



CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE LEVELS MOTORWAY

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CALM CLOSING STATEMENT TO THE PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE PROPOSED M4 CORRIDOR AROUND NEWPORT, 28 MARCH 2018

We are approaching a decisive juncture in a discussion which started before this century began. It is much more than a debate about the route of a bypass. It is a fundamental disagreement about how we should invest enormous amounts of time and money in our future transport infrastructure to make it fit for purpose, including for future generations as well as our own. It is about whether we are serious about combating climate change, and anticipating a world where more and more access and communication will be digital. This must be a world where we do have time to “stand and stare”, in the words of Newport’s own ‘poet laureate’ WH Davies. Our descendants deserve to appreciate the tranquility and beauty of the Gwent Levels bequeathed to us by centuries of interaction between humans and nature, which for many in our area are “a place for the soul to find peace” (*Lle i enaid gael llonydd*).

Are we going to move forward to a sustainable era where our transport systems are designed to serve the needs of all our people - young and old, richer and poorer, drivers and non drivers ? To an era where transport contributes to our health as citizens and allows us genuine mobility and access to our families, our jobs, our friends, our favourite

places and the goods we need ? Or are we going to engage reverse gear by adopting the transport solutions of the past ? Are we really willing to squander up to £2 billion on a bypass to an existing motorway demanded largely by big business and some commuters, who want faster journeys but will actually end up causing even more congestion as well as irreparable damage to the unique and historic landscape of the Gwent Levels and its communities?

In the first phase of the Inquiry last year CALM and other objectors set out strong arguments against the Black Route - flawed traffic forecasts, unacceptable capital costs, simplistic assumptions that a new road will benefit the Welsh economy, underestimated environmental impacts, contradictions with carbon reduction targets and a hugely unbalanced focus on just one region of Wales.

When the Inquiry resumed at the end of January we learned that our case had actually been strengthened by the mysterious, secret deal between the Government and the private company which runs Newport Docks, under which their objections would be withdrawn in return for colossal compensation and associated costs totalling close to £200 million from public funds, in order to remodel the Docks to fit in with the Black Route. There has been no public scrutiny of how this deal was done, or how the detailed costs are calculated. It is called compensation but we should call it out for what it is - a backroom deal in the worst tradition of “public-private partnership” in which the owners held all the cards. They are set to extract an eye-watering sum of Welsh taxpayers’ money to benefit company shareholders. Such a deal may also be in breach of EU regulations about state support for industry.

During the last two months CALM supporters have been able to deploy yet further arguments against the Black Route. We have exposed the clear intention of the Welsh Government to resist stronger statutory protection for the remaining Gwent Levels and the willingness of their representatives at the Inquiry openly to condone their further decimation not only for the by-pass itself but also for the urban ribbon development

which will follow once the new road is opened. The Inquiry has heard evidence showing that the by-pass route is in clear breach of national legislation and international wildlife treaties to which the UK is a party because of its destruction of a huge area of designated wetland and breeding sites for migratory species such as cranes and bats. We heard the Government's consultant admit that he only had 25% confidence in his own proposals to mitigate the damage to bats, and we suspect this would be an all-too-accurate prediction of the likely success of their "motorway mitigation measures" in many other areas, including SSSIs.

We have heard the Government's representatives casually accept that they will not allocate significant resources to compensate properly for the damage which they accept that the Black Route will inflict on the highly sensitive, historic landscape of the Gwent Levels, affecting forever the communities who live there and the thousands of visitors who seek quiet recreation, including cyclists and walkers. We have heard that the abolition of the Severn tolls this year will increase traffic but that there will be no relief at all until the bypass opens in more than 5 and a half years time - in December 2023. This date has slipped by a further two years mainly as a result of the deal at Newport Docks. It now compares very unfavourably with Professor Stuart Cole's relief road proposals using upgraded existing roads round Newport (the "Blue Route") which could be running by the end of 2020 even after allowing for a further Inquiry.

Last week we heard a very clear statement from the Government's statutory environment adviser and agency, NRW, that they strongly maintained several key objections to the Black Route. Notably, NRW lawyers have said that WG are breaching both UK and Welsh legislation because the level of destructive impact on the Gwent Levels SSSIs is "too great" and "unprecedented". NRW add that "a total land SSSI land take of 105 ha. is manifestly excessive and evidence for a breach of Section 28 G (of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981)".

There are now two Welsh Government-appointed, expert bodies formally objecting to the WG proposals for the Black Route. Last year the Future Generations Commissioner, Sophie Howe, specifically objected to the Black Route and submitted extensive evidence to demonstrate that the proposals do not meet the the legal requirements of recent legislation - the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. These Objections from official bodies increase the risk that the Black Route proposals will be declared unlawful, even if the Planning Inquiry and Welsh Government Ministers approve the scheme.

All the weaknesses in the Black Route proposals have been pointed out repeatedly over the period of the Planning Inquiry. CALM and its supporters have deployed more than 20 respected scientists, economists and planners, whose evidence has shredded the case for the Black Route. In response hardly any independent experts have actually given evidence in support of the Government's case, which has largely been made by their own consultants, employed solely to support the Black Route. The Government seems to have decided that objective experts in a well-trodden field are unlikely to support its case.

Many local Community Councils and individuals have sent detailed objections. So has the Wales Federation of Small Businesses which also commented memorably in 2015 that the money saved from “ the £1 billion piece of tarmac” could and should be used to support skills and improve other transport links across Wales. That same year the First Minister claimed that the cost of the bypass would be “nowhere near” £1 billion and in his opinion “well below” that figure. Yet we are now at the end of a Planning Inquiry less than three years later where the figure of £1.5 billion is generally accepted as the current cost without adding VAT or allowing for cost overruns which are so commonplace on this type of scheme - 24% on the Heads of the Valley Road to quote from recent revelations.

We affirm our belief, based on more than a year of evidence at the Inquiry, that the Black Route is unjustified and should be dropped. In its

place we call on the Wales government urgently to bring forward plans for a sustainable, low- carbon alternative - a public transport based network which puts local people, businesses and our environment in South Wales at its heart. Everyone should have the ability to travel to school, college, work or retail centres using public transport. To achieve this we need integrated transport where trams and radically improved bus services link Newport, Cardiff and the valleys. We also need frequent electrified rail services, new and safer active routes for cyclists and walkers, and improvements to existing roads. The latter could be based on the Blue Route proposed by Professor Cole, or by considering the proposals put forward by CALM for a third tunnel at Brynglas. This integrated network would provide greater economic, transport, health and environmental benefits for SE Wales at a cost which will not starve the rest of Wales of urgently needed investment in our infrastructure, or set a ruinous precedent of reversion to outdated and ultimately counterproductive policies of building more and more congested roads.