

British Transport Is 'The Worst In Europe'

by Rainer Apel

The era of ruthless privatization, a trademark of British transportation policy during the last two decades, has come to an end. The British government's Commission on Integrated Transport, established amid the worst of the railway accidents in late 1999, has just released a report which documents that. Commission chairman Prof. David Begg, at Nov. 26 press conference in London, said that the state of Britain's transport sector is "the worst in Europe."

Begg said the current situation shows what happens if a country allows "50 years of neglect" and "under-investment," as Britain has done. Even the government's plan to invest £180 billion (\$270 billion) into the nation's transport sector over the next ten years, would "only start to bridge the gap" between Britain and the rest of Europe.

One-third of that sum is needed simply to bring Britain's rail sector up to the present minimum standards on the continent. Begg pronounced the rail privatization "failed," and his assessment was echoed by reports all over the British media, saying that in order to prevent full default of the private Rail-track company (which operates the tracks and signals), the government will have to inject £6 billion by the end of 2001.

The report is the first comprehensive comparison between Britain and Europe in decades, and it shows that British motorists and public transportation passengers come out worse on almost every count: • 25% of the United Kingdom's main roads are constantly congested, compared to 10% on the continent; • average daily commuting time is twice that of a continental citizen; • the public transportation system is in such bad shape and unreliable, that only 12% of British auto passengers use it, whereas 87% prefer the car; • gasoline taxes are the highest in all of Europe, which means that 15% of the average family income is spent on transportation costs alone; • in terms of European state rail subsidies, Britain ranks second to last, just ahead of Greece.

'Going Nowhere Slowly'

The publication of the commission's report was flanked by detailed articles in the major British news dailies. The *Sunday Times* of Nov. 25, for example, dedicated a two-page insert to the issue, beginning with a reminder that Terminal 5 of London's Heathrow international airport, which the government proudly just inaugurated, is a project that was begun 20 years ago. "Britain has fought four wars and held five

general elections since" the project was scheduled to start, in 1981, the article noted. Even Germany, a country which also allows projects to be excessively delayed for ecological reasons, looks like a country with "fewer problems driving projects forward," in comparison to Britain, the *Sunday Times* observed. "Compared with our continental neighbors, Britain is going nowhere slowly."

None of the Begg Commission's revelations come as a surprise, the article said. "Public transport in Britain has become a byword for misery." The *Sunday Times* interviewed David Azema, chief executive of the joint Franco-British train tunnel across the Channel, who said, "Infrastructure projects take a long time in planning in all Western countries, because of consultancy requirements and environmental issues. But the planning regulations in the United Kingdom are even more protective."

Unlike the French state-controlled system for rail, the British privatized system, which has eliminated any central institution of responsibility, prompts bureaucratic and other obstructionism, causing project delays, Azema said.

The plague of obstructionism reigns at the top of the British government, as the *Sunday Times* documented in the case of the "Tube," the London metro: "Bob Kiley, the American who was brought in to rescue the Tube, thinks the system is crazy and would like to convey this view to Gordon Brown, the Chancellor [of the Exchequer]. But, he says: 'I have been trying for a year to meet Mr. Brown, and I am not sure he exists. I met Mr. [Prime Minister Tony] Blair, and when I said, I would like to meet Mr. Brown, he said, not right away. That was last April.'"

The *Sunday Times* also interviewed Stephen Norris, a former transport minister in a Conservative government, who said: "The reason Britain's infrastructure is so bad is very, very simple. Money. We've been under-investing for 30 years. The Treasury is totally fixated on short-term costs. Nobody understands the importance of long-term investment in the nation's infrastructure."

And in a biting commentary, the Nov. 24-25 weekend edition of the *Financial Times*, the mouthpiece of City of London banking interests, attacked the Blair government for its policy, which has accelerated the collapse of the British rail infrastructure: "Many people have to endure a transport system that is less efficient than the one their grandparents used. Nowhere else in Western Europe do commuters have to put up with anything comparable with London's chaotic squalor."

Since Blair's New Labour party took power in May 1997, "public investment has fallen to a paltry 1.7% of national income, its lowest level since the Second World War," the *Financial Times* said. "In its first three years in office, the party that says it believes in the public sector amazingly contrived to put public services under greater strain than at any time since Hitler pounded London with V2 rockets."

Support for emergency state intervention to save the public transportation system is now visibly growing in Britain.