



INDEPENDENT THINKING

SCOTLAND'S YEAR OF ELECTORAL CHOICES



Everything but the GARL



Transport policy The cancellation of the Glasgow Airport Rail Link was an act of economic vandalism that the SNP has yet to adequately explain, says Wendy Alexander

Completing the Glasgow Airport Rail Link (GARL) will be in Scottish Labour's 2011 Scottish Parliament manifesto.

The Glasgow Airport Rail Link Bill was passed in 2006 with the support of all the main parties. Yet in September 2009 – after £60m had already been spent – the SNP announced its cancellation. The first time any Scottish government has ditched a parliamentary-approved capital project.

Axing GARL means the loss of an estimated 1,300 jobs, £300m investment to the West of Scotland, and the loss of a national infrastructure project.

Dropping GARL was a political

decision. The SNP did not consult with relevant bodies beforehand and it looked for no alternative funding mechanism.

Scotland's big six business organisations (CBI, IoD, FSB, Chambers of Commerce, Scottish Financial Enterprise and SCDI) jointly opposed the scrapping, saying: "In our view, the GARL project is not only desirable but affordable. It has been cancelled only as a result of the Scottish Government's priorities lying elsewhere and ministers' decisions not to use the full range of funding options and revenue streams with regard to infrastructure development."

Their representations were to no avail. Even the SNP's terrible showing in the Glasgow North East by-election, in which GARL's cancellation featured heavily, did not force an SNP rethink.

It emerged recently that the SNP rejected offers from Network Rail last September to help fund the project. But the cabinet secretary John Swinney never told Parliament about these offers. Neither was the Scottish Futures Trust – the government's own infrastructure finance body – invited to look at alternative financing, nor relevant councils invited to contribute.

The SNP have never satisfactorily explained why GARL was the capital project chosen for the chop – not least if Network Rail would have contributed to completing it.

We now know:

- Alternative funding was offered and rejected;
- GARL is a high value money rail project;

- Completion costs, estimated at £175m over four years, would have cost less than two per cent per annum of the annual capital budget.

Capital constraints are real but the cost of completing GARL had not risen significantly in the last year above prevailing estimates. Within the Scottish Government's £3.2bn capital budget there is always headroom. For example, the £54m slippage in Edinburgh trams last year.

The SNP have deliberately withheld project-by-project capital spending forecasts. Encouragingly, co-operation between the opposition parties will now force this information into the public domain. At least in future the Scottish Parliament will be able to track the timeliness and outturn costs of all major government-financed capital projects in Scotland.

GARL's cancellation undermines tourism development, economic growth and integrated transport across Scotland. GARL was an integral part of Glasgow's 2014 Commonwealth Games bid. Glasgow Airport is Scotland's long-haul and transatlantic

gateway, providing international connectivity and supporting Scottish tourism. Every major city in Europe with a railway near an airport seeks to link the two together. It was also the SNP who cancelled the planned Edinburgh Airport Rail Link within weeks of coming to office in 2007.

This mid-construction cancellation was an act of economic vandalism. The SNP made no attempt to revisit the route, renegotiate with partners or identify alternative funding, despite the united support of the Scottish business community.

It exposes the SNP to the charge of partisanship in infrastructure projects. It also reveals the consequences of yet another SNP broken promise – a workable alternative to PPP. The SNP's abject failure to find an alternative to PPP means capital investment in Scotland is falling behind the rest of the UK. The price is now being paid by Scotland's construction industry, its transport infrastructure and the wider Scottish economy. ●

Wendy Alexander is Scottish Labour MSP for Paisley North



A passenger on her way to Glasgow Airport's new security block: GARL's cancellation undermines economic growth across Scotland says Alexander