

Martin Kettle explores a threat to the British psyche  
**Tunnel Vision**

As you read this, tunnellers from France and tunnellers from England are just over four miles apart under the English Channel and closing on each other all the time. By the end of the year, they will have met. And by 1993, when the tunnel opens, we will all be able to travel from Britain to the European continent directly on dry land for the first time since the Ice Age.

By any standards, the Channel Tunnel is an extraordinary development for Britain. It is a giant engineering project of course, with all the challenges which that entails. It is an agenda-changing addition to the infrastructure of Britain, challenging every assumption we make about transport and distribution. And, no less important, it will alter all of our mental infrastructure too.

Yet somehow the longer they go on digging it, the less the British seem to be convinced about the project. There is something very eloquently emblematic about the fact that as the two groups of tunnellers near one another, the French are four months ahead of their schedule, while we British are five months behind ours. Were there ever more reluctant grubbers?

It is impossible as well to ignore the half-hearted way that British capital has involved itself in the project. *Not* involved itself would actually be more accurate.

Originally, remember, the Channel Tunnel was to be Mrs Thatcher's way of providing a great showcase for the private sector's commitment to investment, to big ideas and to long-termism. British enterprise would match French subsidies step for step.

But it has turned out almost the opposite, with the Bank of England battling to persuade reluctant investors to lock money up in the project, and with one financial and management crisis after another.

And just as the French are increasingly doing the digging of the tunnel, so they are increasingly its owners. Only 22% of the Anglo-French shares are now owned on this

side of the water.

Though the banks are reluctant, so far they have always been prepared in the last resort to cough up. The possibility now is that the clash of interests between the constructors - who want costs and therefore profits to rise - and the tunnel company - which wants to keep costs down to enable the Eurotunnel consortium to stay solvent and recoup its outlay as quickly as possible - will leave the project in the worst of both financial worlds. Money will go into it, but it may be that nothing emerges. It will be the exact equivalent of the tunnelling machines themselves, which are too big to remove from the tunnel and which will eventually be buried in the walls they are carving.

As with the tunnel, so also with its links. On the French side, the TGV trains stand ready and waiting, the line all-but-constructed to carry trains from Paris and Brussels. Lille, which battled to ensure that the TGV went right through the heart of the city, has become one of the most economically dynamic and regenerated areas of Europe.

On the British side, the contrast is stark, and not without a certain national pride either. There is no line connecting the tunnel to London, let alone the north and Scot-

land. There is no agreement about what kind of track or trains might be built - if any. In south-east London and Kent, communities rise up to keep the rail link out of their backyards.

Of course, plenty of public money is spent on the project, but here again Britain is falling between two stools. It is not enough to match the French commitment to the project; but too much to allow market forces to decide whether there really is a demand for the tunnel.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the political vultures have been hovering overhead for several months now. The new Right never liked the tunnel much. Now they are well into their second chorus of *We Told You So*. Alfred Sherman recently suggested that the whole thing should simply be left to the French, since the project is in their interests rather than ours. And Bernard Levin wrote that the tunnel is doomed to be a multi-billion pound white elephant which might just go into profit in the last decade of the 21st century.

Mrs Thatcher's government has not given way to such seditious talk yet. But the modern Conservative Party is hopelessly caught between the options. Cecil Parkinson, the transport secretary, though far from unique, is

the most glaring example of their ambiguous attitude. With one hand he is busy planning for a future with the tunnel, while with the other he is scrapping any aspect of it which might put southern Tory marginals at risk.

Ironically, the Labour Party's enthusiasm for the tunnel now also seems to contribute to the uncertainties. Its transport spokesperson, John Prescott, has said that a Labour government would scrap the tunnel link route which the Conservatives officially support into south London. Instead, Labour wants a north-Kent freight and passenger route linking into the wider BR network. That is an entirely sensible policy, but



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the fact that a Labour government is now regarded as a serious possibility means the Tories' plans are themselves red-lined.

So it is all too evident how the Channel Tunnel has become a metaphor for the British relationship with Europe. And what a dismal one it is. We were late starting - a couple of decades late, at least. We still have no vision of how the project might help to transform our lives, but rather, we are preoccupied with its impact on the environment, on house prices and on the C2 vote in the southeast.

Thatcherism was always obsessed with making ideological gestures over public spending. Now it is entirely reduced to them. Yet it is also preoccupied with parochialism which looms all the larger in the light of Labour's opinion-poll lead. That combination now threatens the very life of the Anglo-French link. If the tunnel were to shut down in mid-Channel, it would be a fitting epitaph to an approach which could not match its grandiose aims in its hopelessly indecisive implementation.

