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An Archival Study of Late 20th Century Cancelled British Infrastructure Megaprojects

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Introduction

This paper introduces a research project that examines business management history related to the cancellation of British transport infrastructure megaprojects in the 1970s. For the purposes of this research, the focus is on projects cancelled once work had commenced. To remove ambiguity, in relation to this research the term “commenced project” is one with an organisation setup, staff employed and construction, even if only survey drilling etc., commenced. The term “cancelled project” is one with the organisation being disbanded, potentially with a loss of knowledge, or with enabling legislation being withdrawn.

The research will involve four case studies into megaprojects to demonstrate the theory that post commencement cancellation had an impact on Britain:

- the 1964 - 1975 Channel Tunnel
- the third London airport at Maplin Sands
- the London Ringways motorways scheme
- the London Underground Fleet Line

Some of these projects did recommence in alternative forms, however they are seen as different projects as they involved different people, organisations, and designs. The numbering of documents by the Civil Service and their grouping within the archives also indicate when projects are officially seen as different rather than the continuation of a cancelled project. An overview of each case study, and its relevance to the research aims, will be discussed in the methods section of this paper.

Building on research into the dynamic change that occurs in project sublimates across project lifespans (Gillett and Tennent, 2017), there is the opportunity, through the use of archival study, to assess the impact of changing political and economic policymakers on the management and goals of megaprojects due to their long duration. The specifics of the cancelled megaprojects case studies will be used to uncover the “dynamics of the phenomena” (Maclean et al., 2016), thus enabling the synthesis of theory that can be used to test, challenge and, where necessary, redefine the theoretical frameworks. Once the research has been completed, it is hoped that it will be possible to identify what impact the cancellations had economically, politically, and culturally on future infrastructure projects within Britain.

Theoretical framework

The background of institutional environments, such as the three pillars of institutions (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive), based on national projects (Scott, 2011) may have some relevance to the 1970s megaprojects. However, the direct relevance becomes less clear, as the nature of newer organisational institutions relevant to transnational projects perhaps have less explanatory power when applied to the more confined aspects of 1970s British megaprojects. For example, institutional work on modern global projects tends to emphasise the advancement in communication technologies, enabled by the internet, that allow more actors to take part (Orr et al., 2011). This contrasts with older scenarios of our study in which technology advances were limited to telex machines for international communication.

The original drivers for the projects would be identified using Flyvbjerg's (Flyvbjerg, 2014) definition of the "four sublims" that drive megaproject development: technological, political, economic, and aesthetic. The changes to the plans before the projects were cancelled can be assessed within the same framework and potentially indicate if serious attempts were made to save them. From there it would be possible to identify the areas of potential impact that could be assessed as to the lost and unfulfilled legacies that the megaprojects had promised. Similar themes run through the four case studies in our study and offer multiple perspectives to the same questions and original project drivers: the long duration of the projects; changing local and national governments; economic climate and soaring inflation; public environmental concerns; their impact spreading out into secondary projects.

Methods

The unit of analysis for this study is the management decision making within the megaproject temporary organisations. The source material for the data is archival documentary evidence relating to the organisations, and where necessary to the wider institutional context of parent firms or government. Despite arguments from Maylor et al. (2006) that a task running over many years no longer qualifies a project as a temporary organisation, these megaprojects were all temporary organisations as the completed elements of the London Ringways and the Fleet Line were managed by different, more permanent, organisations than those involved in the construction. Of the five categories of project history research put forward by Söderlund and Lenfle (2013) our study is placed within their second, *Landmark projects and project narratives*. Thus, we initially treat each case study as a single project that does not share a particular concept or technique with the other projects. The framework for building the case studies would follow recommendations set out by Eisenhardt (1989) to critically consider which findings might be case specific or generalisable across cases.

That these megaprojects were deemed viable to commence is a significant area of interest. If the theory of "the survival of the unfittest" (Flyvbjerg, 2009) is followed, then the question to be asked is *why did they fail to be completed when other megaprojects viewed through the prism of this theory are deemed failures despite being completed?* Were these cancelled megaprojects such a disaster that they could not be completed or was more sensible thinking involved that saw they were better cancelled before going too far? If this was the case, then why was the same not applied to the megaprojects judged as failed by "the survival of the unfittest"? Or were these megaprojects cancelled on ill-conceived grounds (Morris and Hough, 1988)? From the perspective of the organisations that owned the megaprojects, the questions that need to be asked are:

- What was it that encouraged them to cancel rather than follow through to failed completion?
- Was cancellation the correct outcome?
- Did the learning from the experience feed into the organisation and future megaprojects?

Compared to current and recent global projects of organisations that are still active (or for which there are still accessible personnel from disbanded organisations) too much time has elapsed to be able to carry out the gathering of empirical material via specifically crafted interviews and questionnaires. This lack of control over what can be asked means that some areas may remain unquestioned compared to modern counterparts and prevent a full understanding of the organisations in question. However, archival study offers the advantages of being an authentic and stable resource. There are perhaps limitations due to selection and availability of sources but we plan to mitigate through triangulation and compensation by using periodicals contemporary to the event, and more recently generated secondary sources where possible, to carefully minimise the problems of archival silence and selection (Decker 2013).

Sample Cases

The megaprojects chosen have footprints in the 1960s and 1970s, with descendants into the 1980s and beyond. Due to the time elapsed since their conception and cancellation there are less restrictions on archival content access compared to more recent projects. Also, there are unlikely to be any significant commercial sensitivity issues. Additionally, the projects were all government sponsored, even if private enterprise was involved, thus further aiding archive access. The period 1964 to 1979 offers an opportunity to assess the role of the changing political landscape on the projects and vice versa. The 15 years saw a mix of Labour and Conservative governments, including a minority Labour government, compared to 18 years of continuous Conservative governments from 1979 until 1997. The Conservatives tended to support projects of national prestige and those that protected rural heritage, whilst Labour were inclined to support social programmes rather than prestigious ones (Hall, 1980). It could be claimed that there was bias towards London and the Southeast of England in the choice of case studies, with the Fleet Line and London Ringways being seen to only benefit London. However, focusing on projects from the same era and geographic region, London and the Southeast, allows comparisons to be drawn.

The Channel Tunnel project was announced in 1964 (HC Deb 6 February 1964) with construction commencing from the British and French sides in 1974. The project was cancelled in 1975 (HC Deb 20 January 1975) by the Labour government over concerns of rising costs at a time of economic crisis and soaring inflation and the uncertainty of the UK's continued membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) (Gourvish, 2006). Transportation through the tunnel was to be via rail with potential links running as far as Scotland and required additional infrastructure in the Southeast of England. The duration of the project covered several Conservative and Labour governments, with change in government being seen as a major factor in the cancellation (Morris and Hough, 1988). Despite the Channel Tunnel being an Anglo-French project many elements operated as two distinct projects (Morris and Hough, 1988). The intention is to focus on the period from when the Channel Tunnel project was greenlit in 1964 up until 1979, a realistic cut off point as the change of Government in 1979

brought a change of policies and the start of discussions for resurrecting the Channel Tunnel that was eventually built.

The third London airport at Maplin Sands was announced in April 1971 by the Conservative government (HC Deb 26 April 1971) and cancelled in July 1974 by the Labour government (HC Deb 18 July 1974). The organisational aspect of the project commenced with the formation of the Maplin Development Authority with the purpose “to reclaim the Maplin Sands for both the airport and a seaport, and proposals published for the designation of an adjoining new town, with new high-speed road and rail links to London’s orbital motorway and Underground.” (Senior, 1977). The range of secondary infrastructure projects dependant on the airport provides an opportunity for identifying the impact the cancellation had beyond the project itself.

The London Ringways motorways scheme, planned in the 1960s, was to place three concentric motorways connected with arterial roads in London. With only three sections having been built, it was cancelled in April 1973 and planning safeguards were removed (Hall, 1980). One completed section, the Westway opened in 1970, was met with environmental outrage (Hall, 1980) rather than the satisfaction Flyvbjerg’s (Flyvbjerg, 2014) “four sublimes” would suggest at the completion of a project. The London Ringways demonstrate how public opinion can change political opinion with Labour being persuaded to take the anti-roads position in the 1973 Greater London Council (GLC) elections (Hall, 1980).

The Fleet Line project ran from the late 1960s until 1979, evolving and changing as different political parties took control of the GLC and Government. In 1971 Government approved funding for the section from the Strand to Baker Street (HC Deb 20 October 1971). A funding decision for New Cross to the Strand was repeatedly delayed (HC Deb 20 October 1971, HC Deb 16 May 1973) with still no decision by August 1976 (HC Deb 4 August 1976). Parts of the line were constructed and renamed the Jubilee Line. The project offers a counterpoint to the pro-road lobby who were pushing for the development of the London Ringways instead of public transport (HC Deb 16 May 1973). The line was a victim of the economic climate of the era. The reduction of stations in the GLC’s revised proposals for the Fleet Line have similarities, on a conceptual level, with the 1966 Soccer World Cup reduction of stadiums to save money (Gillett and Tennent, 2017).

Provisional Conclusions and relevance for modern policy and project management

This study aims to build upon extant literature in the academic field of project management studies by critically analysing four late twentieth century British infrastructure megaprojects based upon empirical evidence, mainly archival sources. Specifically, we intend to develop the ideas of scholars such as, but not limited to, Flyvbjerg (2009; 2014), and Gillett and Tennent (2017) to examine the project experience encompassing why and how our chosen projects were initiated, undertaken but ultimately cancelled and managed-out, from the perspective of management decision-making.

There is the opportunity to probe the idea of British transport projects frequently (perhaps even perceived as ‘always’) failing. The broader concept that can be learnt from these case studies has a modern parallel with the High Speed Two (HS2) cancellation / cutbacks as plans would have been made based on the original announced HS2. An intended outcome of HS2 was the “Levelling Up” of the North of England and improved links with London, whereas an intended outcome of the Channel Tunnel was improved links with the Continent. Maplin Sands would

have upgraded the area and improved links with London. The Fleet Line would have provided links between South East London and the rest of the capital. Presently it is too early, and financial information too commercially sensitive, to assess the impact of HS2 changes, however the findings of these case studies may provide opportunities for future researchers to compare the projects.

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