



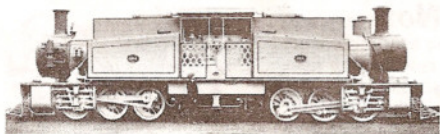
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YES, IT'S
ELECTION FEVER!

SIGNAL FAILURES



PROBLEMS with a new “busway” in Cambridgeshire haven’t dented the government’s enthusiasm for expensive bus infrastructure.

When Alistair Darling was transport secretary, he said “bus-based solutions” often gave more than rail schemes did “for the same money with more flexibility and quicker results”. He blocked light-rail schemes around England (*Eyes passim*) because costs had risen, wasting more than £200m already spent on preparations. When Cambridgeshire council proposed turning the disused St Ives railway into a busway, the government agreed to pay the lion’s share, before the public inquiry was held in 2004.

However, busways are concrete tracks where buses, confined by kerbs, can’t pass a broken-down bus. Emergency vehicles can’t use busways, which need a parallel “maintenance track”. And St Ives is 18 miles from Cambridge, so the scheme (including a short busway on an old railway south of the city) looked expensive at £86m in 2004. In

Wales, rebuilding the disused 18-mile Ebbw Vale railway for trains cost about £30m.

Nor has Cambridgeshire’s busway brought quick results. The infrastructure is flawed and nobody can say when it will open (postponed from January 2009). On 29 March transport secretary Andrew Adonis said the cost could be £140m to £145m and the government had “no intention” of contributing more than £92.5m. How will the rest be covered? The council anticipated payments from future housing developments along the route but local buses to Cambridge won’t have the same cachet as new rail stations would, especially if St Ives had some trains to London.

Labour’s dogma is unshaken. Last month it awarded £80m for an £89m seven-mile busway between Dunstable and Luton which will destroy a railway. And Gosport (population: 76,000) won’t be able to return to the rail network because Hampshire council is building a busway over the railway to Fareham, with £20m of government cash for the first three miles.

A GOVERNMENT device to keep rail schemes within budget could actually make them dearer, according to HS2 Ltd, the government company advising on a future high-speed line.

HS2L says railways cost more to build in

Britain than overseas because of excessive complication (see last *Eye*). It also says that “optimism bias”, a margin added to cost estimates to cover unpredicted rises, potentially creates “self-fulfilling project price inflation”. In other words, when higher costs have been budgeted for, there’s no great pressure to keep construction within the original estimates.

Government rules on “optimism bias” inflate rail schemes by 40 to 57 percent – helping ministers to reject some as unaffordable. For road schemes, optimism bias is just 15 to 32 percent despite whopping cost rises on many (eg 127 percent on the A14 Cambridge-Huntingdon improvement even before construction starts).

The optimism-bias rates for rail appear justified by cost rises and contractual disputes at Edinburgh’s tram scheme, but the nub of those problems is Britain’s policy of moving underground utilities from the path of every new tramway. It’s hard to predict exactly what’s under the streets: one contractor tasked with moving 17 miles of cables and pipes in Edinburgh actually shifted 25 miles.

That blanket policy doesn’t apply to road schemes and bus lanes. And where utilities are moved for road schemes, councils pay a smaller share of the costs than they would if the utilities were moved for tramways.

‘Dr B Ching’