

No Way to Treat a Capital City

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A common feature of historic and modern cities throughout continental Europe is a high quality public transport system. For cities the size of Edinburgh some type of light rail system forms a key element of the public transport offering. Indeed around 250 European towns and cities have tramway systems and more are being added each year with the latest city to build a new era tramway being Florence. It is a straightforward element of transport planning that once the numbers of people carried on key corridors exceed critical numbers then light rail becomes the most efficient option.

Edinburgh is a world renowned city and we are fortunate indeed that earlier generations created a capital city of which we can be so proud. Quite apart from its obvious attractions to locals and visitors, it has a much greater value to Scotland as a whole: it is the engine room of the Scottish economy. Every year Edinburgh pumps £100 million pounds more into government coffers than it receives in return.

So you would imagine that our political leaders would wish to nurture and protect this vital asset. Sadly when it comes to transport investment this does not appear to be the case. The original tram system was allowed to run down and was closed entirely in 1956. On top of that the Beeching era saw the almost complete decimation of the suburban rail network. Gradually we are seeing some elements of this being rebuilt and it is good news indeed to see the official start of work on the railway to Midlothian and the Borders.

However, to compete in the modern world and to face up to the challenges of climate change and ever depleting oil supplies we need to do much more than this; we need an efficient, integrated and decarbonised public transport system. The Edinburgh tram system is the first key step towards providing this for the city; it will create the vital spine through the heart of the city. It will integrate with the bus network and provide interchange with heavy rail trains at three stations. We are fortunate to have a fleet of modern buses that will themselves form a key element of the new network but anyone who contends that buses alone will serve our future needs simply does not understand transport systems and their role in society.

The wider value to a city of an efficient public transport system is much more than the initial cost of construction. Our neighbours in continental Europe well understand this and yet our politicians seek to cap government investment in the Edinburgh trams at £500m. Not only does this fail to recognise the vital contribution that Edinburgh makes to Scotland, it is also at odds with expenditure on other transport projects. Nowhere is this better illustrated than with the M74 extension in Glasgow. Here we have 5 miles of motorway that was initially approved at under £250m, it is still under construction and the estimated cost has now risen to approaching £700m. And yet I hear no calls for this sum to be capped or perhaps the road not even completed. Scotland has enacted leading edge climate change legislation but this is not being supported by appropriate investment in our transport infrastructure. Our future investment priorities must be in sustainable transport modes and government should support authorities such as Edinburgh who are seeking to make the right choices.

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