

Local Residents' Report to the LCC Scrutiny Board

Appendix C

Article Written by George Monbiot. Appeared in "The Guardian" dated 22 August 2018

See sections that we have highlighted in red/ underlined

"Decisions about the Oxford-Cambridge expressway, and the vast conurbation it will create, are made behind closed doors"

Where democracy counts most, it is nowhere to be seen. The decisions that shape the life of a nation are taken behind our backs. With occasional exceptions, public choice is reserved for trivia. The most consequential choices, as they are the longest lasting, arguably involve major infrastructure. The number of disasters in this field is remarkable. A classic paper by the economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg, *Survival of the Unfittest*, explains that there is an innate tendency on the part of policymakers to choose the worst possible projects, as a result of the lock-in of fixed ideas at an early stage. This is caused, his evidence shows, not by accidental error or even delusional optimism, but by "strategic misrepresentation". Advisers become advocates, and advocates become hucksters boosting their favoured projects.

The schemes that look best on paper, and therefore are most likely to be adopted, are those that have been scrutinised the least. Democratic debate would reveal their flaws. This is why planners who wish to leave their mark treat it as a threat. To the megalomaniacs who draw lines on maps, public opinion is like landscape features: it must be cleared out of the way.

A striking example is the government's plan for an Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway. A decision to which we have not been party, which will irrevocably change the region it affects, is imminent. The new road, says the plan, will support the construction of a million homes.

To give you some sense of the scale of this scheme, consider that Oxfordshire will have to provide 300,000 of them. It currently contains 280,000 homes. In 30 years, if this scheme goes ahead, the county must build as many new houses, and the infrastructure, public services and businesses required to support them, as have been built in the past 1,000. A million new homes amounts, in effect, to an Oxford-Cambridge conurbation.

But none of this is up for debate. By the time we are asked for our opinion, there will be little left to discuss but the colour of the road signs. The questions that count, such as whether the new infrastructure should be built, or even where it should be built, will have been made without us.

The justification for this scheme is not transport or housing as an end in itself. Its objective, according to the National Infrastructure Commission, is to enable the region "to maximise its economic potential". Without this scheme, the commission insists, Oxford and Cambridge and the region between them "will be left behind, damaging the UK's global competitiveness".

This reasoning, you might hope, would prompt some major questions. Is continued growth, in one of the wealthiest regions of the world, desirable? If it is desirable, does it outweigh the acceleration of climate breakdown the scheme will cause? When air pollution already exceeds legal limits, are new roads and their associated infrastructure either appropriate

or safe? And are we really engaged in a race with other nations, in which being “left behind” is something to be feared?

But these questions are not just closed to debate. They are not even recognised as questions. The megalomaniacs with their pencils, the rulers with their rulers, assume that their unexamined premises are shared by everyone.

All the tendencies Flyvbjerg warned against are evident. Instead of asking “Do we need this scheme?”, the government agency Highways England, which is supposed to offer objective advice, opens its webpage with the heading “Why we need this scheme”. It claims, against the evidence, that the expressway will enhance the “attractiveness of the region” and “provide a healthy, natural environment, reducing congestion”. It is the kind of propaganda you would expect in a totalitarian state.

The National Infrastructure Commission, which also advises the government, ignores some issues altogether, such as how water for another million homes will be provided in a region where demand already exceeds supply. It makes glancing reference to another massive problem: the extra traffic the new road links will generate will exacerbate congestion on existing roads. Its answer? Expand them as well.

A recent study by the Campaign to Protect Rural England shows that, far from relieving congestion, new road schemes create new traffic – a tendency first noted in 1925 and ignored by transport planners ever since. But the treadmill must keep turning. The bypasses must be bypassed with new bypasses, new jobs must be created to match the new housing, and new housing must be built to match the new jobs. Growth must continue, until it destroys everything it claims to enhance.

To this end, on 26 July the housing minister, Kit Malthouse, wrote to local authorities in the region, insisting that they submit proposals for building the million homes by 14 September. In seven weeks, during the parliamentary recess and the school holidays, they must propose new cities, some of which should house 150,000 people.

The government says it will announce which of three possible corridors for the expressway it will choose by the end of this summer. The choice will be made by the transport secretary alone, after which public consultation will commence. But once the corridor has been chosen, only the trivial issues remain.

As the infrastructure commission’s report makes clear, there is really only one option for the route the new road can take. It might be possible for objectors to argue that the course of the road should be shifted by 100 metres here or there, but all the significant questions will be beyond the scope of the inquiry.

By imposing this decision, the government ignores its legal obligations. It has failed to conduct a strategic environmental assessment before the corridor decision is made, as the law insists. **Under the Aarhus convention, public participation must begin while “all options are open”.** But neither people nor law can be allowed to disrupt a grand design.

This is not democracy. This is not even a semblance of democracy. Yet the consequences of such decisions will be greater than almost any others that are made, because they are irreversible. The bigger the question, the less we are asked.