

Taking Stock at the London Inquiry
(Public Inquiry into the Greater London Development Plan [GLDP], 1969)

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People may wonder what has happened to the great Public Inquiry started last October into the Greater London Development Plan. Little has been reported in the newspapers because the complex proceedings of public inquiries seldom make real news. Nevertheless the Inquiry has been steadily grinding its way through an enormous mass of evidence and hopefully has now reached about halfway.

The inquiry was set up mainly in response to the anti-motorway protests, although it was also obliged to delve into population, employment, housing, parks, conservation and every other aspect of the plan. The motorway proposals include Ringway 1 (the "Motorway Box") close to central London; Ringway 2 circling the city about seven miles from Charing Cross and Ringway three skirting the built-up area about twelve miles from the centre. In addition major radial motorways (some new, some based on existing roads) will connect with Ringway 1. The inquiry's real business is to give judgement on the controversy over these roads.

The Panel of Inquiry, under Frank Layfield, Q.C., decided to deal with its problem in three stages. Stage 1 was to be a broad examination of strategy. Stage 2 a more detailed look at the strategic implications of the Plan for different parts of London. Stage 3 a loosely defined stage for dealing with outstanding matters and coming to conclusions. The first stage is almost complete.

Although there were over 20,000 formal objections to the plan, some 90% of which were against the motorways, in the end there were only a handful of comprehensive, strategic cases to be heard at stage 1. The great majority of objectors, many of whom were societies and associations, quite naturally delegated their case to the two co-ordinating bodies, the London Motorway Action Group and the London Amenity and Transport Association. These two bodies acted together, the former providing funds and political support, the latter providing expertise and the backing of the environmental movement. The other big organised objectors at the overall strategic level were the Boroughs of Croydon, Greenwich and Hounslow (all represented by the same team of consultants), the Borough of Camden, and the Royal Institute of British Architects. Camden confined their objection to Ringway 1, the RIBA limited themselves to environmental issues. Croydon, Greenwich and Hounslow were not at all clear just what proposals they were objecting to or what alternative proposals they wanted to make. The LMAG-LATA objection was crystal clear: no motorways inside Ringway 3, and an alternative strategy spelled out in as much detail as in the GLDP itself, which admittedly was not much.

In addition a considerable number of individual objectors, like Terence Bendixson, former planning correspondent for the Guardian, provided useful contributions on particular aspects. Looming in the background are the Department of the Environment, British Railways and London Transport. All have a great deal to say on the subject but are not able to say it all in public.

The one way in which the method of Inquiry has failed to do justice is in allowing non bona fide objectors to appear. Principal among them are the British Road Federation representing the various business interests that stand to profit from roadbuilding. The BRF are, of course, enthusiastic supporters of all motorway proposals; their objections are simply that they want them built faster. The injustice is that whereas other objectors were naturally opposed by the GLC, no one else was permitted to oppose the BRF, who were therefore able to produce unchallenged some quite disreputable evidence in support of the motorways, notably through the mouth of Professor Alan Day. But, of course, the Panel were alive to this situation.

After months of debate, often penetrating the deepest and darkest corners of a big, complex subject, how does the motorway argument now stand? The important point to make is that the real argument is not what most people think it is. It is not a question of an efficient road system versus people's homes and environment. The real question is whether the motorways are in fact likely to provide an efficient road system and, more widely, an efficient transport system. If they are, then one must still consider whether they are worth the great cost and loss of homes, environment, etc.; but if they are not, then there is no point considering them further.

The main objection to the motorways is that as they penetrate further into the densely built-up heart of the city, not only do they rapidly become more costly and disruptive, but also they achieve less and less. No one now disputes that motorways in the west end itself would do nothing to relieve congestion on the existing streets but by attracting more traffic would probably make congestion worse, not to mention parking; at the same time they would drive another nail into the coffin of public transport and would grievously damage the environment. In a word there is a point, depending on the intensity of activity and movement in the area, where urban motorways become counter-productive. In this country we can show this theoretically by complex traffic models; other countries can show it in actual existence. They have made the mistake of driving motorways too far into large urban areas; we can benefit from their mistake. Some cities like Toronto and San Francisco have learned the hard way and have thrown out proposals for more inner motorways to relieve the congestion generated by the existing motorways.

None of the principal objectors are against urban motorways as such. Nor are they against the car. But they all share the view, as indeed does the GLC, that as one approaches the inner parts of a huge metropolis like London the car, while admirable for a privileged few, becomes less and less suitable as a means of mass transport. However great the apparent demand, there is no point trying to accommodate more than a strictly limited volume of road traffic. Since everyone, except the BRF of course, agrees with this argument the real

question is over how large an area it applies. This is the basic problem before the Inquiry.

The LMAG-LATA view is that the two outer ringways (numbers 3 and 4) should be built and a non-motorway policy pursued within Ringway 3, designed to accommodate the use of cars for local and out-of-town journeys but to encourage the use of public transport (often with the car as far as the station) for longer-distance journeys. This view is supported by the RIBA and might also be construed from the evidence given by Croydon, Greenwich and Hounslow. Camden were content to pursue the same kind of policy within Ringway 2. The GLC, originally believing that the right limit was Ringway 1, have increasingly shown signs of wanting to settle for Ringway 2 instead. They have already postponed the completion of Ringway 1 until the 1990's.

Consequently the Inquiry has revealed that the main participants on both sides are broadly agreed in principle but differ on matters of degree. The issue has therefore become one of measurement and prediction, i.e. it has become highly technical. Interestingly the GLC, despite their great strength in professional staff, have fared badly in the technical debate. Time and again their witnesses have had to admit errors, often startling errors, in their case. This is no criticism of the witnesses, who are as competent (and honest) as could be found anywhere. But it may suggest that they are being asked to defend a weak case. This, however, is for the Inquiry Panel to decide. They have a difficult task because many of the technical issues are concerned with methods of predicting exactly what will happen to traffic volumes, speeds, patterns of location, car ownership and travelling habits if the motorways are built and, equally, if they are not built. The argument is essentially over which crystal ball should be used and it is not an argument that can be avoided, since the difference between the two sides lies very largely in their contrasting views of what will actually happen in the long run if the motorways are or are not built.

It is hard to see how the Panel can conclusively settle this kind of argument without employing its own research team, as did the Roskill Commission on the third London airport. How long would such a team need to sort out the issues? It is difficult to say. But time is not particularly short, as the motorway programme extends over 30 years. If it took two years to reach a decision, that would be a small price to pay getting the right one. Nor need the construction of motorways in London be delayed. All available finance could be devoted to Ringway 3 until the outcome of the Panel's research was known.