

The Thames Tideway Tunnel disaster

As a proposal it is an environmental and economic disaster as well as both for the consumer and for climate change adaptation. Rather than seeking an approach which goes to the root of the problem and does so in a sustainable way, it is an obsolete 'end of pipe' approach¹. But the PR campaign in supporting the tunnel has been clever although one which has been economical with the truth.

Environmental

- The money spent on the proposed tunnel cannot therefore be spent to tackle any of the more urgent environmental problems in the London area (e.g. the water quality of the tidal Thames is assessed as 'moderate' whilst the water quality in the tributaries to the Thames is generally poor; the GLA estimates that in London in 2008 over 4,000 people died as a result of air pollution). Nor on addressing the critical water management problems in the Thames region e.g. responding to the increasing scarcity of water or the risks of flooding. No substantial evidence has yet been produced that there are any significant environmental benefits from the proposed tunnel.

Economic

- With total national debt being over 5 times national income, we need to make every additional pound spent do the work of £2-3 pounds; we need to look for ways of solving several problems at once with every pound spent. More advanced cities, such as Toronto, are adopting the green infrastructure approach for this reason. This deals with air pollution, the heat island effect, water scarcity, and water pollution through an integrated strategy and produces cost savings.
- Both the project and the proposed means of financing it are means of wealth creation in other countries instead of means of creating secure long term growth in the UK. In 2013, the UK balance of payments deficit was £71.1 billion; so this is not a good time to add to that deficit. Rather than the charges to water consumers leaking out of the country to overseas companies and lenders, other options to the tunnel will result in the majority of the expenditure being kept within the UK to produce employment and profits.
- We should expect Britain to be a leader and innovator, not least because this is how we create economic growth and jobs. The tunnel does the reverse and would put us further behind other countries and cities in sustainable urban water management. We are already 30 years behind Germany so the technologies required are proven.

Consumer

- UK national output is only now recovering to its level before the 2008 financial crisis. It is proposed to fund the investment in the tunnel in an extremely expensive way which will add perhaps £80 a year to the costs of wastewater treatment for each household in the Thames region. Unfortunately, the very definition of poverty has become politicised and contested but the Office of National Statistics' most recent figures show that for households in the lowest income decile, 3% of their household expenditure is already on water services.

Climate change adaptation

- From this perspective, the proposed tunnel is a 'lose-lose' option. If we are successful in adapting, then the tunnel will have no further function in perhaps 20 years; but conversely, the tunnel takes away the resources we need to adapt.

As a proposal, the Thames Tideway Tunnel betrays the legacy of Bazalgette and our Victorian ancestors more generally in showing none of the imagination and innovation that was embodied in that work. Nor does it recognise the lessons learnt in funding and organising the construction of that great system.

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¹ This review follows from the reports that I have been asked to prepare by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the UN Water Decade and other bodies as well as from discussions with other water specialists; the closer one looks at the Thames Tunnel, the worse it gets.