

## AI / M1 Upgrade

During the period for public consultation up to 24 February 2003 , before plans for the upgrading of the AI / M1 to motorway were finalised , local MP Colin Burgon took a keen and leading interest in ensuring best practice for the locality. On 7 January he spoke on the matter in the House of Commons . This is the transcript of his speech, taken from Hansard.

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### Elmet (Roads)

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—Poan Ryan.]*

10.57 pm

**Colin Burgon (Elmet):** Given the previous business, it is a good job that I am not paranoid as there seemed to be a Conservative plot to stop me from speaking. That could be connected with the fact that one of the subjects that I shall discuss is the upgrading of the AI, which the Conservative Government cancelled in 1996. However, truth will out. I stuck to my guns and now is my chance to speak.

May I express my gratitude to Mr. Speaker for allowing me this opportunity to raise an issue of both national and local importance? The debate enables me to deal with two motorway issues in my constituency. As I am a history enthusiast, I shall take them chronologically.

First, there is the M1-A1 link, which cuts through my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East (Mr. Mudie). As the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport will know that road was built under a design, build, finance and operate contract during the previous Conservative Government. Although the audit report indicated savings of £80 million compared to more conventional funding, I was roughly correct when I said that success of that

**commercially driven project should not be achieved at the expense of local people's quality of life.**

**As soon as the road opened in February 1999, it was clear that the noise levels were unacceptable to many of my constituents in places such as Garforth, Swillington and Aberford. According to research produced by the Library in April 1999, the noise on the newly opened road was about 3 to 4 dB higher than had been estimated at the public inquiry.**

**It was predicted that, by 2012, the average number of vehicles passing Garforth every day would be between 49,000 and 59,800. In fact, according to Highways Agency figures, the number of vehicles had already reached 59,600 by 2001. What local residents and I find so appalling is that the previous Conservative Government had what can only be classed as a very relaxed attitude—I nearly said "cavalier" but, as we are talking about roads, I changed my adjective—to the impact of road noise on my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East.**

**At the public inquiry in 1993, the independent inspector recommended the use of quieter road surfaces and appropriate sound barriers to minimise noise problems near the sensitive locations of Garforth, Aberford and Austhorpe. As a local person, I would have added Colton and Swillington to that list. Unfortunately, his recommendations were not included by the Conservative Secretary of State when the orders were made, so the contractor was allowed to build a virtually maintenance-free carriageway that would see out the 30 years of the contract and, therefore, maximise their profits.**

**I am pleased to say that, as a result of the pressure exerted by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East and me, the Highways Agency announced within a few**

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months of the opening of the link that a 2.6 km stretch of the concrete surface adjacent to Garforth would be treated with noise reduction blacktop. I am not quite sure what the technical term is for that, but I think that that description fits the bill for most people. Although this concrete surface, which constitutes the backbone of the M1 link, seems to make good business sense, it does not make good sense for those who have to live near it. I am glad that this Government have given a target for the resurfacing

of all concrete surfaces on trunk roads by 2010, according to Transport 2010, the 10-year plan published in July 2000. In the light of that target, may I ask the Minister when my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East and I can look forward to the patchwork quilt surface of the M1-A1 link being uniformly covered with a quieter surface?

**Will the Minister also assure me, in the light of the disregard for the well-being of the local residents displayed by the previous Conservative Government, that the fullest possible public consultation will be carried out, and that every reasonable effort will be made to incorporate and address legitimate public concerns in respect of the impending upgrading of the A1? To encourage this process, I have already discussed the project with members of several parish councils that lie along the route of the road, along with Alec Briggs from the Highways Agency. The meeting was very informative, and I am confident that Mr. Briggs and his team will listen to the sensible suggestions that we put forward. I will continue this process of consultation over the coming years, in an effort to ensure that local knowledge can be fed into the process and begin to shape it.**

**In a project of this scale, a number of details will need to be addressed. If that can be done positively, the communities neighbouring the A1 will derive some benefit from the process. Consequently, I would like to put a number of points to the Minister, and I hope that they will elicit a series of positive answers. Because the design, build, finance and operate contract for upgrading the A1 between Wetherby and Walshford will be completed in 2005—well before the DBFO for the upgrading of the A1 between Bramham and Wetherby in 2006-07—there could be a three-year period of disruption to the local road system. For example, slip roads such as that at York road in Wetherby—near the racecourse, for those who know the area—are due to be closed as part of the earlier Walshford-to-Wetherby DBFO. If left open, those roads would relieve some of the traffic problems caused by the second DBFO.**

**This second DBFO will start with the construction of a three-lane carriageway to the east of the existing road. On completion, traffic will switch to the new carriageway, allowing the existing road to be closed and converted to a three-lane carriageway and an access road for Wetherby town. The optimum arrangement would be to retain the York road slip roads, so that as many routes in and out of Wetherby town could be retained for as long as possible. What**

**thought has the Minister given to proposals to dovetail the two contracts, so that they could run alongside each other, to delay some of the slip road closures and to bring forward other work, such as the new eastern carriageway for the bypass?**

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**I do not wish to tie the Minister's hands, but it seems only sensible that the company that is awarded the first contract should also be awarded the second. If that cannot be done for reasons of commercial or legal transparency, could the need for dovetailing become a centrepiece of the Highways Agency's thinking in the framing of the contracts?**

**During the consultations that I have mentioned with the parish councils of the villages of Bramham, Clifford, Boston Spa, Walton and Thorp Arch, they have all expressed their concern that the main route to the Thorp Arch trading estate, which lies to the east of these communities, will become difficult to access, and drivers will look to use narrow village roads like Spring lane in Walton, the high street, which is already heavily congested, and Bridge road in Boston Spa.**

**I am not convinced that the final road layout will be in place by 2008 will solve the access problem. I agree with Bramham parish council's argument that there appears to be a need for some sort of dual carriageway access road from Walton road to the Grange Moor interchange, so that that route becomes the one that drivers choose. Will the Minister agree that the upgrade, both in its construction, and on completion, should discourage drivers from using the village roads, such as the ones that I have mentioned, to access a major trading estate, which it is rumoured will one day become a large housing development area or even a new town?**

**I feel strongly that the historic town centre of Wetherby needs to be protected from additional traffic. The layout of the town was built in another era and it is not suited to the 21st century traffic loads that it has to sustain. If all its slip roads to the A1 are removed as part of the upgrading works, traffic in the town centre will increase, as the inspector at the public inquiry agreed. Will the Minister agree that it is desirable to keep to a minimum the amount of traffic that has to be diverted through Wetherby because of the A1 upgrade, and what thought has he given to what could be a difficult and perhaps**

**intractable problem?**

**In my discussions with the Highways Agency, I was pleased to hear it confirmed that attention is being paid to the problem of road noise. It is a central issue in the construction of new roads. Many of the village communities and Wetherby town residents have expressed their concerns on this issue. The mistakes that were made by the previous Government on the M1-A1 link road look likely, as things stand, to be avoided. However, being sometimes the pessimist that I am, I would like some reassurance on what I consider to be a very important issue. Can the Minister confirm that a low-noise asphalt will be used? Are there to be any stretches where low-noise asphalt will not be specified?**

**The public consultation document on the Bramham to Wetherby upgrade indicates that mounding, noise fencing and tree barriers will be used to reduce the noise where appropriate. That is welcome, but similar barriers have not been that effective on the M1-A1 link. When it comes to trees, we seem to be planting the smallest that we can get our hands on. Many of us will not be here to see them when they grow to their full size. David Evans, chair of Bramham parish council, was in touch with my office only yesterday to stress the council's view that without about a 4 m high mounding from Bramham crossroads to the Grange Moor interchange, the noise levels will not be reduced to a desirable and tolerable**

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level. I realise—I think that most sensible people realise—that noise can never be eradicated completely, but the upgrading is an opportunity to minimise the problem of road noise. I hope that we can take the opportunity with both hands.

**Will the Minister therefore agree that noise barriers need to be commensurate to the problem in each locality, and that some flexibility should be built into the specification to allow for any necessary adjustments that should arise during the 30-year period of the contract? There should be no off-the-shelf solution to what could well be difficult and complex problems along the route of the A1 and the upgrading area.**

**What could be classed as a minor problem is an important matter for Bramham parish council. At present, there is a metalled cycle track that extends from Wetherby to Grange Moor. The parish council put it to me that with the construction of the access road**

**alongside the upgraded A1, there is an opportunity to create a dual purpose pedestrian and cycle track, which could extend to the existing A64 cycle track to York. Will the Minister consider whether that is achievable?**

**In my talks with the various bodies involved in the project, I have been pleased to hear from senior officers that there has been effective co-ordination between the Highways Agency and Leeds city council, and I hope that that co-ordination continues with the appointed contractor. Will the Minister do all that he can to encourage the closest possible working between the agency and the council so that we have a properly co-ordinated approach?**

**As I hope the Minister is aware, I am committed to achieving the highest possible public participation in the consultation process. I have been working with the Highways Agency and parish councils to help to achieve that. If, as the work gets under way, major issues arise—let us hope that they do not—will the Minister be willing to meet me and a delegation from the parish councils with which I have been working closely?**

**I hope that the Minister will accept that my approach is one of constructive questioning, because I want the project to succeed for the benefit of all those involved. On a more positive note, I know that he is aware that there is broad consensus at national level that the A1, as one of our main economic arteries, has to be updated. Completion of the work will mean continuous motorway access between Gateshead in the north-east, through Yorkshire, and on as far as London. I know that the business community welcomes it, and some of my Scottish colleagues, in far rougher language than that used by the business community, have told me tonight that it is about time that somebody did something about the A1.**

**The upgrading of the A1 will be welcomed also on grounds of safety. On the 29 miles of the road included in the improvement scheme there were 583 accidents in the five years up to 2000, almost a third of which resulted in fatal or serious injury. The safety improvements will be welcomed by those who have long regarded as dangerous the sudden transformation of the A1 from three lanes to two as one drives around Wetherby coming up from Bramham. I myself have witnessed**

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hairy scenes the build-up of large traffic jams at that spot. I am sure that the upgrading will address that problem, and I seek the Minister's assurance on that.

**The new route of the A1 heading north from above the York road junction to Walshford will mean that a sizeable number of Wetherby residents to the east of Deighton road will no longer have a major national route running along the bottom of their street, and I am sure that they will very much welcome that.**

**It is clear that the upgrading of the A1 is a major project, dealing as it does with one of our major stretches of transport infrastructure. Given the scale and importance of the job, we need to get it right. We must make sure that there is effective local input so that local needs, local knowledge and local ideas are fully taken on board. For my part, I will do my best to ensure that that is the case. I hope that the Minister will agree with me.**

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