



## >Oh Dam.

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You can't beat a whacking great infrastructure project for inserting a twinkle into a politician's eye. This is his chance to carve his place in history, as the great visionary who rode roughshod over the doubts of less far-sighted types who could not lift up their eyes past the red ink all over the departmental budget. Tunnels, bridges, dams and dare I mention ports and high speed rail links, such are the projects of choice for our leaders to create their legacy at our expense, and to slip some tidy little contracts to their mates.

The tiny little fly in this huge vat of ointment, however, is the quite appalling record of megaprojects in delivering anything like the benefits they promised at anywhere near the original cost estimate. One could be forgiven for expecting that a list of the most spectacular white elephants of recent times would include a few of the usual suspects from the rogues' gallery of local dictators, but they are mere beginners compared to the governments of the first world.

It is easy enough to argue that Mobutu was a little ambitious when he launched the Zairean space programme, and the international airport at his home village of Gbadolite may now seem a touch surplus to requirements, but the really big numbers are being racked up by the governments that can afford to think on an epic scale. Cambridge University Press has recently published an appraisal of this phenomenon, a tome entitled "Megaprojects and Risk: an Anatomy of Ambition," which should be required reading for anybody in government with any role of budgetary oversight.

I wouldn't recommend attempting to list the authors after a glass or two of the good stuff, but Messrs Bent Flyvbjerg, Nils Bruzelius and Werner Rothengatter make a strong case for their view that many megaprojects only get the green light because of systematic deceit in the planning stages. Costs are underestimated and benefits exaggerated grotesquely to get the project going, and it is only years down the line that it becomes apparent what a fine mess has been developed.

Anybody who's ever done an alteration to a house will know that you have to allow a bit of padding in the budget, indeed many a builder seems to use the original quote as a mere basis for negotiation, but domestic over-runs are nothing to what a government can achieve. History shows us that the Suez Canal cost twenty times the original estimate, the Sydney Opera House fifteen times. That soon to be extinct wonder of aviation, Concorde, sneaked in at twelve times the estimate, while after several near bankruptcies the Channel Tunnel overran construction costs by 80% and is carrying about a third of the expected traffic.

Different attitudes to projects' environmental impact are demonstrated on the rail links to the Tunnel. The typically robust French drew a straight line and smacked a high speed track down, whereas on the English side the train meanders at just above walking pace round the nest of every marsh warbler that may have tweeted an objection. Perhaps the most extreme example of this attention to the wellbeing of our feathered friends comes from the high-speed Hannover to Berlin rail link. The original route chosen passed close to a breeding ground of rare bustards, so it was changed to go underground at an estimated cost of £10m per bustard saved, then rerouted again to create a much longer journey, thus slashing passenger demand.

The list of disasters goes on and on. Try the British Library – fifteen years behind schedule, £450m over budget, and a quality control team pointing out an impressive 230 000 "items needing correction." The track record is appalling, yet wherever you look in the world, there are megaprojects in abundance, driven by an unholy alliance of politicians, builders and financiers who have more of an interest in getting the project going than they have accountability in its eventual success or failure.

Our government has already fallen for one of the oldest tricks in the book – buy this submarine and we'll throw in a dozen factories and a set of



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kitchen knives – and we can but hope that it doesn't get wooed by the glamour of a megaproject or two without a proper look at the implications.

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