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How to Sell a Railway: Lessons on the privatisation of Three Dutch Railway Projects

Joop Koppenjan* and Martijn Leijten**
Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management
Delft University of Technology
P.O. Box 5015
2600 GA Delft
The Netherlands
* tel.: +31 15 2788062
fax: +31 15 2786439
e-mail: j.f.m.koppenjan@tudelft.nl
** tel.: +31 15 2783561
fax: +31 15 2786439
e-mail: m.leijten@tudelft.nl

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Abstract

In this contribution, we provide a comparative analysis of the Dutch government's attempts to realize private investments in three national railway mega-projects: the Betuwe Route, a dedicated freight railway line connecting the Rotterdam harbour to the German rail network, the High Speed Line (HSL South) between the Belgian border and Amsterdam and the Zuiderzee Line between Amsterdam and Groningen, for which a private consortium led by Siemens suggests the use of Maglev technology. The privatisation of the first two railway lines was attempted for during the nineties and beginning of this decade. In June 2007 operation of the Betuwe Route began. To date, the government has not succeeded in involving private parties in the Betuwe Route. Although the privatization of the HSL South has partly been realized by engaging into a complex mix of contract-arrangements, it has proven difficult to keep under control. Recently operation has been postponed until October 2008.

During the project study of the third railway project, which started in 2000, government again tried to realize privatisation while avoiding the mistakes of the earlier two projects. In 2005 government decided not to move forward with the tender procedure and consider alternatives.

Building on theory and earlier experiences with privatisation and public private partnerships we compare the three cases with respect to motives for privatization, strategies and results. We seek explanations for the way privatization evolved within each project and generic lessons that can be drawn from the cases.

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