of inner London. The most important objective is therefore to ensure that "no one with normal travel requirements need ever feel dependent on the private car for journeys within the main built-up area of London".⁽¹⁾ On the roads this again involves improving conditions for walking, cycling and travel by bus. It is highly important that facilities should be available within easy access of those who have only those modes available; as far as possible the resident of inner London should be able to find all that he needs either in his own locality, or in the immediately adjacent localities or in central London. This has important implications for land use and locational policy as well as for transport policy.

We do not believe that such a policy should involve a restriction on car use for those journeys which, even after the alternatives have been improved, it would still be more convenient to make by car. Car owners in inner London would, however, need to accept that their journeys to and across central London should normally be made by public transport; we believe that they would willingly do so if the right facilities were provided.

(1) Transport Strategy in London, para 8.3.2

Road building has an important part to play in our strategy for inner London, but the aim is not to significantly increase the total capacity of the road system, still less to provide a continuous network of high capacity, high speed roads which would generate long car journeys. The object should be to resolve the conflict between traffic and the environment and to permit schemes to go ahead which facilitate walking and give buses priority over other traffic. This does not require the provision of a new network designed on abstract, geometrical principles; it requires the patient individual examination of the particular points of conflict in inner London (e. g. major shopping centres) and of the methods of resolving them.

Conclusion

It is therefore our conclusion, and our consequent advice to the Secretary of State for the Environment, that the Inner London motorway, the radial motorways and the other road building proposals put forward in the Layfield report should be rejected. An alternative road improvement strategy in Inner London, along the lines which we have suggested, should be investigated in relation to the proposals for public transport, the environment, pedestrians, bus priorities and other management measures about which we are in general agreement with the Layfield Panel.

Copies of this document, and the LATA/LMAG Evidence to the GLDP Inquiry "Transport Strategy in London" may be obtained from LATA, 26 Elm Park Mansions, Park Walk, London, S. W. 10.