

## **A Road to Dream About**

**John Osmond**

When, as happens more and more frequently these days, I wake up at two or three in the morning I drive the A470 to get to sleep. When I start from Bute Street in Cardiff's docklands I usually drop off by the time I get to Rhayader. That may be because I get stuck, literally, behind a lorry at the crossroads in the town centre.

If I start from Llandudno I've usually driven well past Dolgellau before some of the straighter sections through Powys lull me off to sleep.

The problem with the A470 is the bends. Invariably, somewhere along its 168-mile length you get stuck behind a lorry or caravan, waiting for minute upon minute before you get a passing opportunity. That's why, when we launched the Institute of Welsh Affairs report on upgrading the road, on the day of the first elections to the National Assembly in 1999, we head-lined the press release *Queue-busting down the A470*.

Of course, there was more to it than making the driving easier, quicker and safer. Upgrading Wales' internal strategic road network is vital if our economy is to develop in a balanced way. It is vital, too, if people from all corners of Wales are to have reasonable access to key services and facilities that all too often are located in south-east Wales, whether it be Cardiff's Heath Hospital or the Millennium Stadium. Of course, we must improve north-south rail links. But for many people in large tracts of north and rural mid and west Wales the only option they have is to travel by road.

However, not a lot has been done to improve north-south road links since we launched our report in 1999. There's been a by-pass here and straightening a bend there, and some major works such as the current project to straighten the road between Betwys-y-Coed and Blaenau Ffestiniog. But there has never been a plan for the route as a whole, never an ambition to make this the key central artery, to unite north and south. Yet this is an essential project if the National Assembly is to engage effectively with all the people of Wales, and especially those who live in the north.

Now at last we may have a chance of this aspiration becoming a reality. The 'One Wales' coalition agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru is specific, declaring, 'We will press ahead with improvements to major road links between the North, the West and the South of Wales, investing £50 million for this period over the four year term.'

That may sound a lot of money but in road building terms it is not very much. How can we use the resources available to start the process of turning the A470 into the major road link Wales so badly needs? This will be one of the main questions addressed by the IWA's conference *Uniting the Nation*, being held in Llandudno on 18 January.

We will be arguing that the Assembly Government should enable us to update the report of that name that we published in 1999. The key proposal was for route widening at strategic intervals along the length of the road to enable regular two-lane

passing opportunities on south bound and north bound journeys. Fifty possible schemes for passing places were identified in the study, distributed not just over the A470, but the A487 between Maentwrog and Bangor, and the A483 between Newtown and Wrexham. The estimated cost at that time was £63 million, which should be within reach of the Assembly Government's budget today.

Together with other improvements already in the pipeline, this passing place scheme, similar to ones undertaken in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, would significantly enhance traffic flows and cut at least an hour from present north-south journey times.

As well as reducing the journey time, and bringing north and south close together, there will be an improvement in the consistency of travel times. That is to say, at present, a journey on the A470 from north to south can take anything from three-and-a-half to five-and-a-half hours, depending the time of year, time of day, and the weather. Regular passing places, coupled with comprehensive signposting, would reduce the impact of these imponderables.

And as well as the economic and social justice arguments, there is an important road safety dimension as well. Lorries, caravans and slow-moving farm vehicles rapidly clog up the route leading to long queues, especially at peak times in the summer. In turn this leads to frustration, drivers edging out in an effort to peer ahead and eventually, taking that risk that can be fatal.

However, there is a downside - if Ieuan Wyn Jones, our new Minister for Transport in the Assembly Government, were to go all out for the scheme. I would probably have to find an alternative method of getting to sleep at nights.

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