Motorways versus Democracy

Public inquiries into road proposals
and their political significance

John Tyme

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Chronology of Inquiries

1973

June/July	M42	Bromsgrove
September	M40	Kenilworth
October	M20	Ashford (Kent)

1974

February	M56	Chester
February/March	M65	Burnley
December	M16	Epping

1975

January	M16	Epping
May	M25	Byfleet
May	A55	Llandudno
November	Aire Valley Trunk Road	Shipley

1976

January	Elmstead By-pass	Colchester
January	Hayle By-pass	Penzance
February	Lewes By-pass	Lewes
April	Haslingden By-pass	Haslingden
May	M25	Hornchurch
June/July	M3	Winchester
September	Archway Road I	Hornsey
September	M27	Chichester

1977

April	Archway Road II	Archway
May	Ipswich By-pass	Ipswich
October	Archway Road III	Archway
November	M25	Ripley

The author and publishers would like to thank Mike Peyton, whose perceptive and entertaining cartoons appear in this book.

Foreword

by David Widdicombe, Q. C.

One does not have to agree with everything John Tyme has said and done to recognise the important service which he and his supporters have performed in opening up to scrutiny and debate the whole subject of decision-making in the field of Government-sponsored projects. Our public inquiry system works well enough when the proposal under investigation is promoted by a local authority or private developer – that is, someone other than the Government. But as applied to Government-sponsored projects like motorways it is thoroughly unsatisfactory. This is partly because the Government combines the roles of advocate for the scheme and judge of the objections to it, compounding this unfairness by appointing as inspectors at the inquiries persons such as ex-civil servants who do not strike the public as independent. Far more important, though, is the embargo placed at the inquiry on all discussion on the main thing everyone wants to discuss, namely whether the project should take place at all.

The plain fact is that people everywhere in this country today want more say in the decisions that affect them, whether at their place of work or where they live. Voting once every few years may have been enough a hundred years ago, but it is not enough for a community which has enjoyed the benefits of universal education for several generations. Our institutions must develop to accommodate this demand for participation. In particular, this book shows that we must devise ways to involve people in decision-making in the field of transport policy. If policy cannot reasonably be discussed at the local inquiry, new institutions must be set up at which the need for a project can be fairly and fully debated. Parliament has not got the time to discuss such matters, and is in any event hampered by the polarisation of opinion which occurs at the political level. It may be that we

need a range of institutions lying between the public local inquiry and Parliament at which policy can be debated. The other feature essential for participation is, of course, open government – an idea to which the Department of Transport is notoriously resistant.

John Tyme has by his persistent campaign reflected and channelled the general dissatisfaction with the decision-making process in the transport field, which has developed as public awareness of environmental issues has come to the fore in recent years. I particularly commend to the attention of readers Chapter 7, in which he describes the part played in decision-making by interest groups, who can sometimes establish disquietingly close relationships with Government departments at official level. John Tyme is quite correct, in my view, to identify and bring into the open this element in the process.

It is to the credit of our system of government that the body of opinion which John Tyme represents has not been brushed aside. Its importance has been accepted, and his work is bearing fruit. Rules have now been laid down for motorway inquiries. A committee has been set up to investigate procedure. The Leitch Committee has reported on the Department's methods of traffic forecasting and appraising schemes, making recommendations which go a long way to justifying John Tyme's criticisms, and calling, as he does, for more openness. Other reports will follow. There is still a lot to do, but John Tyme has set the process of reform well and truly in motion.

March 1978

D. W.

Preface

In this short volume I have sought to do a number of things. First to describe how I came to be involved in inquiries into road schemes in the first place, and then in something of a narrative form to give an account of the inquiries themselves. In some instances I have included submissions in full in the text as any curtailment would lead to incomplete understanding of the issues involved, while others I have summarised in the text and set some down in full in the appendices. Press comments have been included when I have found them both to be accurate and to convey the flavour of events. Finally I have sought to draw some fundamental conclusions from it all, and the book conveniently ends with the implications of a High Court case concerning the same inquiry that started everything off.

Inevitably it tends to be a personalised account, and I much regret that space does not allow adequate mention of the work of the many highly intelligent and dedicated people with whom I have been associated, and who so often took up where I left off. The book, then, seeks to be no more than the account of the intervention of an ordinary non-expert person in a field of central government planning involving expertise, power and authority of the highest order. It is an account of how this enormous – and corrupted – power has been brought low, not by counter-expertise, purchased at great expense, but by quite ordinary people from all walks of life and from the whole breadth of the political spectrum – quite ordinary people asking quite ordinary questions, requesting that quite ordinary measures should be taken to provide the answers and, when denied those, taking the necessary extraordinary and courageous action.

That the writer was invariably at the centre of the many controversial events that followed makes the personalisation of this account inevitable. This may lead to accusations of a personality cult

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or whatever, and if this pleases some, then no harm is done. What would please me would be for this book to be read by people who, overwhelmed by bureaucratic power and obduracy of one form or another and denied the protection they have a right to expect, are thus enabled to see that by entirely peaceful means and drawing on an ancient and honourable tradition in the history of this country – that of Dissent – they can achieve justice and defend themselves and their communities not by playing the game according to the rules which (in so far as they are revealed) are devised by their opponents, but by working out a new game altogether, with rules devised by themselves.

For it is my conviction that so long as institutional protection is absent only ordinary, common-sense people banded together, people untainted by the sick dreams of the great technocrats, can halt the drive towards social and political disaster. First by asking simple questions like: Do we need it? Is it sensible, humane? What real purpose does it serve? And then by an evolutionary process asking further questions: Is it in accord with government policy? What is that policy anyway? Have the proposers fulfilled their statutory and constitutional obligations? And thence to questions beyond: What is happening to our democracy and our parliamentary system of government? Where are we heading? And finally, judging from the answers they receive or work out for themselves, taking various courses of action within the scope of that alluded to above. It is to them, therefore, that this book is primarily directed, and it is dedicated, of course, to those courageous friends and acquaintances that I have made throughout the events described in these chapters. Its dedication therefore writes itself.

To all those who have had the courage
to stand up (or sit down on the floor)
and be counted, who by their actions
constitute a bright candle in an
otherwise darkening world