

Lunar Society Annual Lecture, 15 March 2011

“Birmingham Unleashed: An Elected Mayor, High-Speed Rail and Academies”

Adonis’s challenges to Birmingham

Lord Adonis suggested that High Speed Rail poses a challenge to Birmingham, which goes much wider and deeper than the current capacity of city and region to respond. The full text of his speech is at [http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/pdfs/birmingham_unleashed_andrew_adonis_lunar_society_speech.pdf]. Briefly, he proposed three measures:

1. High Speed Rail (HSR) itself needs to be handled as a transformative piece of economic infrastructure, not simply another transport scheme;
2. Transformation of the secondary schools system by setting up Academies, so that Birmingham becomes a source of new opportunities, capitalising on HSR;
3. To achieve these things Birmingham would need the focus and energy of a new Chamberlain: in present terms this would mean an elected Mayor.

Issues for the Lunar Society

“The Lunar Society aims to play a leading part in the development of Birmingham and the wider region. The Society does not itself take positions, but provides a forum for its membership to influence change through focusing debate, linking social, economic, scientific and cultural thinking and catalysing action on issues critical to the future of the city and the region as a whole.” (the Introduction to the Lunar Society)

All three of Adonis’s propositions meet the LS criteria of relevance. It is difficult to think of anyone better-qualified to speak on them, and linking them as he did is very much in line with the LS mission. The way that he engaged and responded to a packed and enthusiastic audience also offers potential for the third element of our mission: ‘catalysing action’ – and that is the purpose of this paper.

The LS does not itself take positions – it is for its members to listen and reach their own conclusions about what they hear, and then to use their influence as they see fit – through their ‘day jobs’. This paper is designed to help this process by broadening members’ awareness of critical issues and stimulating their thinking. You can respond to this paper and engage in this debate by [[instructions](#)].

This is a process that the Society has used successfully in the past, in relation for instance to building a new hospital (the newQE, now open), Climate Change, the NHS reorganisation in 2001/2 and congestion charging. In each case the paper that resulted was an authoritative review of the key issues to be addressed by decision-makers, not a Lunar Society position.

While Lord Adonis is well-qualified to explore the issues he has raised, there are (as he himself said) other important points he did not cover, or dealt with only cursorily, for example:

- While criticising Birmingham’s transport performance compared with London, he perhaps understates the extent to which London has been favoured by Government (the 1985 Transport Act’s ‘market solution’ to bus services was not applied in London), and the exceptionally favourable treatment of public transport investments in London over several decades (like Jubilee Line and CrossRail);
- He dismisses too easily the potential for better transport to harm a weaker economy linked to a stronger one (the ‘two-way road effect’). However, this strengthens his argument about the importance of well-coordinated complementary actions (see <http://www.greengauge21.net/publications/fast-forward-a-high-speed-rail-strategy-for-britain/>);
- He places a great deal of reliance on the economic benefits of HSR projected by his former Department (DfT), but these methods are being very widely challenged by experts in the field. There is an urgent need for an approach which is both more broadly-based, and compatible with devolution of more local responsibilities to local level.

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Draft of 30 March