

The Future for Buses: an illusory vision, Dr. Mayer Hillman, May 1999

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*Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus at the Policy Studies Institute, argues in the June 1999 issue of *Town and Country Planning* the government's vision of the bus playing a major part in providing a matching alternative to the car is illusory and is unlikely to deliver significant results. Instead priority should be given to a much more cost-effective investment programme in walking & cycling networks, with bus investment taking 3rd place. The full article is published below, with his permission.*

Last year's Transport White Paper states that motorists will not readily switch to public transport unless it is significantly better and more reliable. And the recent report of the House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Inquiry on that White Paper argues that it would be unreasonable to penalise them until this has been done. Indeed, it is a widely shared tenet of transport policy that buses must be seen as a key element of local transport planning. At the heart of the Consultation Paper on the future of the bus therefore lies the Government's declared intention of making such improvements to the quality of journeys by bus that people no longer perceive it as a workhorse but as a thoroughbred and consequently transfer a significant proportion of the journeys they currently make by car to it.

Whilst there is clearly ample scope for enhancing its quality, and there can be few who would not welcome that, much evidence exists to indicate that the bus would then be chosen in preference to the car for very few journeys. Moreover, there are strong grounds for questioning whether the proposed strategy will work as intended and would be anywhere near as cost-effective as other strategies favouring the non-motorised modes. Nor would it be as efficient in delivering a range of other related public policy objectives.

The first reason for this is that the car's attractions for door-to-door travel, not least in terms of speed, convenience, reliability and comfort, can only rarely be matched by the bus. Just in terms of overall travel time, the National Travel Survey shows the car to be much faster than equivalent journeys by bus. Even the bicycle easily outpaces the bus on most urban journeys. Taking account of the roughly 50 per cent of time spent on the walk, wait and walk stages of bus journeys (the Consultation Paper surprisingly makes no reference to the walk stages), buses would have to be driven between stops at unrealistically high speeds to compete with the car or bicycle. In any case, the consequent need to accelerate and decelerate sharply would result in an uncomfortable ride.

In the main, transfer to the bus can only be achieved where use of the car is deterred by adopting strict measures on parking restraint and other prohibitions on its use. An effective policy to that end would have to extend well beyond applying solely to commuter travel for this accounts for only one in seven of all journeys of which only a minority are to locations such as urban centres in which limits on car use can be justified on grounds of insufficiency of road space and parking capacity. It is disingenuous to imply that bus use in these circumstances would be the outcome of success in achieving the White Paper's aim of increasing personal choice!

Moreover, a policy to require that limits on car use apply in other locations and on other types of journey, where bus services are likely to be far less viable and therefore require more subsidy, would sit uneasily with

1. the reassurance contained in John Prescott's Forward to the White Paper of wishing to 'persuade people to use their cars a little (sic) less and public transport a little (sic) more';
2. its moderating affirmation that we are not forcing people out of their cars and 'great sacrifices aren't called for'; and
3. its hostage to fortune prediction that the number of people owning cars will continue to increase - so we also need to make life better for the motorist.

Such statements give the strong impression that it is inadmissible in most situations to deny people the opportunity of using their cars when they want and, even where that may be desirable, they have an inalienable right to go on doing so unless a matching alternative is available.

The second reason why the proposed policy on promoting a significant transfer of travel to the bus is likely to fail is because it is incorrectly based on three related fallacious assumptions. The first is that the vast increase in car use has come about owing to dissatisfaction with public transport; the second that therefore with improved bus services, car users can be encouraged to transfer back to the bus. The third is that the four billion journeys currently made by bus each year is in impressive number on which effective policies can build significantly.

However, bus journeys at present account for only six per cent of all journeys and represent an average of only 80 journeys per person each year (and not many more even by women pensioners in spite of the availability of concessionary fares for them and their relatively low level of car ownership). It is worth noting too from analysis of National Travel Survey data covering the last 20 years that for each passenger kilometre lost to buses, 11 more have been added to car travel. Thus, the great majority of the change in people's patterns of travel has not resulted from transfer from public transport but from newly generated car use associated with the geographically dispersed patterns of activity that the rise in car ownership allows. As the Audit Commission's Review of Local Transport, published earlier in the year, points out, recent modest increases in patronage from improved bus services (typically resulting from far higher levels of spending by local authorities than by bus operators) are generally due to existing passengers travelling more often rather than car users being attracted to use these services.

The third reason for anticipating major disappointment stems from the fact that, whilst the Government repeatedly declares its intention of getting value for money in delivering an alternative to the car, it sees investment in public transport as the principal means of doing so. However, investment in alternatives is not evaluated on a level playing field. The non-motorised modes, especially cycling, are not seen as perhaps having far more scope nor, in all likelihood, the ability to deliver far more cost-effective ways, both in terms of capital expenditure and running costs, of providing a more realistic alternative to the car for most urban journeys.

Data from the Dutch National Travel Survey contain the grounds for this assertion. Whilst the quality of public transport there is significantly higher than in this country, it is salutary to note that the proportion of journeys made by it is far lower there. The explanation for this is that, close on 30 years ago, the Dutch Government recognised how advantageous it would be to adopt a strategy on encouraging people to cycle by creating safe networks for it. As a consequence, about 30 per cent of all journeys in the Netherlands are now made in this way - even women pensioners do not make a much lower a proportion. This cannot be simply explained by the topography there: other Continental countries, including Switzerland, have also chosen a similar strategy with considerable effect.

A fourth reason for questioning the emphasis placed on the role of buses is oversight of the fact that cycling furthers other Government policy objectives far more effectively and cheaply than they can. An insufficiently recognised benefit of investing in encouraging people to use the bicycle rather than the bus as a means of transport for many of their journeys is its effectiveness in promoting a healthy lifestyle and thereby reducing the burden on the health service. And, of course, the bicycle makes no contribution to traffic noise, local pollution or greenhouse gases, in marked contrast to the bus which uses fuel relatively intensively per passenger, especially in off-peak hours. The White Paper acknowledges that buses only usually emit less carbon dioxide than does a person travelling by car. This may prove to be often if they were to be used increasingly in off-peak - with its associated low seat occupancies.

The arguments set out above, substantiated by fact and figure from Government sources and well-researched studies, suggest that the widely-held vision of the bus playing a major part in providing a matching alternative to the car is illusory. The high expectations attached to a strategy founded in that belief are likely to be dashed. Not only does it entail relatively high cost but also, as a consequence, it effectively short-changes a strategy based on cycling as the far more realistic alternative to the car for many urban journeys. The principal conclusion therefore should be that transport provision is prioritised in favour of safe and convenient networks for cycling and walking followed by improvements to bus services.

Papers setting out these arguments have been drawn to the attention of politicians and civil servants at the DETR (and formerly at the Department of Transport) for many years. But the implicit exaggeration of the

future role of buses that the Consultation Paper demonstrates - and, implicitly, the considerable understatement of that of cycling - continues.

Insofar as the validity of the case for this prioritising of transport provision remains unchallenged, the only explanation could be the reluctance of these decision-makers to acknowledge that they may have been mistaken in the past as well as the need they see to pander to the ill-informed public opinion that public transport is the principal panacea for our transport ills. If that is true, it calls into question the methods used in applying research findings and in critically assessing the objectivity of contributions to the consultation process. It also represents a disturbing commentary on their unwillingness to change course in a radical rather than the limited way that is being currently followed.

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