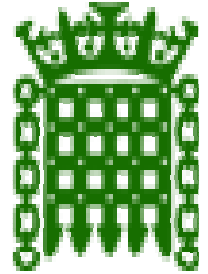




All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA
Light Rail & Trams, Affordable & Sustainable Transport

"The past we inherit, the future we build ourselves"



"TramTrain does it Greener and Cheaper on lightly used railway lines and in the streets"

All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group

Christian Wolmar

[The talk was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation]

CW said he would try and put trams in an historical context and asked why in this country we were "so bad at trams". There had been a lack of transport policy over the last one hundred years. He quoted a publication from a series called "Perspectives" entitled "Are trams socialist?" which looks at transport policy over the last 150 years. It highlights our blind spot in relation to collective, as opposed to individual, means of transport. CW contrasted a picture of a first generation tram with a modern congested street. From the 1920s Ministry of transport policy was entirely geared to road building and accommodating the car.

The car was seen as the future. He contrasted an early picture of a virtually empty arterial road with a 1950s one of gridlock on the Exeter bypass.

In the 1960s the Buchanan Report proposed building urban motorways to accommodate cars. One of the victims of these policies were the tram systems which finally disappeared (except for Blackpool) in the 1950s and 60s.

Trams were the working class way of getting around town, cheaper than the railways and going to where people lived, more effective than buses and often municipally run. Trams were excluded from, for example, the West End of London because of their working class associations.

Trams were seen as getting in the way of cars and that is what largely killed them off although there were other issues such as the fact that most tram fleets were old and needed replacing.

A lot of European cities kept at least the core of their tram networks. We, however, wiped them out and also the trolleybus.

By the 1970s and 80s we began to realise that the solution is not car-driven although we never quite accommodate this.

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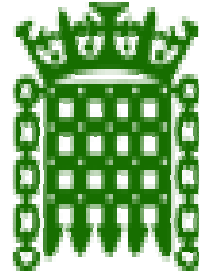
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We get a new generation of trams from 1982 with Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham, Croydon, Birmingham and Edinburgh as well as the Tyne and Wear Metro and DLR. These systems are not perfect; Manchester and Nottingham are probably the best.

They are all built to accommodate what is possible, so there is quite a lot of use of existing rail lines, which is not always ideal, there is no integration and indeed competition with buses due to legislation, they do not always get priority over other traffic, but they are still largely successful.

John Prescott recognised this and promised 25 tram schemes by 2010 but we only got extensions in Manchester and Nottingham and the Edinburgh tram. The argument was that they were expensive, not enough people would use them.

There was no understanding that in practically every respect trams are transformational. They are cheaper to operate than buses, they take people out of cars in a way that buses never do – according to the Urban Transport Group about 20% of people using trams at peak times used to use cars and at weekends the number can go up to about 50% - they attract investment – what city that has a tram system does not put it on the front page of their annual report?

They can deal with flows of around 20,000 people an hour and from around 2,500 people an hour it becomes cheaper to operate.

Manchester now has the biggest system but Nottingham has the best planned scheme because they have to some extent managed to accommodate it within the bus network, they have built lots of park-and-ride. They have partly funded it with the workplace parking levy – why has nobody else done that? Why are Sadiq and Zac not talking about that in London? So we do have some examples of successful and popular tram systems but not enough.

We could really be much more ambitious and it could be transformational in terms of air quality and the environment and we have to look abroad.

Zurich is a good example. It very nearly went down a completely different path. It is not a densely populated city – Paul Miles in a book about transport in suburbia pointed out that it was not to do with population density but with politics.

In the 1950s the transport planners wanted a system based on urban motorways and underground railways and to get rid of the trams. Being Switzerland, the proposal went to a referendum and was thrown out in 1962 and again in 1973. Instead the trams were retained and prioritised over cars.

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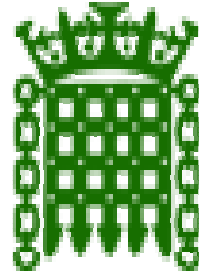




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So there may be a different culture here but it can change in the way that the Cycle Superhighway is changing the culture of cycling in London. If we had built one or two of the trams that Ken Livingstone proposed, like Camden Town to Elephant and Castle, it might have had the same effect. We can still dream about that.

The point is that even Zurich, which perhaps does not seem the ideal place for trams, ends up with 15 tram routes, 100 miles of track and enormous public support for more of the same.

The public transport share of all journeys is about 60% and another 20% cycle or walk and the city has not ended up as a typical car-dominated city. A coordinated policy like this can work.

CW concluded by saying that one major topic that the public were interested in during his London mayoral campaign was clean air. It is going to be the big issue of the next ten or twenty years. Something that trams can do is shift traffic away from cars and improve air quality.

The Chairman thanked the speaker. He suggested that a Group visit to the Nottingham system would be useful.

He asked CW why he thought we were so bad in the UK at making political decision about new tram systems and what we needed to do to change that.

CW replied that the answer was that both the Department for Transport and the Treasury had a very limited view of the externalities. The Treasury does not consider the wider benefits of schemes. His view was that the DfT had never understood anything beyond the narrow economics of schemes and never understood the limitations of car use.

We now have a really good opportunity to show the economic and environmental success of tram schemes.

The clean air issue is not going away and measures will have to be taken to reduce car use in central London and trams are clearly a way forward.

The Chairman invited questions and comments from the floor.

Chris Bell (Chairman Conservative Transport Group) asked if, given that economic commentators attribute much of London's success to its transport system, other cities should not be pressing for similar integrated systems and if trams might be an economic way of achieving that than tube systems.

Rob Williams (journalist) suggested that the reason why France was so far ahead of the UK in tram provision was the existence of a specific tax, the Versement Transport, to fund public transport.

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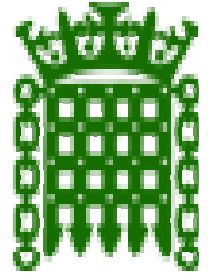
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Andy Dixon (WSP/Parsons Brinckerhof) observed that one of the major costs in building a tramway is utility diversion, which adds virtually no benefit to the tramway itself.

It is technically unnecessary to remove most utilities yet legislation and practice dictates virtual deep-mining of the area before the tramway can be installed. It can be anything up to a quarter of the cost of the project.

It is up to Parliament to create a mechanism which prevents statutory utilities having the right to demand removal of their plant and then, if there is a problem, for the Treasury to have a fund which can be called upon. So utilities are largely left where they are but if there is a problem there are no risks to the utility companies. This would make a big difference to the viability of tramway projects.

CW responded that the problem is that there is a bias against long-term investment. So bus based systems are chosen because of their initial low cost without any understanding of the transformational nature of trams.

There are many routes where buses are inadequate, such as Oxford Road in Manchester – perfect for a tram route. He agreed on utilities – you may need occasionally to stop the tram service but then you will have got it for a much lower price in the first place.

He did not understand why the industry has not done more to lobby on this matter.

On the question of funding, Manchester has somehow managed to find the money to do this, despite losing the referendum on the congestion charge.

That is the example to follow and with the workplace levy, with devolution, etc we ought to be able to progress.

Bernard Gambrell (freelance consultant) felt that new tramways should not end in large sports facilities or shopping centres because this distorts the local economy and may harm small local businesses.

Tim Kendell (UKTram) said that when he left DfT a year ago there were about 2.5 people working on trams as against 250-300 on main line rail and up to a 1000 on roads, not much chance for trams with that type of representation.

Did CW think that devolution, with LEPs and ITAs and PTEs taking a lead, is the only way forward.

John Dayton (Conservative Transport Group) asked why buses were less effective than trams at getting people out of their cars.

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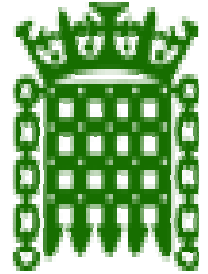
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CW responded that all transport investment tends to distort the existing local economy. We all love transport improvements and the subsequent economic regeneration.

The East London line is an example. But then what happens? House prices go up, rents go up, smaller businesses are squeezed out and only rich people can afford to live there and use the transport system that has been created. How can we find a way around that dilemma?

Some of the LEPs seem to be very car-oriented but some might be attracted by trams and the PTEs are in favour of them.

The situation at DfT dates back to the formation of the Ministry of Transport in the 1920s when there was a roads section and an "all the rest" section, a result of RAC and AA lobbying.

Buses are seen as some sort of socialist anachronism and as rather uncomfortable and smelly and subject to traffic congestion.

We have not in the UK developed a concept of bus rapid transit, only a few guided buses which were very expensive for what they delivered.

Trams are much more comfortable.

The middle classes will use trams but not buses and we just have to accept that. If you cannot get the middle classes to use your collective transport then it will not work.

Secretariat

James Harkins FCILT MTPS

Mike Willsher, LRTA

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