

The Swiss road network - what happens next? : Swiss traffic policy in danger of reaching an impasse

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The Swiss Road Network – what happens next?

Swiss traffic policy in danger of reaching an impasse

The concrete objectives of current Swiss policy on traffic problems can be expressed “in a nutshell” as a further extension of rail transport on the one hand, and on the other a limitation and reduction of the volume of private motor traffic.

The direction given to our present traffic policy – which also has a bearing on other existing problems such as the shortage of space for traffic in towns and other built-up areas, and the need for protecting the environment and preventing atmospheric pollution – contains plenty of other problems, since:

– On the one hand, for the first time in many centuries, extension of the traffic infrastructure is not being progressed in the areas where it is most needed; and

– On the other hand, current needs of motor vehicle users are to be artificially reduced or limited by methods that can only be described as “dirigistic”.

Promotion of public transport – but not where it is most needed

That the present policy is not primarily directed towards the extension of the infrastructure to those areas where the demands are greatest can be seen from the “Rail and Bus 2000” concept and by the advance plans for extension of traffic in the transit sector and in services for the outer suburbs.

– The “Rail and Bus 2000” concept, which *inter alia* aims at the existing rail network being complemented by the building of four new tracks, will improve the traffic situation not only on our West-East axis where bottlenecks already exist, but will cover a broader surface area too – thus in principle many areas where there is no demand for the provision of better public transport facilities, or where any such demand is at all events not much in evidence.

– The countries of the European Community (the “EC”) demand that Switzerland should create a 40-tonne road corridor for helping to cope with the steadily increasing volume of transalpine goods traffic in the light of the realisation by the end of 1992 of a free single domestic EC market. The Federal Council suggests, as an alternative to the corridor, that it should make massive investments amounting to many millions of francs for the construction of new railway tracks, in the belief that the EC would be

able to use the new facilities as a testing-ground for the coming “combined” traffic.

– Practically all towns and other built-up areas are overflowing with motor vehicles, and the clamour for an improvement in the conditions for individual traffic cannot be disregarded. But the local authorities are, as so often, unable or unwilling to accede to the demands. They see an extension of the facilities for public transport as the only possibility for meeting the ever-more insistent demands of traffic.

Using “brute force” against motor vehicle traffic?

The steady growth of traffic in the last few decades has been most evident in connection with the individual traffic sector. Since the 1960's, the volume of road traffic has more than doubled but still has to be handled on a network of roads that has during the meantime hardly been expanded (if one does not take the motorways into account – they now handle more than a quarter of all traffic).

The number of new vehicles licensed every

year has shown a continuous increase, and only a false prophet could forecast any future decline in the almost universal preference for individual traffic. But it is precisely the breaking of this trend, with a limitation and future reduction of the number of private vehicles on the roads, which is the declared aim of current Swiss traffic policy! In all sectors of the public infrastructure, whether in the provision of water supplies and energy, garbage collection and disposal, the health service and in education as well as in justice and administration, improvements are being made continuously to bring performance into line with changing conditions, but in connection with individual traffic, one is attempting to achieve improvement not by reforms but by reducing the capacity for performance.

Here are some of the measures that are being taken or planned against motor car traffic. One needs only to look at the objectives of the “initiatives” launched in recent months calling for voting on mainly local issues. The electorate in the capital city, Berne, gave its approval to an initiative with the slogan “Stop the commuters!”, urging a drastic limitation of both private and public parking places, and pleading for all applications for building permits for the construction of parking buildings on the city fringes to be prevented or delayed. And the so-called “Cloverleaf” initiatives (rejected by the national electorate and the Upper House of Parliament) had been directed against the completion of the construction work on a motorway extension already in progress! And another initiative called “Stop the concrete” even demanded a reduction of the existing areas reserved for traffic.

All these demands are concerned with domestic traffic, i.e., with traffic inside the Confederation, and this is where Switzerland will have to solve its own problems. Unlike such issues as energy bottle-necks and the disposal of nuclear or toxic waste, in respect of which we can if need be enlist the help of foreign countries, the problems on



Lorries play an important part in final distribution of consumer goods.

(Photo: Keycolor)

our roads can only be tackled on the spot. The motorways in France, Germany, Austria and Italy will not be able to solve our traffic problems between Basle and Zurich or inside our cities and built-up areas.

Improvements to public transport are not enough!

That our traffic problems cannot be solved merely by improving public transport is evident from the results of the strenuous efforts made in recent years to encourage people to make greater use of public transport services, such as half-fare travel cards, ecologically beneficial season tickets and a streamlined timetable ("a train every hour"). These measures have given rise to an enormous increase in the volume of passenger traffic by public transport. But in spite of all devices introduced to make motorised private traffic less attractive, it continues to expand too. In the total volume of passenger traffic, the share of that carried by road amounts to four fifths and more (for goods traffic, it represents barely one half). And as public transport will never be able to take over the share corresponding to private means of transport it is sheer self-deception to think that it will be possible to solve our current traffic problems and those of the future by furthering the use of public transport while at the same time neglecting road traffic infrastructure. In view of traffic needs now and in future, such a course will inevitably turn out to be a dead-end blind alley.

The Federations of Road Users therefore



Motorways channel traffic and are five times safer than main roads. (Photo: Keycolor)

want to make their view abundantly clear that alongside the promotion of good public transport, the still uncompleted sections of our national highways should be finished in a determined and purposeful manner, so as to guarantee the smoothest possible flow of traffic, with if need be, an expansion of the motorway networks. Likewise, on the main roads of all the cantons, existing bottlenecks must be remedied without delay in the interest of local residents and other road

users. And the traffic problems in the overcrowded and expanding outer conurbations can in the opinion of our federations only be overcome if solutions are sought (and found) which do justice to the needs of *all* parties – and these include of course the needs of motorised road users too.

Hans Koller, the Information Officer of the Swiss Federation of Road Users ("FRS"), Berne.

Transit traffic through Switzerland

A subsidiary aspect of the ongoing debate about Swiss transport policy

After much discussion, the concept "Rail & Bus 2000" seems to have been accepted by most of the parties concerned. And now interest is being concentrated on the question of what reforms are actually needed in the sector of transit policy, with special reference to the requirements of other countries and in particular those of our European neighbours.

In the foreground of our traffic policy is the objective of getting more traffic on to the railways and less on the roads. Even so, two features are rather surprising:

Only a minute proportion of the goods traffic in Switzerland is *not* "home-made". The total of all goods traffic amounted to 513.1 million tonnes in 1989, but the proportion relating to foreign trade is very small. 89.6% of the total volume concerns our own domestic market. Imports and exports together amounted to 7.2%, while transit traffic by road only reached 3.2%.

On the other hand, transit traffic for goods transported by rail and road together represented only a modest 0.3%.

The EC as a factor for stimulating public transport

Current Federal policy regarding traffic is being directed towards what can only be seen objectively as a small and very marginal segment of all traffic in Switzerland. This fact is evidently connected with the attempts to realise by the end of 1992 a single free-trade domestic EC market, and with the

increase in trans-alpine goods traffic that would probably be involved if these attempts succeed.

The perfecting of the single European market – which can hardly be achieved unless the problems of traffic across the Alps are solved – is at present the driving force behind the attempts to shift goods traffic from road to rail and thereby to promote the development of a "combined" Rail/Road traffic system. Admittedly, the EC is demanding that Switzerland should at least permit the provision of a road corridor through which 40 tonne lorries would be allowed to travel. The negotiations on this point have been going on for about a year and a half. In these discussions, the Federal Council has repeatedly confirmed Switzerland's willingness to collaborate in relation to transit goods traffic *by rail*, but not to such traffic *by road*. As an alternative, the Swiss government has hinted that it would be prepared to effect investments running into billions of francs for the construction of new rail tracks