River Tweed in Scotland

Britain: Parallels with Indonesia

Not surprisingly the big issue in Britain at the moment relates to the upcoming referendum about staying in or leaving the European Union – commonly known as Brexit. A second issue is the continuing concern over infrastructure matters, many similar to those we discuss in Indonesia. London traffic, while not reaching Jakarta proportions, is still plagued by many jams, especially at key travel times and even with the introduction of restrictions on parking and other charges.

There is always a problem of capacity for all large cities, but there is no doubt that, without a large network of busy commuter rail links to the suburbs and the well-established underground, London would long ago have ground to a halt.

In the future of Greater Jakarta, some fresh thinking is required over how the city is to address the challenge of not only dealing with today's problems but also the rapid rate of urbanization that is to take place over the coming years. This is not just over improving traffic movements but also towards addressing its future water supply and sanitation requirements, complicated by the subsidence of the north of the city.

As an aside, I had a ride in an all-electric Tesla car, which was most impressive. Indeed, electric and driverless vehicles are the shape of the future, with the result of less air pollution.

Scott Younger
President commissioner of Glendale Partners and director of Nusantara Infrastructure.
International Chancellor, President University

In Britain, the energy debate and climate change are continuing topics of conversation.

The cancellation of the subsidies to encourage windfarm and solar projects, which encouraged considerable interest and follow-through on projects in these areas, has led to a brake on new projects. The wind energy sector is likely to be blown to offshore developments and the solar sector has had to rethink how it progresses in the UK. It is an obvious form of renewable energy for Indonesia.

A major concern in Britain is the proposed development of the third nuclear power plant at Hinckley Point. Apart from cost, the plan to build with aspects of the project involving some new technology, not yet totally debugged, is causing headaches. Large base-load power is needed and the moratorium on fossil fuels in Britain means that nuclear is an obvious direction for the country to go, even though it takes many years to complete a nuclear facility from conception to operation.

The proposed large tidal power project to be built at Swansea Bay has run into contractual difficulties, both technical and financial, and the project is going back for review since clearly some of the project components need better definition. The project, which has required considerable environmental scrutiny, is a first phase of complementary ones in the area which together could supply a significant input to Britain's electricity demand. In Indonesia, British company SBS Ltd. is preparing to construct the first ocean energy project in the region.

The plan for the first high-speed train, HS2, between London and Birmingham, remains high-profile while the debate for or against it is regularly aired in the press. Those against comment that the multibillion price tag could be better deployed on other needed infrastructure. Sounds familiar!

Flooding remains a continual issue. As everywhere, it is convenient to build cities and other new community expansions at low levels, but the often unforeseen and generally unplanned consequence of this is the very considerable changes that are brought about to the natural drainage for storm conditions through the construction of roads and buildings.

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Planning requirements are often inadequately thought through and the results of permissions granted cause huge costs in subsequent repairs and maintenance in the years that follow. The problems that we face in Jakarta are a witness to this problem, even though the consequences of its astonishing growth over the past four decades might have been difficult to comprehend at that time.

I was down in the Scottish border country briefly, walking along the banks of the pleasant River Tweed in the lovely border town of Peebles, well upstream of the river which exits into the North Sea on the east coast of the border between Scotland and England.

Contrast the two figures shown from the normal conditions I witnessed this past month and the storm flood that flooded low-lying property at the turn of the year, one of several floods recorded in Britain this past year. The flood was like one some 70 years ago, and that one was worse. People tend to refer to climate change but the causes are more mundane and human-induced. Engineers have to make decisions when designing on storm floods to ensure that people are not going to be troubled within a project life cycle.

For water-related projects a 100-year return cycle is often adopted, but the intervention of later constructions (obstructions) as population expands, causing the need for more building, often cuts across the design thinking of a century before.

Now the population of the world is some four times greater than that of 80 years ago, never mind the rapid urbanization that is currently taking place, especially in Asia. In the past half century, accelerated upstream cutting down of trees and natural vegetation has exacerbated the problem in the built-up areas below.

Perhaps the abiding message of the past few weeks is that, while emerging economies such as Indonesia have huge infrastructure demands to address, the mature economies of the West face similar challenging problems while they grasp the problems of needing to replace old infrastracture and also address perceived problems from changes in climate.

It does not matter where we are, the large population of today's world, coupled with steady urbanization, will mean most countries have to put infrastructure needs at the top of the agenda.