

The best tip this winter?

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Snowflakes bring out the effects of privatisation and forced supply and demand on the Dutch railways. Meanwhile motorists go without good winter advice.

[O011 Image 2](#)

These are the days to give winter advice to motorists, such as on how to avoid skidding, winter tyres, anti-freeze, etc. The Netherlands' first snowfalls in mid-December immediately caused record traffic jams. The best advice might have been just to stay at home, or take the train.

However, trains and buses (and even trams) ground to a halt in the thin layer of snow which would not have even brought out the snowploughs in Scandinavia, but in the Netherlands caused the worst traffic infarction in years. The prize for the most striking winter tip would have to go to the Dutch Railways (NS) and rail operator Prorail (i.e. who are supposed to be *pro-rail*) with their advice: PLEASE DON'T TAKE THE TRAIN!

I really had to be somewhere, so I took my car, which enabled me to reach my destination without a problem via slippery residential streets and easily traversable freeways. The 'frozen' automobile industry could not have wished for a better Christmas message – free automobile advertising, more effective than the scrapping subsidy. The announcement was utterly debilitating to public transport, especially when the high-speed Eurostar froze to a standstill in the Chunnel.

'Shameless display of unreliability'

If there is one thing winter is good for, it's for promoting the train as a reliable and safe alternative to cars that can't get through the weather. It was exactly this message that the NS had impressed upon commuters in a recent advertising campaign – a waste of money, it seems, after this shameless display of unreliability.

I personally *had* to go by car, because even cycling was nearly impossible thanks to municipal cost cutting on snowploughs and dwindling salt reserves. Our famed cycling paths became icy traps, and that in the Netherlands, the cycling nation. I bet that after this first week of snow, thousands of public transport users decided to buy a (second) car, and to say goodbye to the NS and those bus companies with fancy-sounding names (*Connexion*, *Arriva* – hardly!).

The Dutch Railways' official excuse was that some switches freeze solid when this much snow falls. That never used to happen. And everybody wonders, with good reason, why this is never a

problem in countries with real winters, such as Switzerland, where I have often travelled by train in the winter.

[O024 Image 1](#)

The answer is that Swiss Railways are simply well-organised, with staff for everything (conductors, station managers, oil-men) and on-the-spot organisation. They run like Swiss clockwork, despite meters of snow. Even the Belgian Railways, hardly famous for their efficiency, had organised additional staff along the tracks and had no switch problems.

Just try to find that in the Netherlands! In our country, many 'unprofitable' railway jobs have been economised away and replaced by computers, or by external agency staff on ad-hoc contracts. These agencies first need to direct their people by car through the snow to a faulty switch. Earlier, NS staff would have just solved this type of problem on the spot; nowadays the railways remain paralysed for hours until the snow has been fired away.

'Het-up MPs present a hypocritical picture'

This kind of 'efficiency' is the result of *privatisation* and forced *supply and demand* (i.e.: cutting costs as much as possible on public services, stripping them bare in order to maximise private profits). Thorough preparation for an icy winter costs a couple of million, so the investment is simply not made (or not enough, at any rate). NS and Prorail are subject to the tyranny of financial controllers and short-sighted politicians who no longer have eyes for social benefit, but only for percentages.

Het-up MPs who then start pontificating about the sad state of affairs regarding the trains present a rather hypocritical picture, given their responsibility for the privatisation of public transport and the huge profits raked in by the NS.

The NS at first even refused to compensate the swindled customers, claiming that "circumstances were beyond our control"! Finally they had to give in. I'm worried that next winter the NS might start handing out skid chains...

'Good for the engine, the environment and your health'

Meanwhile, seven million car owners are doing without the three *winter tips* that could save them money and millions of litres of fuel in freezing or snowy weather. For years now, the government, car magazines, the automobile sector and the media have failed to provide the necessary promotion of motoring advice for both environmentally friendly and safe driving during winter. Only ANWB, the Dutch AA, gave free internet advise, but who will read that?

These three 'forgotten' winter tips could result in the saving of around 250 million litres of fuel and 0.5 million metric tonnes (Mtonne) of CO₂:

- *Frost first, engine second!* Good for the engine, the environment and your health (a cold engine consumes 300 per cent more fuel, resulting in maximum air pollution). *Use a roof or windshield frost cover!* Ideal for people who don't want to scrape the frost off their car every morning. It also saves time and fuel, and prevents scratches and cold hands. *Use the accelerator sparingly and apply ecodriving, especially now!* Those who want to get home in one piece driving on slippery roads, should drive with the fewest possible revs in the highest possible gear – a tip which, incidentally, applies all year round.