

Railway Workshop

"The future of public transport in Britain and Switzerland: What can we learn from each other?" - London, 27 & 28 November 2013

Summary Report

On 27-28 November 2013 the Embassy of Switzerland in the United Kingdom hosted the latest in a series of bilateral workshops comparing and contrasting the structure of the railway and public transport industries in the two nations, with a view to furthering political debate and managerial action in both countries. Approximately 60 representatives from Swiss and UK ministries, infrastructure managers, operating companies and regulatory bodies discussed current topics relating to management of public transport in the UK and Switzerland.

A dinner for speakers was hosted by Ambassador Dominik Furgler and Mrs Hayam Furgler on the opening evening. Ambassador Furgler took advantage of the opportunity to thank all involved experts and professionals for their personal commitment and to underscore the importance and the high practical value of the bilateral exchange between the UK and Switzerland in the field of public transport.

The workshop opened with a comparison of pricing structures, identifying the Swiss emphasis on national multimodal fares and network tickets at standard rates, in contrast to the extensive use of market pricing and yield management (though not for peak travel) in Britain. In both countries rail use is increasing; the Swiss response is government-driven long-term parallel planning of capacity and supply and corresponding financial requirements, whilst British planning is more demand and profit focused with the level of funding determined by periodic negotiation between the government and the rail industry.

A highlight of the workshop was the holding of session 2 in the style of a parliamentary committee inquiry in a committee room at the Houses of Parliament under the chairmanship of Louise Ellmann, MP and Chair of the House of Commons Transport Select Committee. Issues considered included cost and fare levels, methods of investment fund raising, the roles and responsibilities of the various players along the public transport value chain, operational reliability/punctuality as well as the quality of journey passenger information in Switzerland and the UK.

The workshop concluded with presentations by representatives from each country on how they would run the railways in the other country. British policies would see Swiss railways given a stronger value-for-money remit, perhaps with some travel times reduced, though maybe at the expense of some loss of reliability. The regular interval 'Taktfahrplan' timetable might be relaxed slightly, for example by reducing some over-generous evening or weekend services. On the other hand, Swiss policies would bring to Britain the benefits of improved inter- and intra-modal integration and a price structure designed to compete with the car, such as the 'pay-up-front-flat-rate-universal' GA network ticket. Little benefit was seen in the separation of infrastructure from operations, which – in the Swiss perspective - was widely perceived as generating debatable systemic value added; however, the existence of numerous railway operators was seen as beneficial with a view to inter-company benchmarking.

In his closing remarks, Conradin Rasi from the Swiss Embassy Economic, Finance & Trade Section again stressed the great value the Embassy had obtained from the workshop and confirmed that the collaborative programme with the UK would continue.

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