THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT

JOHN MILES follows on from Eric Sampson's article in the last issue with his thoughts on the European ITS Action Plan's mixed messages

The second of November saw the 50th anniversary of the opening of the first 100 km, more or less, of the M1, the London to Yorkshire motorway. The precise distance depends on whether you count the spurs and connecting roads.

The motorways ushered in a new era of easy mobility and their impact on people's lifestyles has been profound. Half a century on, with the publication of a European Action Plan on Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), we could be on the threshold of a similar revolutionary development that could have just as profound an impact. But whereas our motorway infrastructure has been built by civil engineers organising earthworks, pouring concrete and laying bitumen, tomorrow's "info-structure" is the domain of electrical and telecommunications engineers, IT specialists and data analysts.

The notion of "thinking" highways is stretching things a little, but a number of important developments are on the horizon: real-time travel information services, intelligent freight logistics, easier intermodal connections, personalised door-to-door journey planning, advanced toll payment systems and other information-led advisory services and control systems.

Given the growing significance of ITS-based mobility services it seems unfortunate, to say the least, that the European ITS Action Plan is making such slow progress.

One hundred kilometres of the M1 were completed in a record-breaking 19 months. By comparison the ITS Action is proceeding at snail's pace. My long-standing colleague, Eric Sampson, has invoked the spirit of Mr Punch (a somewhat anarchistic British seaside puppet show character) to suggest a way out of the Brussels impasse (*Thinking Highways Volume 4 Issue 3*). It's obvious that we badly need a real-life Mr Punch, or his long-suffering wife Judy, to knock heads together so that the Action Plan is not further delayed.

In fact it is now nearly 12 months since the ITS Action Plan was published and there is still much to be settled. The proposals were drawn up last year by European civil servants and cover 24 specific action lines grouped into six priority areas of action (see box above). This

> *"The notion of the thinking highway is still a little far-fetched"*

24 Actions in 6 Priority Areas

- Optimal Use of Road, Traffic and Travel Data
- Continuity of Traffic and Freight Management
- Road Safety and Security
- Integration of Vehicle and Transport Infrastructure
- Data Protection and Liability
- European ITS Coordination

package was adopted by the College of European Commissioners on 16 December 2008 but for work to proceed the Action Plan also needs endorsement from the European Parliament and the European Council of Ministers, who represent the national governments for the 27 Member State of the European Union (EU).

Directing the directive

At the end of March this year the EC's proposals were given a warm welcome by the Council of Ministers and in April the European Parliament added their endorsement.

So far so good, but, although all parties seem to agree that a European Action Plan on ITS for the road transport sector is in principle a good thing, a logjam has built up around the proposal to have a European Directive on ITS. A Directive would give the Commission powers to make regulations that would shape the way ITS is deployed in future. What has been upsetting people is the mandatory nature of the Directive which would be binding on EU Member States. So the past few months have seen the EC in one corner arguing the case for a Directive and the Member States challenging in the other. Meantime the European Parliament's position is for the EU to press ahead quickly with defining mandatory requirements in four key areas:
- The provision of EU-wide real-time traffic and travel information services;
- Data and procedures for the provision of free minimum universal traffic information services;
- The harmonised introduction of eCall throughout Europe;
- Appropriate measures on secure parking places for trucks and commercial vehicles and on telematics-controlled parking and reservation systems.

The objections coming from the Council of Ministers go right to the heart of how the European Union operates. As Eric Sampson explains in his article, the EU applies the principles of "subsidiarity" and "propor-

"The mandatory nature of the Directive, which would be binding on EU Member States, has upset people"

tionality" in order to respect the autonomy of the Member States. These principles are absolutely fundamental to the Treaties which underpin the EU, of which the infamous Lisbon Treaty is just the most recent. Put simply, the issue of subsidiarity is all about whether ITS Action Plan topics should be addressed collectively by the EU working together, or left to the individual Member States to get on with as they think fit. And if it is agreed that an EU-wide approach is needed, then the proportionality test has to be applied: is the action in itself well-considered, or is it over-the-top and too heavy-handed?

What has been particularly difficult in this case is that the Commission has been proposing a Framework Directive that sets out the broad scope of the actions to be taken but leaves the details to be sorted out at a later date. This feels too much like giving the EC a blank cheque.

First-hand experience

If we can ignore all the hubris for a moment, let's stop and consider why the Commission are pushing for a legislative approach. Why isn't consensus-building and voluntary collaboration amongst the Member States and with industry sufficient? The Commission's response is that the softly-softly approach hasn't been working. This is not the first Action Plan on ITS in the road transport sector to have emerged from Brussels.

More than a decade ago I was on secondment to the EC as part of the team in Brussels that put together an earlier plan. Those proposals were published back in May 1997 as the "Community Strategy for the Deployment of Road Transport Telematics". The document set out some fairly modest and worthwhile objectives and it did achieve some success in raising the profile of ITS. But, if we take an overview of progress with ITS deployment generally across Europe, in the past decade the end results have been patchy to say the least. I can understand the European Commission's frustrations but clearly there is a degree of scepticism out there about the wisdom of adopting a European Directive, fuelled by uncertainties over the consequences of adopting a legislative approach. A look at the kind of objections that have been raised is informative. [See Box]. There are some understandable fears which need to be addressed but mixed in are a few red herrings. For example on standards it's true that the European standards bodies, CEN, CENELEC and ETSI, are making headway with a coordinated approach to ITS standards, but that's not the end of the story.

The real issue is about ITS systems and services and how well they can be realised across local, regional and national boundaries. For example, what are the basic requirements for information exchange across borders between different traffic control centres? How will private sector information service providers, like Tom-Tom or TrafficMaster, extract information from the roads authorities and traffic control centres?

This is not just about standards. There are data com-

pliance, privacy and information exchange protocols to be considered too, some of them concerning road safety and the handling of emergency situations and for these to take full effect they need to be mandated. Through the ITS Action Plan it should be possible to develop an agreed set of principles that will inform those kinds of transaction and which can be implemented right across the continent.

Do we know what we want?

In my opinion, "mandatory one-size for all" objection is unnecessary scare-mongering. It's is a bit like the proverbial European 'straight' banana. It doesn't exist! Simple logic tells us that it would be impractical to propose a rigid formula for traffic management or freight logistics to be applied across Europe. ITS solutions that are right for the remote regions of Northern Scandinavia won't necessarily be the answer for the congested arteries of central Europe. What we should be aiming for is an agreement on what levels of ITS functionality are appropriate for different, varying circumstances, along with a strategy to ensure that national and international standards are eventually harmonised.

Perhaps I have more faith than others that the European coordination framework that will underpin the Action Plan can ensure that common sense prevails. We certainly need an agreed European framework if we are to make progress with some or the more advanced ITS concepts that require the involvement of the automotive industry as well as the road infrastructure operators. What I would like to see is a debate about different levels of functionality and an approach which says "if you

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Eric Sampson's European ITS Action Plan article in *Thinking Highways' Sep/Oct 2009* edition

are going to adopt ITS in these circumstances do it the European way because we will get a better result and a wider benefit as a result".

Time passes and discussion about the Directive continues, with the EU Swedish Presidency trying for a co-decision by all three parties - the Council, the Parliament and the Commission - by the end of the year. At the time of writing the outcome is still uncertain but it seems likely that there will be agreement to move forward with the four mandatory services favoured by the Parliament: on e-call, truck parking, universal traffic information services (possibly limited to safety-critical events) and real-time traffic and travel information services.

One good TERN

Alongside this watering down of legislative ambition there needs to be a serious commitment by the Member States to strengthen the machinery for consensus-building and voluntary collaboration. Groups representing the road operators on the Trans-European Road Network and representatives of the national and secondary road network operators somehow need to be involved, together with the automotive, telecommunications and traffic control supply industries. An important opportunity to develop these ideas will come this month at the "EasyWay" project forum in Vienna.

Our motorways and the vehicles that are driven on them are engineered to much higher standards today than they were in 1959 and everything is much safer now. But don't you wish there was some new way to deal with congestion and drive down the accident rates? That and climate change are today's big challenges. Where is the strategic vision of the kind that inspired the M1? The European ITS Action Plan contains specific measures that can help us move forward and yet we seem to be frightened of it, unwilling to rise to the challenge. TH

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Typical ITS Action Plan Objections

"All you need is standards, why do we need a Directive?"

"The European Commission will impose a costly "one size fits all" approach."

"Member States have different sets of problems – don't impose uniform solutions."

"Eastern European Countries won't be able to afford it."

"Countries that are more advanced in ITS will have to spend a fortune replacing legacy systems."

"Stay out of it: roads and traffic are best addressed nationally or regionally."

"European regulation will stifle innovation."

"Leave ITS to the market - the market will take care of it all."