

SBB and a toothbrush...

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SBB AND A TOOTHBRUSH...

Malcolm Bulpitt

In September 2011 a small group representing the British railway industry was invited to Switzerland to take part in an intensive three-day study tour. The group was accompanied by representatives from the SBB/BLS and other Swiss organisations such as the Federal Office of Transport (BAV) and the Swiss Association for Public Transport (VöV). In November 2013 the Swiss Embassy organised a 2 day workshop that was designed to test the lessons learnt, to promote further analysis of some key issues and to lay the foundations for continuing dialogue. It was hoped that by bringing the participants from both countries together, along with a number of invited guests associated with the railway industry, it would assist in political debate and managerial action in both countries. Each of the five sessions had a slightly different format. For one the workshop moved from the Embassy to the Houses of Parliament where Louise Ellman, MP, the Chair of the House of Commons Transport Select Committee and one of her parliamentary colleagues (flanked by their 'experts'), challenged members of the British group on their experience since the visit. Two analytical sessions addressed the themes of pricing and governance, another compared long-term planning in the two countries, whilst in the final one an experienced figure from each country commented on how they would run the other country's railways. The original 26 participants from the Anglo-Swiss study tour were joined by some 30 invited guests, and an invitation was kindly extended to myself. The Embassy is aware of the SRS and *Swiss Express* and I was invited along with two other journalists. At least five other members of the Society, also professionally involved in the railway business, were present.

It would be difficult to report in detail on the amount of explanation of detailed theory and informed debate that took place over the two days. A taste of the level of senior management involvement present from both countries can be gleaned from a listing of some of those present. Apart from the Ambassador and colleagues from the Swiss Federal Dept. of Foreign Affairs, the BAV was represented by a Deputy Director and a Project Manager; the SBB sent its Deputy Head of Pricing and their Senior Advisor on Regulatory and International Affairs; the BLS its Head of Passenger Transport; the VöV their Deputy Director; and Tarasce Swiss (something like our ORR) their Managing Director. Apart from the two MPs who ran the session at Westminster the UK was represented by officers from; the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR); Department of Transport; Network Rail; Transport Scotland, and managers from a number of rail operators. Research Professors from two well-respected British academic institutions were involved in the workshops, along with the Chief Executives of both the Campaign for Better Transport and Passenger Focus.

There was no doubt that many of the British representatives who visited Switzerland were very impressed with the integrated infrastructure, and investment in facilities and rolling stock that they found there. It also became very

obvious that those UK rail professionals present who had never been to Switzerland, found it hard to understand a system where all modes connected without competition between them. This became obvious in the discussions where (with a few non-operator exceptions) the British only ever referred to 'Railways' whilst the Swiss always referred to 'Public Transport'. As one Swiss pointed out theirs was a holistic approach to the competition of private transport, whereas in the UK we appeared to glorify the wasteful concept of competing and un-connecting modes, each trying to compete with the motorcar. For their part some of the very senior Swiss admitted in conversation that they had not previously understood that we allowed buses and trains to wastefully compete, with each mode receiving Government subsidies to do so! It was agreed by many present that the British fares structure was a complete mess, with only some of the operators, and a dogged civil servant, trying to make a case for it. The Swiss also accepted that their system of relative low priced (in Swiss income terms) annual full fare (GA) and half fare (HalbTax) discount schemes probably needed revising upwards, and some conditions needed applying to stop the GA becoming a defacto annual season ticket, allowing excessively long commuting trips that put a major strain on the peak operation of the system. Unsurprisingly many of the people representing the British operators and Government organisations thought our present system of franchises was good, despite the Swiss, the academics (who had undertaken detailed financial studies of the system) and most 'non-aligned' UK representatives considering it to be fatally flawed.

This unfortunate British adherence to the establishment line came in the final session when each country was invited to indicate how they would run the other's railways. The UK railway representative stated that he considered the Swiss should abandon their regular interval timetable and interconnecting services. His view was that it was wasteful in terms of investment and equipment, and that Swiss transport would be more efficient if individual transport elements were franchised and allowed to compete(!). The Swiss representative accepted that their method of operations was probably not suited to the British system, both political and commercial, but that the current British franchising system was clearly not successful. He considered that probably the best way forward for the UK was to introduce a nation-wide version of the Transport for London and Merseyrail 'Concession' method of operation, which probably represented 'Best Practice' within this country and resulted in high passenger satisfaction scores. This conclusion reinforced this outside observer's overview of the Workshop that the Swiss consistently acted to meet passenger needs, whereas the British generally based their operations on the needs of operators and their shareholders.

Finally, SBB and a toothbrush? It was noted that when the head of SBB was once asked what consumer item would he associate his railway with, his response was 'a toothbrush'. He hoped people would use it twice a day without thinking! 