

MORE THAN PASSENGERS

| Transport, community and
| power

Marcus Roberts

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SOCIETY**

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Deanne DuKhan of AGAHST deserves thanks not just for supporting the Fabian Society's research in this area but for respecting our differences of policy and opinion whilst constructively engaging with my work at every turn.

Finally, this paper is of course the opinion of myself alone and whilst I have drawn on the ideas of others it should not be taken as proof of their views. Equally, any mistakes are my responsibility alone.

Roundtables and Interviews - an explanatory note

This paper is an argument for radically rethinking how transport policy in Britain could be made with significant implications for public spending choices and communities alike. This paper is grounded in the opinions and experiences of local politicians, industrial leaders, academic experts and community leaders who whilst differing wildly on their individual policy preferences were surprisingly united in their desire to see a major devolution of power and money. The Fabian Society sought their opinions over several months through a series of interviews and roundtables on the understanding that individual ideas and quotations would not be attributed, but their overall contribution would be recognised.

The attendees and interviewees included Pete Abel (Love Your Bike campaign), Roberta Blackman-Woods (shadow minister, Communities and Local Government), Jon Cruddas MP (policy review co-ordinator), Rowenna Davis (Labour party), Deanne DuKhan (AGAST), Maria Eagle MP (former shadow transport secretary), Hugh Ellis (TCPA), Jeff English (Integrated Transport, Leeds), Alastair Harper (Green Alliance), Rebecca Heron (Greater Manchester LEP), Nick Glover (LEP executive officer, Birmingham & Solihull LEP), David Leam (London First), Terry Morgan (Crossrail), Nicola Shaw (chief executive, HS1), Karim Palant (political adviser, shadow chancellor of the exchequer), Val Shawcross AM (Transport Committee, London Assembly), Ben Still (chief executive, Sheffield City Region), Mark Rowney and Will Straw (Institute for Public Policy Research), Corin Taylor (Institute of Directors), Phil Taylor (former special adviser, shadow ministerial transport team), Sir Robin Wales (Mayor of Newham), Sam White (former special adviser to Chancellor of the Exchequer), Alan Whitehead MP (former transport minister), and a number of others who preferred to remain anonymous. It is important to note, however, that the conclusions I have drawn and the argument that I have made – whilst grounded in this research – is my own.

INTRODUCTION

Under Ed Miliband's leadership, Labour's intellectual debate on public policy has focused on the often abstract ideas of devolution, contribution and responsibility. This report is an exploration of those ideas in practical terms with relation to our nation's transport needs. In this context, 'devolution' refers to power and budgets being moved from Whitehall to regions. Contribution comes from communities and individuals who are asked to participate in a reformed planning consultation process in which not just their voices but actual agency is honoured. Finally, under the status quo, accountability is diffuse, with bidding, franchising and contracting blurring lines of responsibility. The reforms recommended in this report would ensure a clearer understanding of who is responsible for what.

The report argues first that Britain's transport policymaking is excessively centralised and cuts out local concerns. This disconnect can result in poor decision making. It goes on to call for regional government (local authorities, devolved administrations and Local Enterprise Partnerships as well as City Regions) to be strengthened, so that both power and budgets are devolved to the most effective level for decision making. Regional government should be granted more individual power over licencing and franchising, and should have a bigger say in national decision making and long term spending choices. On the opposite end of the spectrum, local communities should be consulted on their priorities in the first instance. The report also argues that the entire process of bidding needs to be reformed, because the present system is antithetical to meaningful consultation. Taken together, this research aims to reflect Ed Miliband and Jon Cruddas' belief in 'people-focused public services', in which devolution, responsibility and contribution are honoured.

The need for a changed approach can be found in both the growing opposition to major transport projects like Crossrail or HS2 as well as the ever growing list of local transport needs of a smaller but no less necessary scale. Rightly or wrongly too many citizens and local decision-makers feel that their voices are not heard in Whitehall on matters of transport policy and that they exercise too little influence over what does and doesn't get built in their areas.

By shifting powers of policy making and even spending choices down from Whitehall to a regional level (either through devolved government as in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales or through Local Enterprise Partnerships or City Regions) and granting those authorities the right to renegotiate contracts, overhaul franchising processes and have both voice and agency in deciding spending decisions on a regional basis, a new deal on transport policy between people and government can be achieved. But this

approach of shifting power downwards is not limited to intra-government change alone. Rather this report also recommends that within regions and localities the voice of community interest is more strictly adhered to even to the extent of allowing greater rights of prioritisation or even veto by local communities. This should be achieved through a significant expansion in community engagement to secure development by consent of the people not fiat of the state.

But this approach is not without its weaknesses and problems, particularly in terms of the lack of clarity around Britain's current devolved arrangements. With the widespread rejection of elected regional government, attention has turned to Local Enterprise Partnerships and so-called City Regions. The idea being to allow existing political, community and business stakeholders to broker with one and other in regional bodies that may lack the democratic legitimacy of directly elected authorities, but do represent the wishes of key actors on a regional level.

Both the coalition government and the Labour party have spoken warmly and at length as to the value of LEPs and City Regions and it is likely that whoever forms the next government will seek to empower these emergent structures further. Existing local government actors seem split on their utility, however. Some from a unitary authority background warn of a return to layered duplication, whilst others more enthusiastically embrace the creation of a more formalised forum at regional level for key stakeholders.

This report does not seek to give extensive comment on the nature of democratic accountability for the emergent LEPs and City Regions. But it does make a clear case for an expansion of their powers, given the need to grant greater voice and agency to community interests in transport policymaking. This is because all interviewees and roundtable participants, whether pro- or anti- the growing power of LEPs and City Regions, felt that the trend towards them was inevitable and wished to help shape them as best they could.

Beyond the current lack of clarity around Britain's devolved arrangements, there is a danger of gridlock stemming from a surfeit of community consultation. Some experts warn that the scale and complexity of transport decision-making requires high levels of understanding and engagement, so it is naïve to hope that the general public can engage meaningfully on such matters. But this report argues that the pendulum has swung too far the other way at present and needs to be brought back towards the interests of the people. Too much consultation is currently too technical or ritualistic; designed to prioritise the avoidance of legal dispute rather than engaging with the hopes and fears of residents. Thus a shift towards the citizen and away from the technocrat is in order.

By combining a reformed process of community engagement with enhanced budgetary and decision-making powers for regional bodies, this report argues that both the diktat of remote central government and the gridlock of an unending consultation can be avoided. A middle path can be navigated in which citizens play a more active role in shaping transport priorities.

For at the heart of Ed Miliband's call for "people-powered public services" is the presumption that top-down models can only be transformed through the active participation of citizens and greater trust in local, not just national, representatives. Reforming principles of devolution, contribution and responsibility find their expression in actual policy choices of power and money in transport policy. For with its tangled mix of centralised power

and surface-deep engagement, this area provides a prime opportunity for a reforming Labour government to put its rhetoric into practice devolving power and trusting citizens. The result should be transport policy that more accurately reflects both the needs and wishes of Britons.

1 THE PROBLEM: MARKETS AND CENTRALISATION

Britain's transport policy is top-down in both form and function. Decisions are made in Whitehall that have sweeping effects upon regions and localities, but which engage desperately insufficiently with local government and communities. The result leaves our nation's transport policies with a series of skewed priorities – grande projets rather than smaller, more local investments. Central government leaves regional and local decision makers out in the cold, and the impact from ill-thought out competitive bidding programmes can be highly negative. The result is a lack of integration across the system, poorer service for passengers and great insecurity for both funders and transport providers.¹

This imbroglio partly explains the attraction of big ticket transport projects like HS2 and Crossrail. Regardless of the relative merits of these projects, the chance to push through one large scale planning and budgetary process holds greater appeal for national transport policy decision-makers than the difficulty if not tedium of countless smaller projects that have exponentially more difficult planning and budgetary processes. Far easier for the national decision-maker to succumb to the 'bright shiny object' of a single ticket project, than attempt to navigate the many swirling eddies of a far longer list of locally driven, smaller transport initiatives.²

Moreover, central government's major transport decisions can be influenced by major power brokers like big engineering firms, railway franchise holders or airport lobby groups.³

In contrast, the voices of local residents, community interest groups and even elected local politicians are too often drowned out. For example, despite a clear environmental and economic case for an expansion of electrification (often on rural branch lines), the Department for Transport has made little progress in this area.⁴

More radically, as the New Economics Foundation has noted, the £34bn originally earmarked for HS2 could be reallocated to:

“Transform rail infrastructure in the North and Midlands, creating new and faster east-West rail links, redeveloping stations and electrifying regional rail lines... overhaul the East and West coast mainlines, increasing the speed, capacity and reliability of North-South rail travel with less environmental damage than HS2... (and) upgrade mass transport in Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool, including investments in large light rail schemes and bus networks.”

This would still allow for a two billion pound expenditure “to make cities outside of London better for cycling and walking, creating a boom in low-carbon, healthy transport in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bradford and Liverpool.”⁵

Regardless of the relative popularity of the HS2 scheme, NEF’s research made a persuasive case as to the advantages of an alternative.

When transport policy is concerned, however, Whitehall’s mantra is “central government knows best”. This attitude is deeply out of synch with the direction of modern British society, economics and politics. Whereas citizen empowerment, the devolution of power and achieving long-term value for money are the hallmarks of smart citizens, forward-thinking companies and in-touch politicians, Whitehall’s approach to transport too often seems antithetical to these values.

Positive examples of new trends can be found from organisations like the Taxpayers’ Alliance, 38 Degrees and the National Trust, who all put a high premium on listening to the voices of their members. Likewise companies like Unilever and Tidal Lagoon Power go to great lengths to engage with both customers and workforce in shaping their business plans. Finally, politicians from the Conservative party’s David Willetts to Labour’s Jon Cruddas have carved out important intellectual spaces for agendas prioritising spending to prevent problems in the long term rather than ameliorate problems in the short term.

LEPS AND CITY REGIONS

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were the coalition government’s successor to New Labour’s Regional Development Authorities (RDAs). This reorganisation was hailed by the coalition’s own business secretary Vince Cable as “Maoist and chaotic”. LEPs were meant to establish plans for infrastructure and business development but too often have taken an insufficiently long-term or strategic approach. Stakeholders said in interviews that, despite a genuine effort on the part of central government to empower LEPs, in practice government devolution “feels more imagined than real ... we still have to provide details of local schemes to Whitehall civil servants than be trusted”.⁶ This shift from regional to local was a source of concern for transport planners too: “The loss of regional plans leaves a gap ... [and] the lack of a statutory basis for regional planning means a lack of a duty to create a plan”. This lack of legal necessity underpinning planning can undermine serious engagement by decision-makers and stakeholders alike.

There was more positive reaction to the promise of City Regions – originally the greater metropolitan areas of Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool but now being expanded by the coalition’s 2012 Combined Authority initiative – as the successor tier of devolved regional authority in the wake of the widespread failure of devolved regional assembly and direct mayor initiatives. Several stakeholders cited the advantages of a regional decision-making process, including a greater degree of flexibility, more involvement with local partners and a greater chance of successfully integrating local decision-makers into transport policymaking. The Sheffield city region was specifically praised: “Out with silos and ringfenced spending ... the private sector struggles to understand why you would ringfence transport from flood defence for instance.” Thus a “single pot (combining infrastructure monies into a single budget pool) change is hugely welcomed”, as joined-up funds for disbursement at a regional level make more sense to regional politicians and business leaders. However, there

is concern that too many “funding decisions remain national”.

In the future, interviewees agreed that the regional level was most appropriate for budget holding and decision making, with positive implications for serious engagement, as with real power, greater participation by key players is likely to occur. National government can also incentivise regions to carry out city region policy making based on LEPs. In practice, this would likely require a change to the geographic boundaries of LEPs to align them with that of city regions – marking a return in practice to the last Labour government’s Regional Development Agency model. This would encompass binding plans made on a statutory basis covering a host of infrastructure targets, including transport and housing. In this fashion, interviewees hoped local authorities would then be encouraged to better reflect the needs of city regions as a whole.

This does not however address the question of democratic legitimacy. In the absence of elected regional oversight this will remain a problem but could be mitigated in part through an expansion of councillor’s representation and rights on LEPs and City Region boards.

Finally, such a realignment would allow for the creation of larger, longer-term strategic growth plans providing an opportunity to link transport with other developments that are in the pipeline. As one interviewee said, the key question from government is often: “How fast can you deliver things?” This model would, in the opinion of a number of interviewees, improve the chances of providing better value-for-money transport spending, more integrated infrastructure plans and faster delivery all at the same time.⁷

One of the biggest victims of the top-down approach is local government. Councils frequently find themselves frozen out, with Department of Transport decisions being made in ignorance of their preferences. Local authorities lack both the political power and the budgetary remit to push back against central decision makers, and thus find themselves unwilling accomplices to unwieldy transport policies that they themselves may deeply disagree with.

Central to the cause of this problem is the way in which spending allocations are shaped by the bidding process. Regional authorities compete with one another for transport funds, which in practice requires local government to craft their transport plans in accordance with what they think maximises their chance of receiving central government funding, rather than pursuing their own locally-generated priorities. This means that local government is not truly in charge of meeting their local transport needs, as their spending allocations are shaped by the bidding process.⁸

The impact on community engagement is just as damning. Bidding lays bare the lie that consultation processes are genuinely intended to grant citizens a voice. Local authorities are caught upon the horns of the bidding dilemma: on the one hand, they could consult in advance of bidding, alter their bids as a result of community feedback, and risk failing to meet the stringent national criteria that bidding represents. Or, on the other hand, consultation can occur after a successful bid, in which case the scope for meaningful deviation from the pre-agreed plans is so limited as to be meaningless.⁹ Caught up in this dilemma, genuine community engagement dies.

The current bidding process also undermines attempts to integrate transport policy between localities and regions. Instead of being incentivised to cooperate, too many local transport decision-makers feel the need to compete with one another for scarce funding from the centre as they scramble to ensure their potholes get fixed in preference to a neighbouring authorities’

needs. Indeed, one interviewee warned of the increasing danger of local decision-makers being forced to “game the system” by switching funds previously designated for strategic purposes, such as new bridge crossings, to immediate needs, like road repair. As a consequence, cross-regional links can suffer as local authorities focus only on the short term needs of their areas.¹⁰

Local government also suffers from a lack of requisite powers to properly manage transport policy within their area, as private sector outsourcing has placed some key levers outside the public grasp. For example, tendered bus contracts that outlive the length of elected politicians’ terms of office seriously inhibit the ability of councils to act on issues as basic as routes and fares.¹¹ This has adverse effects not just for passengers who rely on these services, but for local democracy itself. If a citizen has no choice over the bus company on which they depend, and their council cannot exercise any control over the bus company, then both citizens and politicians alike are stripped of their agency.

This is not to say that the answer lies either in tying all contracts to council terms or bringing all transport franchises into public ownership. The former would discourage long-term investment, whilst the latter would be precisely the kind of top-down, ‘one size fits all’ approach that has already been seen to fail (see p.12 for more on a future alternative). Nonetheless, there is a real need for there to be a greater match between the titular responsibilities of local government and the political power and financial means to make those words a reality. A greater level of democracy in transport policy would challenge Whitehall’s concentration of power and the market’s free reign.

The wider rationale for this can be found in the Labour party’s post-election defeat internal debate about the nature of the 1997-2010 government in policy terms with concerns centring on the centralising, technocratic and market-focused nature of that government’s policies. With a growing appreciation for the public value of public transport, a concern about private monopolies that represent predatory capitalism and a desire to empower citizens rather than dictate, there is the chance for a fresh approach to Labour thinking. At a very practical level, involving citizens more closely in decisions about what gets built, where and what cost will strengthen local support for a transport projects and help citizens share responsibility for the trade-offs between transport choices that involvement in decision making requires.

HS2: THE PROBLEM IN PRACTICE

Whether interviewees were pro- or anti-HS2 in principle, their complaints about it in practice were notably similar. One major transport decision maker said that the HS2 proposal had not consulted early enough, saying that the impact was “too limited ... and despite HS2 having a good process around local connectivity and how stations will develop, some of the big decisions were made outside of the (regional) decision making forums.” Another interviewee cited HS2’s consultation problems in terms of “the expense of consultation” saying that “authorities are under pressure to adhere to rules - rather than do good consultation - in an attempt to avoid judicial review.”

In the case of HS2, this led to a minimalist approach to consultation in which not enough people were involved early enough in the process. Interviewees again cited the importance of agency in consultation, with one senior decision maker saying: “There’s no point in consulting if you’re not going to change your plans”. They pointed to “the small example in HS2 in route change. But the stage that really matters is earlier than that; the different ways you could serve the north”. This interviewee added that if government at all levels was “genuinely looking at the options for alternatives to HS2” they would consider the question of how to “achieve the same outcomes through enhancing existing lines. The different routing options for serving the north.” They also told the Fabians that while this work was done, and a good level of consultation amongst transportation experts was conducted, it was never subject to public debate.¹²

2 THE SOLUTION: PEOPLE AND DEVOLUTION

Restoring democratic oversight, achieving meaningful community engagement and delivering smarter transport policy requires a radical overhaul of the existing model of top-down central government, as well as competitive bidding. From councillors to administrators to civil society groups and independent experts, the answers given are remarkably similar: to expand democracy and regulate the market.

Longer-term bidding

Turning first to local authority bidding, interviewees generally supported a shift from highly detailed and specific short-term grant opportunities to longer-term, purpose-led larger bids. A number of interviewees called for the reform of local authority bidding to be based around the ultimate purpose of transport policy rather than the specifics of a short-term project. In practice, this would mean a move towards a model whereby the local authority consults on and bids for the overall transport needs of an area. Having won a bid, it then disperses funds for the agreed purpose. Take the example of an area's road needs: instead of bidding for a year's worth of maintenance monies, the region could work out the balance between motorway expansion, repair costs and mass transit alternatives on a combined rather than ad hoc basis.

Under such an approach, regions would be able to consult first on their transport needs, bid for the release of funds needed to address them over a long period of time and plan related infrastructure investments with greater certainty and connectivity than is currently the case. The implications for shifting budgets from short termism to actual strategic investment are dramatic and a logical continuation of 'single pot' infrastructure spending allocations called for by such experts as the Heseltine No Stone Unturned growth review which received support from interviewees as well as the TUC.

Community consultation

The knock-on effect of this change would immediately be seen in how local authorities then go about consulting communities. In the place of largely decorative consultation efforts, they could engage with citizens in order to establish the actual needs of an area. From town hall meetings with developers and experts to doorstep discussions with residents (to break out of 'the usual suspects' problem of repeat attendees at consultation events) innovative developers are placing a greater premium on community engagement.¹³

Of course, greater participation can also lend greater legitimacy to the difficult decisions that are an inevitable part of enacting transport policy, gaining more popular support for transport projects.¹⁴

Local authorities that engage with citizens in a more meaningful fashion and can prove that they have shaped and amended their plans as a result of listening to local people should be rewarded in the bidding process above those that failed to do so.

EVALUATING TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

In any transport planning process, stiff competition between different priorities is inevitable. Interviewees broadly agreed that the main criteria for new projects included: private sector growth, employment creation, gross value added (GVA) and productivity. In addition, some interviewees cited indicators such as the size of a project's carbon footprint, or avoiding spending "that compounds multiple deprivation". However, these criteria were disputed by some of the interviewees who said: "Fundamentally it's the value added and the impact on jobs" that matters, because "other means are too complex and fundamentally needs to be far simpler, bigger".

Critically, none of the interviewees cited community engagement or specific local needs identified through consultation as a hallmark of quality in the current system. There was agreement, however, that any future reform would have to promote consultation as a factor in policy to a greater extent than is currently the case.¹⁵

Rebalancing responsibility

Having considered the changes necessary in terms of local authority bidding and community engagement, it is also necessary to consider a rebalancing of power and budgetary responsibility between national, regional and local government. The key to this is the proper use of subsidiarity. Properly understood, subsidiarity is the devolution of power to the lowest appropriate level. 'Appropriate' is a crucial qualifier in transport policy, as it will often result in devolution to the regional rather than local authority level in order to ensure the integration of services. Passengers often journey between authorities but within regions. This simple reality alone helps explain why power is best vested at that level.¹⁶ So as to ensure that councillors are not sidelined in such a system, local authority representation at regional level must be guaranteed.

However, for devolution of power to be successful, budgets must be devolved as well. Regional authorities must control the allocated funds for their areas so that they can ensure proper democratic accountability. It would manifest in the form of central government granting regions the ability to establish Transport for London-style regional transport authorities accountable to citizens and local decision makers rather than Whitehall. The implications for franchising decisions, capital investment plans and bidding are profound and would likely necessitate a shift in transport spending priorities as a result (see chapter three p.16).

But this devolution of power and money should be conditional on regions consulting their citizens in a truly meaningful fashion on the long-term

transport needs of their area. In other words, central government's role should be reversed from that of enforcing top-down diktat to policing proper meaningful consultation.

THE MANCHESTER MODEL

The city of Manchester is a showcase for both the problems of the current over-centralised transport decision-making model, as well as the potential rewards of a more devolved approach. On the one hand, Manchester demonstrates the tension resulting from short-termist bidding and central government's over-concentration of power, with the city struggling to balance building economic growth and maintaining basic infrastructure. Naturally there should be "a fifty-fifty split between the two" but a combination of funding cuts and the bidding system has resulted in Manchester (and other cities in a similar situation) attempting to "game the system a bit" and predict where bids will be in future to preserve core funding for those in anticipation of bids. As one interviewee put it: "The work that residents care about in the wards are never big enough or attractive enough to get DfT money."

On the other hand, Manchester demonstrates what is possible when a more innovative approach to consultation and the shaping of transport spending plans is pursued. Decision-makers acknowledge that this varies "across different parts of the transport portfolio" but cited "the change in the cycling lobby for example to the point where we can now work very effectively with residents and campaign groups in that sector". As was the case also with disability groups, Manchester's decision makers improved their engagement directly with residents through public meetings, leaflets (but of high quality design and material) and a series of workshops with different interest groups. Key to their approach were multiple efforts and multiple contacts: "Residents were probably pleasantly surprised by how much the scheme changed as a result of their process", demonstrating the value of the fundamental truth that any consultation process that seeks to grant voice to a community is only as strong as its ability to grant agency as well.¹⁷

Regional governments should be granted the power to set the terms of private contracting and revisit those terms in accordance with the wishes of citizens. From bus routes to fares, they must have the ability to actively shape not just the goals, but the delivery mechanisms for transport policies.¹⁸ Interviewees from all over Britain craved the powers of a Transport for London-type structure.¹⁹ Independent experts have also cited other models such as Lothian region's publicly owned transport model, which is operated at arm's length by a private company.²⁰

The means by which this might be achieved range from the incremental to the truly radical. The slowest way of achieving this would be to allow the buy-back of transport franchises as they become available. Alternatively, services could be returned to public control through legislation, citing the nationalisation precedents in UK law.

In all instances, the ability of local decision-makers to bring the co-ordination and running of transportation within a single authority across a whole region (as is the case with Transport for London) is essential. The body that runs it need not necessarily be publically owned but must be publically accountable, not just in terms of political oversight, but with user partici-

pation in its decision-making processes at all levels.

The final change to the decision-making structure is the role of shared power between central and regional government. To ensure integration between regions and the delivery of national strategic transport needs, the Department of Transport should help facilitate co-operation between the regions. Instead of directly imposing national strategic needs upon regions, a better model would see them facilitate discussion between regions about interregional needs. Sharing decision-making power for national transport appropriations would mean that greater integration can be achieved.

On an institutional level, a national transport strategy board comprised of the regional transport leads as well as the secretary of state is needed to put the above into practice. But again, the Department of Transport's role would shift towards composing national transport strategy by means of co-determination. This differs from existing advisory structures, such as devolved government contact and local government liaison, in that instead of being advisory, it would be sovereign. Within such a model, the representatives of regional government and local authorities would have actual decision-making powers instead of their current consultee status with the Department for Transport.²¹

The above measures would change national transport strategy itself, with implications for our nation's transport priorities.

REFORMING RURAL TRANSPORT

For decades governments of all colours have de-prioritised rural transport infrastructure. As a result, rural public transport services often lack integration with the larger rail network, branch lines all too often still lack electrification and fares are prohibitively high for many on lower incomes.

A more suitable rural rail network would link communities to centres of employment and strengthen regional economies, curtailing the current brain drain of young talent from countryside to city. As the pressure group Labour Coast and Country told the Fabians, delivering an integrated transport system through devolution would allow councils and regional authorities to work together to promote connections between existing transport hubs and areas with high population density. This should be combined with an expansion of the light rail network, particularly in coastal communities that are poorly served by existing transport networks. Labour Coast and Country also argued that greater funding should be made available to community and cooperative groups providing transport services in rural or isolated areas. Finally, a specific rural transport pledge should be made committing the next government to a dramatic increase in connectivity for rural regions.²²

But there must not be an exclusive focus on rail alone. For many rural communities, buses are the main arteries of traffic flow. The current franchising model of delegating many rural bus services to private companies has resulted all too often in higher prices and worse customer service. Thus the rural experience is yet another reason why this model must be radically reformed.

3

CONCLUSION: CHANGING PRIORITIES

At the heart of this report is a simple challenge: should we build what bureaucrats want, or what citizens need? By shifting decision making from a heavy national bias to a shared basis, devolving both powers and budgets and engaging in meaningful community consultation Britain's transport priorities can move from what few may want, to what many more may need.

There are limitations with this approach: granting agency to localities will still require trade-offs between competing needs and communities. Support for spending choices will not be unanimous simply because consultation has been improved and some citizens will always ask for more than can be provided. However, support for the choices that are made should be greater with opposition to them reduced. As one major developer of a successful infrastructure project aptly said: "Our job was not to eliminate the noise of opposition but to reduce the volume to a manageable level."²³ But should the volume not be reduced to "a manageable level" than the project should not proceed. The decision on where the difference lies between acceptable and unacceptable levels of opposition to schemes necessitate a continued role for executive decision making, albeit one with more meaningful process.

Furthermore, the competing claims of environmental and economic, or local versus national needs will continue to create tensions for decision-makers to deal with, but they will be able to think in a more long-term and strategic fashion. Governments can set the criteria by which long-term funding will be released and regions can bid for those monies within that framework. That funding must proceed until such a time as a new long term bid is required. At that stage, should a different government wish to shift its preferences it can do so, but again within a long-term framework.

By listening to individual citizens, community groups and sub-national politicians, the priorities that are likely to emerge may very well shift from a small number of large-scale transport projects like HS2, to a large number of small and medium sized projects. For example, were regions and localities to be properly empowered, and were they to consult with passengers, branch line expansion, rural line electrification and better bus-to-rail integration would likely become the driving priorities for many transport policymakers. This is not to say that a national scheme like HS2 would never come to pass, but it would necessitate a markedly different approach to HS2 to secure the necessary support outside Whitehall. For instance, a national high speed rail project in the context of this model would likely have to meet the following criteria: regional growth (not just London centric growth); routing that maximises integration (likely using Heathrow as at least one airport hub); routing that maximises the number of regions having a genuine stake in the

project, such as a willingness to alter routes, station plans and perhaps even speeds as a result of consultation feedback; passenger affordability (prohibitively expensive ticket prices would be ruled out to encourage positive feedback during consultation) and finally the added value of the project would have to be significant enough to bear comparison with similarly-priced smaller projects.

This approach would also have radical implications for where projects are planned. If other regions had the institutional advantages of a Transport for London style body, they would be better placed to attract investment and deliver their own major transport projects. As a result, the serious imbalance in British transport funding that results in London receiving more than twice as much money as the entire north west can be redressed.²⁴

Taken together, a shift in power and money from Whitehall to regions, with local authorities listening in turn to the wishes of communities in shaping their transport spending, can put into practice the idea of “people powered public services”. It will make real the rhetoric of devolution, contribution and responsibility for a more long-term, locally supported transport network.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For detailed analysis of these problems see the work of Professor David Begg via <http://www.transporttimes.co.uk/about-us.php>
- 2 A point of general agreement between transport policy experts from Dr Christian Wolmar <http://www.christianwolmar.co.uk/> to Professor Begg <http://www.transporttimes.co.uk/about-us.php> as well as Fabian interviewees and roundtable participants
- 3 An illustrative example of wide ranging influence across UK infrastructure is the engineering and construction conglomerate Amec whose lobbying influence on UK public spending is notable <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/company-profiles/influence-lobbying>
- 4 See RailFuture's case for electrification briefing paper http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=0CEEQFjAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.railfuture.org.uk%2Fwiki-download_file.php%3FfileId%3D125&ei=TUT2U_S0IOHmyQOyhYLwBA&usq=AFQjCNFGzxp0D2hpg5gl9Lye1MD4ca5MA&sig2=VtYoVjaMmMym6DyNxZo9g&bvm=bv.73373277,d.bGQ
- 5 See the New Economics Foundation's 'HS2: the best we can do?' <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/high-speed-2-the-best-we-can-do>
- 6 See page 2 for an explanation of the Fabian Society's roundtables and interviews
- 7 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 8 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 9 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 10 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 11 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 12 Fabian Society roundtable participants and interviewees
- 13 For more on how consultation processes can be reformed see 'The Politics of Rebuilding Britain' published by the Fabian Society
- 14 For a positive example of how consultation can grant both voice and agency see <http://www.tidallagoonswanseabay.com/consultation-process.aspx>
- 15 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 16 For more on the importance of city regions as the right level of transport policy decision-making across a broader range of areas and with more budgetary control see the Labour Party's Policy Review: Empowering communities to improve transport http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/TRANSPORT_-_EMPOWERING_COMMUNITIES.pdf
- 17 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 18 For more on the current problems of bus franchising see IPPR's 'Greasing the wheels' report <http://www.ippr.org/publications/greasing-the-wheels-getting-our-bus-and-rail-markets-on-the-move>
- 19 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 20 See Edinburgh Council's Transport: 2030 http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/info/20171/council-wide_services/341/transport_policy
- 21 See the House of Commons Transport Select Committee's ongoing complaints in this area <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmtran/1140/114010.htm>

- 22 Submission from 'Labour Coast & Country'
- 23 Fabian Society roundtable participant or interviewee
- 24 See the House of Commons Transport Select Committee briefing paper on regional differences in transport spending http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/transport/Scrutiny%20Unit%20Note%20-%20regional%20transport%20spending%20_2_.pdf

MORE THAN PASSENGERS |

TRANSPORT, COMMUNITY AND POWER

Marcus Roberts

Britain's transport policymaking is excessively centralised and cuts out local concerns. *More Than Passengers* is an exploration of devolution, contribution and responsibility in practical terms with relation to our nation's transport needs.

The need for a changed approach can be found in both the growing opposition to major transport projects like Crossrail or HS2 as well as the ever growing list of local transport needs of a smaller but no less necessary scale. Rightly or wrongly too many citizens and local decision-makers feel that their voices are not heard in Whitehall on matters of transport policy and that they exercise too little influence over what does and doesn't get built in their areas.

By shifting powers of policy making and even spending choices down from Whitehall to a regional level and granting those authorities the right to renegotiate contracts, overhaul franchising processes and have both voice and agency in deciding spending decisions on a regional basis, a new deal on transport policy between people and government can be achieved