

Working on making it work : Swiss public transport - a very personal view

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WORKING ON MAKING IT WORK

George Hoekstra

Swiss Public Transport – a very personal view



Chur bus and train station.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

Everyone visiting Switzerland always marvels at how well our public transport works. In Britain, I despair over how much better theirs could work.

What is the difference? In one sentence: the Swiss work much harder on making it work. The people themselves have expressed their wish for a working public transport system with big majorities at various referenda. In Switzerland the result of a referendum is law, - the Government cannot overturn it. Also, people are fully aware of the cost of the proposal as it has to be included in the ballot. People in Britain always tell me "... in Switzerland, public transport is subsidised, ours is private!" But the "private" public transport in Britain is still very heavily subsidised. It gets money out of all levels of taxation, both national

and local. In fact, the private railways get many times more subsidy today than they ever did in the days of British Railways. You may say, because of inflation, this is an unfair comparison and the railways now carry many more passengers. Not true; they also get more income from fares – and, through rises consistently far above inflation, quite a lot more. Do not tell me about "massive investment". Hardly anything is invested. In Britain's spin society, normal maintenance is called investment. It is not - maintenance is an essential cost to protect the existing track, rolling stock and buildings against deterioration. However, even this essential work has not been done. Railtrack was cock-a-hoop about making £1.3m of "profit" a day. But the infrastructure was in

a terrible state. I am not exaggerating for as a professional civil engineer and a Fellow of the Permanent Way Institute I am qualified to judge. It is a pity a lot of people had to die before it was realised that money “saved” through lack of maintenance is not profit.

In the relentless pursuit to be the world leader in privatisation, Britain’s railways have become terribly fragmented. Literally everything is owned by a different company, all with their own layers of management and administration. No wonder costs are spiralling and job satisfaction has gone out the window. It has become very easy to point the finger at somebody else – “nothing to do with us”. In Switzerland railways are also owned by different companies. But they own and thus are responsible for everything: track, catenaries, rolling stock and buildings. You could only point a finger at yourself. In Britain, after wasting a huge amount of money, the infrastructure has now been brought back into state ownership. The British taxpayers will have to pay quite a lot for putting it right. After years of neglect and squandering payouts to shareholders, it firstly must be brought back up to standard and then properly maintained. Actual investment, i.e. improvements and expansion comes on top of that. Yes, the Government can use part of the money it gets paid for the usage of the tracks by the railway companies. But where do these companies get that money? Mostly out of the subsidy paid to them by the same Government! In Switzerland we call this “left pocket to

right pocket”. This only achieves enormous administration costs – and no tangible results.

Then there are the buses. Almost all local and rural bus services are subsidised by local authorities. So a lot of money is certainly spent. Why then, are the results so patchy? That last word holds the clue - patchy.

In today’s Britain the one absolute vital factor for a working public transport system, integration, is sadly lacking in most areas. It was different when I first visited Britain in 1953. Public transport was rather worn-out because of the war, but at least in the area I can talk about, the Southeast, trains and buses (with “clippies”) ran like clockwork and connections were assured. Sadly today, after privatisation, all coordination is lost. Timetable changeovers are on different dates. Why I ask. I get told: the dates vary because of different financial years and contract dates. What contracts? – Ah yes, the subsidies! Nonsense! If you subsidise the companies, surely you can force them to coordinate. Timetable changes should preferably be made only once a year, if it really has to be then twice, but please, all on the same date.

Postbus at Küblis.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell



Fine tuning?? By fine tuning timetables several times a year, people get confused, fed up and buy a car. Once you have lost them, wild horses will not get them back. In dealing with traffic congestion, road pricing is all very well, but at the moment Transport for London has a hard time coping with the “sudden” increase in traffic. The City of Bern took a different approach. It introduced very long red- phases on all traffic lights leading into the city, but buses and trams got green. Driving between two outlying areas through the centre was stopped by making through routes into dead end streets. Deliveries in the city are allowed only early in the morning. But, and this is essential, the alternatives were finished first. The ring roads close to the city and very good integrated public transport on all levels (train, tram, bus) into and in the city itself were in place. Trams have priority and buses dedicated lanes. The law states traffic behind a bus must stop to let it back into traffic as soon as its indicator is on. Interchange hubs also exist in outlying areas; no need to go into the centre first. Only a few Park & Rides as thanks to good integrated public transport most people no longer take their car into Bern.

In Britain, London, Birmingham and a few other conurbations, do have a reasonable system of public transport with interchanges in the outlying areas and an easy to use fare system. But they are totally isolated from each other and the rest of the country. The

way they are administered differs greatly, the only thing they have in common are the huge administration costs. Also, as a man involved in working with Centro told me “...politically they are a can of worms!”. Companies proudly compete against each other with low pricing on the internet. They forget that their only enemy is the convenience of the motorcar. This system of specifying a train and reserve seats in advance is copied from the airlines. It makes sense for planes, but it is silly for the railways. Railways carry a much higher volume of passengers at much higher frequencies and usually over shorter



Bus at Thun Station.

PHOTO: Ian Athey

distances. They are a turn-up-and-go system. If pricing could be standardized – this means the same system, not the same price - a computer could do all the calculations and save a lot of money. All sales are automatically entered into the system and regular surveys of “where did you start your journey and what is your destination”, determine how money from day-rovers and seasons is distributed among the companies. Like the services, the ticketing must be fully integrated. The Swiss day rovers and season tickets include long-distance as well as all local transport,

trams, buses, boats, in their areas.

How did they manage to get all those hundreds of different companies under one hat? Easy - most of them could see the logic in the savings. The few "difficult" ones had the choice, either join or lose your subsidy! It works: Switzerland, with just over 7.5m inhabitants, is world champion in usage of public transport. Over 300,000 people hold yearly season tickets for the whole country. Just like a Swiss Pass! Why? It is just so easy. No finding out about fares, buying tickets, looking for change or problems when you have to change routes. Just hop on and ride! I had one for over thirty years. If you are on an intercity train in Switzerland, watch how few people have their tickets clipped: they travel on day rovers or seasons.

Then the cost is right. The yearly season for all of Switzerland, including all transport on buses, trams and boats, costs about £1,300. The cost of the yearly season from the closest railway station to my house in Britain (Headcorn, Kent) to Charing Cross, a distance of just 50 miles, train only - not including London Transport - is more than double that! Horrendously expensive if you think that disposable income in Britain is lower and the fare is not tax-deductible either!! In Switzerland, cost for public transport to, as well as for your work, is fully tax deductible. Car ownership per inhabitant is higher than in Britain, but very few use the car for travel to work.

Frequent, reliable, comfortable and clean trains will normally arrive on time - unlike the car. On the train, you can work or talk to your colleagues. No need for a car to get to the station as fully integrated transport means that there is almost always a connecting bus. If you live out in the sticks there usually is a call-bus system. Good value for money too: cheaper than running a car. Apart from seasons, we have the half-fare card. Over 2m persons hold

one - almost every third person in Switzerland! The three year card costs only £150, and remember that the card means you pay half of all normal or special fares for travel, any day, at any time and in either class. Several SRS Members have one as they visit Switzerland often. A day card, only available to half-fare card owners, gives you unlimited travel for a day for just over £23 - cheaper if you buy them in lots of six. Many communities have cheaper day cards for their citizens. In many cases, the day-card is cheaper than just the return train fare - and all local transport is included. Want to come back a different route? No problem - you can go anywhere. Convenience will win people over. Special efforts are also made to promote public transport. During motorway queues at weekends or holidays, car occupants are offered free day tickets to try public transport for leisure travel. I have written in *Swiss Express* about the successful promotion of car sharing. A new housing development includes a season ticket for local area public transport in the rent!

In Switzerland, they are really working hard on making it work!

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

