INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN TRAVEL POLICIES

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of ECMT or those of its Member Countries.
Introduction

I am very pleased to have an opportunity to say a few words at the start of this Seminar. First, our sincere thanks go to the US DOT for inviting us to Washington and hosting the event here. The US has been a valued Associate Member of ECMT for over 25 years but, perhaps surprisingly, this is the first time that an ECMT event has been organised in the United States. I believe this is an important concrete symbol of the joint wish to strengthen the links. It is a realisation that, though there are many differences between Europe and the US, our transport problems are remarkably similar and there are potential benefits in examining what we can learn from each other.

The US has taken an active part in the work that we have done for over a decade now on sustainable urban travel. And we have very much appreciated this involvement and in particular the constant presence and strong professionalism of Ed Weiner and Bill Lyons over this period.

In the work that ECMT, sometimes with OECD, has done, we have tried with all the countries involved to draw up a forward looking policy agenda. This takes as a starting point our shared aim for dynamic, economically viable, healthy, safe, living cities, our shared aim to reduce, in all its dimensions, the damage that transport does to the environment and our shared aim to provide effective access to services and people for all.

Sustainable Urban Travel

Our first report in the early 90’s on Sustainable Urban Travel set out a flexible strategy to meet these goals. The strategy encompassed elements of best practice, of policy innovations and, in order to achieve long term goals, clear economic signals to transport participants. This strategy obtained broad political acceptance with different Ministries including transport, environment and urban planning approving it. But we must say that some of the elements of the strategy were not accepted everywhere. Indeed the former US Transport Secretary, Mr. Pena, who presented the report to transport Ministers said that the pricing part of the strategy could not be implemented in the US.

In the years following its publication we saw that implementation, especially of fiscal instruments like increasing fuel prices, was controversial and ran into difficulties. But not only pricing was difficult to implement, but land use measures, car restraint, traffic calming, bus priorities, even speed limits all were opposed or blocked in various places.

So our recent work Implementing Sustainable Urban Policies has focused on implementation of policy. It is therefore particularly interesting to be here in the US to see how you see the challenges and how you are trying to bring about improvements in the quality of life and accessibility in your cities.

The US is of particular interest as so many things are different than in Europe or Japan. The structure of cities, demographic factors, the trip patterns, the role of public transport, the importance of the car and the politics all seem to be different, and some very different, from the situation in Europe.

Let me remind you of some of these differences.

First your cities are different. The United States is a vast Country with plenty of space and longer distances between your cities. In much of Europe there is little space and our cities are closer. Also our cities are in general much more dense than yours, with population densities in general several times higher than those in the States. Suburbanisation and urban sprawl occur in the US to a far greater extent than in Europe. Our cities in Europe are also going through this process of decentralisation of jobs and
residents but not to the same extent as in US. One of the reasons is that we have less space but another is that we have land use planning rules in Europe that are much more constraining than in US.

Second, car ownership and use is much higher here. Europe still has car ownership at about 450 per thousand. In the US the figure is over 850 and some US cities in our recent work had more cars than people! Car ownership is growing fast in Central and Eastern Europe but the rate of increase may be slowing in Western Europe. So the gap with US may even be widening. Annual car use in the US is over twice that in Europe. One of the reasons is that car use is much cheaper. Because of taxes, fuel prices in Europe are two to three times US prices and the gap has increased recently too.

Third, public transport and the use of non motorised modes is much higher in Europe. The average European takes 8 times more trips by public transport annually than her American counterpart. Public transport modal share is only 2% in US while it is much higher in Europe. The same is true for walking and cycling, which accounts for only 7% of trips in US and for example 46% in the Netherlands.

Fourth, the political situation and possibilities are different. Let me give some examples. In Europe there is a lot of discussion and even some action to restrict or limit car use. For example, in France the towns are now obliged to draw up a plan to manage mobility; in Paris these plans include a reduction in car traffic in the city and this has been achieved. In the US, our understanding is that such policies or aims are not on the political agenda.

A second example. In Europe we are undoubtedly moving towards a greater use of economic instruments, and in particular pricing, to reduce congestion and other externalities and also to pay for infrastructure. In particular, the London congestion charge introduced successfully in February this year is being watched and studied by many European cities and governments. The same is true for the system that, in January 2001, Switzerland introduced for charging trucks on all national roads and for the German system which is to be introduced as soon as some technical problems are solved.

A third example. In Europe we have tried to contain urban sprawl through planning rules and regulations including green belts and restrictions on out of town shopping centres, special zoning and innovations like the Dutch ABC policy. But the results have been mixed and we are certainly seeing continuing decentralisation in very many cities especially the central and eastern European countries. We know that the US has a different philosophy, but we know too that our philosophy often breaks down under competitive pressure between jurisdictions, or when employers offer local jobs.

A fourth example, this time in the other direction. In the US you have had air quality standards for much longer than us and our understanding is that you have believed mainly in vehicle technology to achieve them. In addition, you have monitoring procedures and enforcement mechanisms that we do not have. In Europe we were much slower to adopt the environmental norms that you have. Though now, these gaps have closed and Europe is no longer far behind in the norms for vehicles. Our fleet is older so we still have a lot of older dirty vehicles but this is changing too. In Europe there is a widespread belief that we cannot meet our environmental targets through technology alone. It is not clear to what extent this belief is shared in the US.

These examples are illustrative of some of the differences in the way we look at things. In Europe we sometimes agree high sounding principles but in practice we cannot live up to their ideals. Perhaps you are more pragmatic in your ideals but you are better at implementing what you say?

This Seminar is an opportunity to explore these kinds of questions and we hope we can all benefit by learning about the differences and understanding more about the policies and practices. We hope everyone finds the papers of interest and the discussion stimulating.