

CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS FOR THEME E
THE FUTURE HUMAN AND TRANSPORT ENVIRONMENT

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It is very proper that in a conference on transport changes we should devote some serious time to a discussion of the future. One of the common characteristics of transport is that it involves mammoth commitments of financial, territorial and human resources to an objective beyond the foreseeable future. Another characteristic is that we will rarely have adequate funds or needs for all the alternatives transport plans placed before us. We will need to favour some schemes and discard others. A further common characteristic is the long lead times before many schemes begin to have a noticeable effect. A final characteristic is that many of our transport decisions are irreversible. Once we have taken our step we are committed to that route — there is no turning aside or back. The resources that we consume are likewise finite (E4) and — as befits an engineering system — entropy will prevail and the laws of thermodynamics will once again prove immutable (E1).

So we must invest in transport as an act of faith, faith in our own judgement of the future. We must assume that the benefits we so confidently predict will actually arise at some future date. (E1) (E2).

Of course, our transport investment will actually help shape the future and so our prophecy will tend to be self-fulfilling. I do not say this to make you complacent but to make you realise how important your decisions are. Your opinions run the risk of becoming reality.

You may also have noticed that we don't have a great number of papers on the subject — despite my claims concerning its importance. One reason for this, I suspect, is that it is not easy to talk sensibly about the future. A second reason, I am sure, is that it is very unwise to write about — as people are apt to tap you on the shoulder when that future finally arrives and point out the error of your predictions. Finally, those of us who talk publicly about the future are probably charlatans for — as others have remarked — the modern Nostradamus spends his time at the Stock Exchange, the futures market or enjoying the fruits of his foresightedness on some sunny southern beach.

Given those strictures, what can we say. We certainly have entered — and will never leave, I trust — a time in which we all respect both our natural and many aspects of our built environment. We have received an inheritance and we now all recognise our obligations as custodians of that inheritance. We are also in a world where increasingly we see individual self-fulfillment as a need and a right. And, of course, we are in a world of dramatically changing new technology (E3). We must believe that — rather than having passed through that world — we have only entered the first of its many doors. There is far more change ahead of us than we have yet seen.

Why can I say this with such confidence? I say it because we are only just beginning to leave the human dimension. Dimensions larger than

we can perceive are now being tackled in space, dimensions smaller than we conceive are now at use in microelectronics, times longer than we have imagined in astronomy and times shorter than is human in information processing; overwhelming mundaneness by robots and intelligence beyond our own in computing. We are just stepping out of our dimension.

And yet, of course, as human beings we cling to the status quo and our own dimension and our egocentricity, always psychologically unprepared for change. As Aldous Huxley noted, we rarely perceive change happening until well after the changeable event. Or if we are forced to consider the future, we do so on a short term basis. Which politicians think beyond the next election? Which engineers beyond their retirement?

We have recently observed the effect of three changemakers on travel – and these are explored in all our subthemes. We have seen how much of our travel is sensitive to economic demand (E3) and to energy prices and we are beginning to see the creation and use of whole new systems of information flow (E3). Can a world in which we waste more transport energy than we use be an ideal world?(E4).

It is important to also appreciate that, as transport is a derived demand which arises from filling various needs, it will change as those needs change. Thus to predict the future for transport we must, perchance, predict the future for our world. Not just in economic terms, but also in social and political terms. This is no small task, but compartmentalisation cannot govern our transport futures. Should we be optimists or pessimists? As I said earlier, our views today will be self-fulfilling. But over-optimisation will waste resources – and thus make a lesser world – and overpessimism will slow us down. Thus anything but the correct decision will diminish the world in which we will live.

And what of the developing world? (E5) Of our colleagues yet to enter the transport world that some of us are just leaving. What advice and help do we offer to them? Should they follow in our footsteps, by-pass some hazards we encountered or choose another route altogether?

As one example, I believe that in the past we have rarely studied our transport objectives in adequate detail. We have lived in misty worlds of subsidisation and cross-subsidisation,(E1) of truths and hidden half-truths, of confused competition and of monumental monopoly. We have forgotten the needs we are trying to fulfill and obscured our objectives.

The benefits our systems have provided have been diffuse and poorly documented (E1). In this they have had good bed-fellows in transport costs – particularly those that can't be listed in dollars and cents.

If we do not plan our future, it will be decided for us, for the one certainty we have is that a future will happen. Let us not be passive robots. What tools do we have to tackle the task of understanding and planning for the future? It has been said (E1) that those we have are woefully inadequate. What perspectives of the future do we see? It has been said that we are too short sighted (E2). Let us begin to make these new tools and see those new perspectives during this conference.