

The view from Europe

Many in Europe may regard our creaking transport system with sympathy, says **Lucy Ahad**, but we have plenty to learn from the continent's model of investment, information and technology



Despite increased investment, Network Rail is aiming to reach pre-Hatfield punctuality levels only by 2009

To our travel-savvy continental neighbours, Britain's train delays, eye-wateringly expensive fares, overcrowded motorways and inner city jams are like a trip back in time. But while the chaotic state of our transport network might seem an odd but touching eccentricity to visitors, to millions of UK commuters it's a daily source of misery, time-wasting – and puzzlement.

Quite why Britain, the world's fourth-largest economy, does not have a transport network to match is not readily explained in terms of geography. Britain doesn't face the same challenges of distance, climate and topography as other European countries like France or Scandinavia. Other things being equal, Britons have less distance to travel; yet still they spend significantly longer commuting to work every day than their European counterparts – 45 minutes each way on average, ten minutes more than the French and twice as much as Italians.

There's no need to exaggerate the problem: the figures speak for themselves. Trains on the UK's Virgin West Coast line were delayed by an average of seven minutes each in 2003, compared to just 26 seconds for the high-tech bullet trains on the Tokyo-Osaka commuter line in Japan.

France's new high-speed train link takes passengers between the country's two economic hubs of Paris and Marseille, 758km apart, in not much more than three hours – while passengers between Edinburgh and London travel the more modest 530 km in four-and-a-half hours. Nor do we pay less for as much: recent research by the Liberal Democrats shows that £10 will take a passenger only 25 miles on the UK railway network on average – compared to a staggering 175 miles in Italy.

Unsurprisingly, the unreliability and expense of public transport have increased the appeal of private cars – creating logjams on an overburdened road network, adding to emissions of CO₂ and air pollutants, and showing us up still further against our greener and more efficient neighbours in Europe. Road congestion is worse in the UK than anywhere else in the EU. Congestion causes average delays of more than an hour on a quarter of Britain's major roads, against only 4.5 per cent of roads in France, and 7.5 per cent in Germany.

To many, unreliability, inefficiency and overcrowding are a straightforward consequence of decades of under-investment in transport across the board. A 2001 report from the Commis-

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sion for Integrated Transport (CfIT), which provides ‘blue skies thinking’ to the government on policy, concluded that Britain's transport system had been “half-starved of investment for nearly half a century”.

It points out that between 1990 and 1995 France invested nearly 50 per cent more per person into transport infrastructure than Britain, while Germany invested two thirds more – despite the far superior infrastructure that both countries already enjoyed.

This exemplifies the historical ground that Britain now has to make up. The result: the user pays more at the point of service than anywhere else in the rest of Europe, where the taxpayer bears more of the cost; yet receives a poorer service. Increase investment, the argument goes, and the transport system will take care of itself.

Yet many argue that the problem lies in deeper structural and management problems that make extra investment ineffective. Under pressure from the public, the government has significantly increased investment in transport since the Hatfield crash, and moved transport up the priority list next to schools and hospitals.

Although there have been improvements, notably a welcome increase in punctuality in 2004, these have been modest: nearly one in every five trains in Britain still runs late, and Network Rail, the not-for-profit company created to run the railways after Railtrack's demise in 2001, is only aiming to reach pre-Hatfield punctuality levels by 2009.

France's slick SNCF rail network, critics stress pointedly, is not split into 26 private train operating companies (TOCs) with dividends to pay and profits to make, operating under complex franchise arrangements, and regulated by a dizzying array of organisations and watchdogs.

The apparent inability of Network Rail and TOCs to deliver improved train services has led to growing calls to renationalise the railways. Delegates at last year's Labour Party conference voted overwhelmingly in favour of “resolving the fragmented structure of the industry by introducing an integrated, accountable and publicly owned railway”.

The Green Party included a pledge for renationalisation in its 2005 election manifesto. And a recent report from the Catalyst think tank makes a convincing case that not only could Britain afford the one-off costs entailed, it would bring almost immediate savings – to the tune of £500m a

year. In fact, it is unlikely either that any single factor is to blame, or that there is one clear-cut solution.

“The extra investment ploughed into the transport network in recent years is merely clearing a backlog of decades of under-funding,” says Dr Steve Toole, transport advisor to the Liberal Democrats. “We should gradually start to see modest year-on-year improvements, but the big question still to be resolved is just how deeply the public sector should be involved in running the system.”

Ironically, although Europe shows up our shortcomings most cruelly, it could also provide some of the benchmarks and incentives to improve it. Francesco Grillo, director of the Italian think tank Vision, believes that smarter use of technology and road-pricing systems could help the UK, and especially the congested South East, to overcome some of the more formidable problems that it faces compared to its less population-dense neighbours. It could also stand to learn from others.

“If you combine the experiences of 25 countries, many of which – like Estonia – have devised original solutions to transport challenges, the potential is enormous,” Grillo argues. “Brussels is wary of producing country rankings; but better knowledge-management could help identify critical situations and share best practice.”

“What does Britain get out of Europe anyway?” is the question that most frustrates pro-European politicians. “Better roads, trains and buses,” would be a snappy reply – and even the *Sun* would be hard put to argue against European improvement of Britain's roads and railways.

The EU has already played a part in raising the bar in UK transport standards: a measure pushed through by the European parliament last month means that train companies across the EU, like airlines before them, will now have to compensate customers in cash for delays.

By promoting the sharing of information and technology, and creating ‘peer pressure’ through comparisons and minimum targets, Europe could yet play a part in dragging Britain up to meet transport standards on which it currently falls sorely short.

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