

Interview with Isabelle Durant,

Deputy Prime Minister and Mobility and Transport Minister of Belgium

During the seminar "Sustainable Transport in the European Union: Managing Transport Demand, Fostering Economic Growth" which was organised by the Belgian Presidency in Brussels on July 12, 2001, Isabelle Durant, Deputy Prime Minister and Mobility and Transport Minister of Belgium had a separate talk with journalists. She emphasised that the Belgian Presidency will encourage at Community level the re-weighting of the transport policy with an approach that gives due consideration to the human and environmental dimensions. In the last decade transport, and especially freight transport, has increased in most EU member countries more quickly than the growth of the GDP. This resulted in the fact that transport has become a victim of its own success, causing serious problems in everyday life: congestion, air pollution, accidents and other harmful effects which cause the degradation of our cities and towns. This trend might be even accelerated when new members join the Union.

To avoid further deterioration, serious measures must be taken to manage transport. Technically raising the efficiency of transport is not sufficient in itself, because these gains are eliminated by the growth in the transport volumes. In fact, a new milestone was reached in this regard at the Göteborg summit this June, which decided that transport growth should be decoupled from economic growth. In conformity with this approach the Belgian Presidency will be concentrating on three major themes under the general heading of mobility: better environmental protection, improved transport safety, and better working conditions for professionals in this sector.

Two fundamental steps will follow which will encourage the shift in the common transport policy. Firstly, the new White Paper on the Common Transport Policy will soon appear which must continue to restore the balance in a context of sustainability. Secondly, the policy on trans-European networks will have to be redefined.

An informal joint Transport/Environment Council will meet on 14, 15 and 16 September in Belgium, only the second meeting of its kind after the one held in Great Britain in 1998 on the question of the integration of environmental and transport policies. The debate will focus on the crucial problem of the promotion of the transfer of freight away from the roads and towards more environmentally respectful methods, as an example of the policy essential to the integration of the two sectoral policies. The point is to ensure that the sharing between the various modes of transport favours those which produce less of an environmental impact, helping towards the concrete implementation of a sustainable transport strategy.

The introduction of prices which will reflect more precisely the real costs of transport (including the environmental and other social costs) will be a central element of the EU's policy for sustainable transport.

During the press talk Ms. Durant answered also the following questions of the representative of our magazine.

– The European Union just recently signed a new agreement with Hungary on freight transport, which will give more tax exemptions to international road transport. This is an obvious violation of the principles which you just mentioned. Does the Belgian Presidency intend to take any steps to remedy this situation?

– The EU gave more tax exemptions to Hungary for a limited period of time. After 2002, the EU will have to re-examine those exemptions. I am in favour of a reinforcing of the modal shift method, it means that I will speak for a suppression of a part of the exemptions and especially those with no environmental justification. But it will happen after the Belgian presidency.

– The Hungarian government is now submitting an ISPA application to finance the national road surface strengthening programme aimed at achieving 11.5 tons axle-load standard bearing capacity in order to meet Council Directive 96/53/EC. The implementation of this programme at the present conditions will require enormous sums from the Hungarian and EU taxpayers. What can the Belgian Presidency do in order to avoid such a violation of the polluter-pays-principle?

– The Belgian presidency organises an informal Council with the Ministers of Transport AND the Ministers of Environment. It is the second time only that those Ministers will meet together. I hope that this exercise will help the EU and the candidate countries to realise the disadvantages of the quick growth of the road transport and finally take measures for the future to revert the trends.

– A number of candidate countries, including Hungary have started to implement huge motorway construction programs, while existing road and especially rail infrastructure is often in a very bad state, and in many cases even deteriorating further. What is your viewpoint on this issue?

– The European Union is encouraging the candidate countries to improve rail infrastructure and put less effort to motorway construction. Better rail transport in the candidate countries results in less road transport and hence better environment in the EU countries too. People in our countries are becoming more and more aware of this issue, and if public opinion will become more unfavourable to the enlargement because of environmental concerns, that would greatly hinder the whole accession process. The governments of the candidate countries should also take into account the new research on the relation between economic growth and the construction of motorways. During the present seminar Professors Phil Goodwin and Roger Vickerman told us about the SACTRA study which concluded that there isn't necessarily a direct relationship between these two issues, and even when such a relation exists, there are generally more efficient ways of boosting economic growth than building motorways.

– It seems that in the candidate countries the transposition of the EU legislation is progressing quite well, but there is an enormous lag in practical implementation. For example, it is highly dubious whether Hungary will be able to comply with the EU ambient air quality norms, considering the rapid growth of road traffic and the acceleration of urban sprawl. How is the EU

planning to control the enforcement of the legislation in this case?

– The European Union will follow very closely also the practical implementation of the EU legislation in the candidate countries. All these countries must implement in reality the EU directives on air quality if they wish to join the Union. A timetable must be set up with concrete dates and targets to be fulfilled, and this will be strictly checked by the EU.

– How do you see the role of NGOs in the efforts to achieve sustainable transport?

– During our work we closely cooperate with NGOs. For example, this seminar was organised with the help of T&E, which has an enormous expertise on transport and a wide knowledge of the experts on this sector. T&E greatly contributed to the successful organisation of the seminar. We encourage also the NGOs in the candidate countries to get more involved in the process which will lead to sustainable transport. We hope that governments of the candidate countries will also act in conformity with the principles and practice of the European Union, and will give effective help to improve public participation in the decision-making concerning transport issues.

András Lukács