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OBSERVATIONS ON ZURICH TRANSPORT

by Alan Pike

The Swiss general public and their administrators must surely be more intelligent than their British counterparts – with some notable exceptions who perhaps took note of what people did outside these islands. Zurich has a population of over half a million and surrounding residential areas bring the total catchment area for transport to over three quarters of a million.

Referenda in 1962 and 1973 rejected expensive tram subway and U-bahn proposals but in 1977 gave approval to a scheme which managed existing space in the urban area to better effect at far less cost. The existing road surface was re-allocated in favour of trams, buses, trolleybuses, cyclists and pedestrians. The use of private cars in the city centre is restricted to the limited road and parking space remaining.

There is now a 120 km. tram network, much of which is segregated from other traffic, while some bus and trolleybus routes have sections of reserved lanes. Two developments help to make the trams speedy and efficient. A central computer monitors the position of trams within 10 metres and instructions can be issued to speed up or slow down to even out the loading by avoiding bunching. This is aided by control of the highway traffic lights so that trams are not slowed at traffic junctions.

The overall result is that with the investment of only SFr 250 million (about £100 million) over 13 years and by the controls previously mentioned, the capacity created approaches that of the new S-bahn which, of course, has a wider scope but with a similar objective.

One of the most significant claims is that the road transport management scheme is 20 times more effective economically than the local motorways. Another apparent benefit is that local taxation has been kept low whilst land values and economic activity has risen.

I know of a top Swiss executive who goes to work on a bus; in Zurich they travel by tram.

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