



Political leadership and determination key to securing the future of the UK's infrastructure



Nick Baveystock, Director General of the ICE, argues that although the policy environment for infrastructure investment and delivery has improved, politicians need to better articulate both their long-term vision for infrastructure and its benefits.

Politicians of all parties agree that the UK's ability to generate and sustain growth and improve our quality of life depends on infrastructure that functions reliably and efficiently. Infrastructure regenerates communities, creates jobs and ploughs investment back into the local economy.

But there are difficult political decisions ahead. Policymakers face significant national and international pressures on successfully investing in and delivering our infrastructure; construction industry recovery is gathering momentum but still fragile; and we're dealing with a historic deficit in infrastructure investment. Added to this are climate change targets, extreme weather events looming on the horizon and increasing demands from a growing population.

Infrastructure development requires strategic, long-term policy planning - yet not enough effective decision making takes place outside of short electoral cycles, and not enough political consensus on long-term priorities and contentious projects is reached. There have been attempts to improve the environment for infrastructure delivery through the creation of InfrastructureUK, publication of the National Infrastructure Plan and initiatives like Lord Deighton's Capability Review. To build on this, business and industry need to see a political climate of consensus that will provide a long-term strategy for infrastructure.

What's needed is political will, vision and leadership – from whichever party or parties holds power next May. We can't remove politics from infrastructure, but all too often MPs and civil servants specify inputs, when they should be defining outcomes and the key strategic effects that the UK seeks from our infrastructure systems.

Politicians and industry need to help the electorate better understand the infrastructure we all use. This means proactively engaging with communities on the strategic need for infrastructure and the potential projects that may deliver this. In addition, the current approach to compensating people for the impacts of infrastructure projects is reactive and perceived as a defensive tool. ICE proposes a wide ranging and well informed programme of engagement to inform the approach to compensation.

Sir John Armit's consultation for the Labour Party, which includes a Draft Bill on the National Infrastructure Commission and the Parliamentary framework within which it would operate, closes today. It raises important questions around our current approach to infrastructure investment and delivery. ICE believes that ahead of next May's Election, all parties need to consider how they would articulate a long-term vision for infrastructure, develop a plan that attracts investors and creates confidence within the industry and engages communities in infrastructure development and benefits from the outset.

As the independent voice of infrastructure representing over 85,000 civil engineers, ICE can help provide solutions to the infrastructure challenges ahead. But it is for politicians to engage with, and lead, the public debate. It is politicians who discuss and agree strategic outcomes, and who must then engage the public to determine how best to deliver those outcomes - in an informed discussion, with options and choices properly and maturely set out. It is politicians who create the conditions for investment and oversee effective implementation - and ultimately, who must have the courage of their convictions to make difficult decisions and see them through.