

Transport policy is at a crossroads, Paul Gannon, August 1999

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Transport policy is at a crossroads. From all reports it seems as if the Prime Minister may ditch any real commitment to roll back the Great Car Economy. Tony Blair has been advised that car drivers form a massive block of the electorate and they will be prepared to penalise political parties that penalise their use of their cars.

When Tony Blair swanned past congested motorists by using the bus lane on the M4, he must have been full aware of the signal he was sending to motorists. No British government has ever attached more importance to sending the right message than Mr Blair's. His message was a two-fingered salute to John Prescott and his attempts to do something to change transport priorities.



John Prescott - increasingly isolated in government

Another signal to the electorate about the real attitude of important parts of the government and civil service towards change on the road, is the undue haste with which they have given way to the demands of the anti-cyclist lobby for the new fixed-penalties for a wide range of cycling offences. Contrast that with a recent debate in the Lords on demands for banning the use in motor vehicles of mobile phones. Despite the growing evidence of their involvement in causing crashes, the usual response from the Home Office was paraded: not enough evidence of a problem; police say no need for new offence; current laws and penalties sufficient; and difficulties of enforcement; therefore no change needed.

Similarly, campaigns over the years, by pedestrian and cyclist groups as well as road crash victim organisations such as RoadPeace, for lower speed limits, banning bull bars, etc have been dismissed with the same trite reasons.

All these considerations could easily have been applied to the new cycling offences, but weren't. The prejudice against cycling remains firmly entrenched in major parts of government (local and central), police and judiciary. They know that 55 pedestrians are killed on the pavement every year - by motor vehicles. The number of pedestrians killed by cyclists, on the other hand, is so low as to escape the statistics, being mixed up with numbers of pedestrians and cyclists killed in any accident involving just cyclists and pedestrians - 4 in 1996, who could have been either a cyclist or a pedestrian.

So much for evidence-based policing. Cyclists are a nuisance and the Home Office, police and courts will continue to treat them as such - whatever the policies of the Department of Environment and Transport (DETR).



No cycling! - still the knee jerk reaction of British government & judiciary

Now the motor vehicle lobby is battling to neutralise the DETR's integrated transport policy. This is every minor battle over parking versus a cycle lane writ large. Will the "concern expressed by residents" predominate, on a national level, over the commitment to the integrated transport policy?

Let's be absolutely clear about one thing - the motor vehicle lobby is large, rich, vocal and determined to undermine any serious attempt to change the transport policy of the last fifty years.

Saloon bar insights - such as lower speeds cause more pollution than higher speeds - are manufactured by the industry and its lieutenants in the press and spread from driver to driver, and then paraded as the Scientific Truth. A senior Camden councillor only recently repeated the myth that slower traffic means more pollution, using this perversion of the basic laws of physics as a reason for not introducing traffic calming measures.

The Conservative Party has already decided nationally to head full pelt down the route to more roads, higher speed limits, and no speed bumps in the hope of encouraging their electoral revival! We are seeing the effects already here in Camden. Locally we have a very productive forum, the Cyclists and Pedestrians Liaison Committee, which brings together local cyclist and pedestrian groups with councillors and officials. At the last meeting a Conservative councillor brought along a motor cyclist who fulminated at incoherent length about cyclists and pedestrians, and the councillor himself tried to politicise the meeting, which normally concentrates on issues about cycle and pedestrian-friendly street engineering, with demands for a discussion about the recent riot in the City of London!

The battle for the hearts and minds of the motorist is on - and we are the most likely casualties. The argument that many a motorist also wants better public transport, better cycling facilities, and a better environment is lost on the one-dimensional thinking that seems to predominate at Number 10 Downing Street about this issue.

Actually this is not a surprise. The key decision about transport policy was taken by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown well before May 1997 when New Labour was elected to power. The decision was not to fund change in transport policy by public money.

The tube and the railways are the classic example. Privatisation, under whatever form, is the alternative to public funding of renewal of the crumbling infrastructure. Yet as the railway and bus privatisation have amply demonstrated, the policy doesn't work.

It will take many billions and several decades to improve the railways and the tube. At the moment one can only say that policy remains in limbo. The Treasury wants to cut transport spending even further, while private rail and bus operators are subject to absurdly light regulation, and there is no guarantee that John Prescott will get time to legislate to toughen the regime. And even if he does get the time, it will take a few years to test whether tighter controls can force the private sector to deliver real improvements - and there is no encouragement at all from history of governments forcing private investors to invest in things they don't want to invest in.

Privatisation, as understood by British entrepreneurs, has effectively depended on state subsidies and regulatory feebleness; if the railways and tube are to be different they will pull out.

In the meantime the tube goes through ever more closures - whole lines, whole stations, even the whole system on occasion. And the railways get slower, more overcrowded, dirtier and more expensive. Things are getting much worse and will continue to do so for some time yet - and there is no sign yet of any changes of substance. The official policy of London Underground is to discourage people from using the tube. Rather than providing capacity for extra passengers, London Underground wants to carry fewer people.

The most obvious solution to urban public transport problems in Britain would be a serious investment programme in modern tram technology. But this too is ruled out by the Treasury because it would demand public money.



An investment programme in modern tram technology is essential - but demands a commitment to investment by the government

True, it is possible that a few local authorities may be allowed to introduce road charging and taxes on workplace parking spaces, and even to borrow against potential future income to fund immediate public transport projects. But, if you're relying on that to get you to work, you could have a long wait. A few trials make start by 2004 - but they must cross a number of serious hurdles before then. The motor vehicle lobby will have plenty of opportunities to divert these plans down a cul-de-sac.

So we are left with the buses! Left standing waiting is my experience of London's buses - especially my local service number 10 which has an official timetable of one bus every 8 minutes during the day, but seldom produces more than one bus every 30 minutes and often fails to turn up in less than an hour!



C12 bus service - this useful route which connected thousands of north London residents to Kings Cross was axed a few days before John Prescott announced his integrated transport strategy.

The problems facing London's buses are formidable - not least the attitude of London Transport. The organisation which runs the bus service is quoted by the Ham & High newspaper as justifying its refusal to introduce a new bus service that could alleviate the school run in parts of Camden by arguing that more buses would only mean more pollution! And, as local authorities introduce bus lanes, the bus companies profit from the cost-savings instead of putting on more bus services. Over the last few years the private bus companies in London have cut costs by 40%, cut services and increased profits substantially. And, by agreement between the government and the bus companies, wages are kept so low that not enough drivers can be recruited to run

existing services let alone take the people who are supposed to stop using their cars.

In other words, even without the Home Office's anti-cycling bias, Tony Blair's trembling knees when confronted by Mondeo man, and John Prescott's increasing isolation from influence in the government - even without all that - the Treasury's dead hand on the public policy had already effectively reduced New Labour's brave fling with a new transport policy to bureaucratic gridlock.

Of course, there is one cheap way the government could encourage reduction in car use - by making it safe and attractive to cycle. Unfortunately, we have legal crackdowns on cycling while dangerous car driving is tacitly encouraged. And for every yard of cycle facility we win, we lose one elsewhere - even the national flagship Bristol-Bath bike path is threatened by a new road scheme.

Sometimes I feel optimistic about our chances for changing things for the better, but the forces aligned against us are stunningly powerful and will dredge up any and all arguments to do us down - the cycling on the pavements issue is an example.

The Home Office and the police don't really give a fig about the problem (I have many times seen police officers drive past cyclists on the pavement, however I have also seen a police motorcyclist jump the lights to tell off a cyclist who had not stopped, whilst ignoring a motor cyclist who had stopped but had gone way past the lights, blocking the pedestrian crossing area!). But making out cyclists as naughty, undeserving people justifies the civil servants and local authorities that continue to deny cyclists' facilities - as well as the behaviour of drivers towards cyclists.

A few months ago a driver in Lambs Conduit Street deliberately drove his car at me trying to force me off the roadway onto the pavement (this after I had stopped to let him past!) because he imagined, as he opined through his tortured and angry visage, that "cyclists aren't allowed here"!!! How can it possibly be that people think that they should use their cars as weapons against cyclists they think (correctly or incorrectly) are transgressing against the law? In introducing their new laws Jack Straw and Paul Boateng are sustaining and strengthening the anti-cyclist bias already evident in the almost complete lack of legal protection provided to cyclists (and pedestrians) by British law in order to curry favour with the motorised electorate.

The motor vehicle lobby will put up an astonishing and aggressive defence of their right to rule the roads with disregard for other users - and disregard bus lanes, cycle lanes, pedestrian crossings, speed limits, red lights and other restrictions on what they consider to be "normal" behaviour. We still have a long, long way to go. With New Labour openly wobbling on its commitment to change, it could be much, much longer than we have been anticipating.

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