

JONATHAN BRAY



If you come at King Car, don't miss

People are increasingly willing to hear the case for car constraint, but wishful thinking and factual argument won't be enough

► On September 8, 2000, the Stanlow Refinery in Cheshire was blockaded by Farmers for Action protesting about the cost of fuel. Two days later fuel protesters were on site seeking to shut down six of the country's nine oil refineries and four oil distribution terminals, triggering panic buying. Just six days after the protests began most fuel supplies were down to 5% of normal levels and thousands of petrol stations were closed. Food supplies to supermarkets were under strain and the blue light services were also running low. The protests started to wind down at that point as the real life consequences of the protesters absorption and bravado started to dawn. If any other protest group had taken direct action in pursuit of their own interests to bring the country to its knees the police would have put a stop to it, using whatever force they felt necessary. But the state kept the kid gloves on and drew a conclusion that is still held.

Meanwhile, in the early 2000s the economists had decided that congestion charging was the answer to everything - after all, on paper it looked so grown up and neat. Mayor Livingstone had made it work (though they tended to forget that Tony Blair attacked Livingstone at the time for doing so). But once Ken had done it all the terribly clever people in London agreed with each other that congestion charging would be the one and only idea that was worth spending their valuable time entertaining for transport policy outside of London.

Significant funding for cities then became predicated on introducing a congestion charge. Greater Manchester went for it with a £3bn package of transport funding including Metrolink extensions and a BRT system. This was dependent on a road pricing scheme which would charge £2 for vehicles in the peak entering the area bound by the M60 motorway with a further £1 for those entering an inner cordon, roughly corresponding to the Manchester Inner Ring Road. It went down badly with the public - very badly. In the

referendum not a single Manchester District voted in favour. Overall it went down four to one. The chair of Greater Manchester PTA, Roger Jones, who led the campaign for the charge, lost his seat to a local micro party that opposed it.

And now in 2022 we have seen Leicester back off its workplace parking levy plan in the face of a trade union-led campaign - as well as local uprisings in London against Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (despite LTNs being predicated on the relatively innocuous and well established idea of reducing traffic in residential streets).

All of these episodes have a scarring effect. They lead to conclusions being drawn. They contribute to the political and media folk memory that you take on motorists at your peril. They tell you that you are more likely to lose than you are to win and that your political capital is better spent elsewhere.

Having said that, and despite all the big defeats, there has been progress. Charging for road use isn't the norm but it is becoming more common (mostly in relation to air quality). In London it's rippling outwards from the central core. In Birmingham its established itself in the central core.

A string of recent reports suggests that a critical mass of the public is ready to listen, prepared to be persuaded and open to doing a deal between their own interests and the wider public one.

For example, Stagecoach's recent report, *Every journey makes a difference*, found that the majority of motorists are open to using their car less and most motorists (51%) want councils to take action to encourage people away from using their cars.

A report for Campaign for Better Transport found that 49% of respondents supported the idea of pay-as-you-drive, after arguments for and against were discussed, while only 18% opposed it.

In their 2022 Commuting Census, Mobilityways found that the vast majority of commuters (81%) would consider an alternative to their current mode.

However, all of these hypothetical aspirations can easily mutate into actual opposition. Firstly through fear - and then loathing - of actual initiatives designed to reduce car use. These initial fears can also all too easily be sucked into a culture war frenzy



Backlash: The September 2000 fuel protests

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leading people to take positions which harden into existential pitched battles that keep their protagonists hooked on Twitter.

This brings us to one of the current frontlines on traffic reduction - Oxbridge. Both Oxford and Cambridge are now advancing some radical plans for traffic restraint linked to public transport expansion. At the recent Bauer smart transport conference in London, Oxfordshire's transport lead, Cllr Charlie Hicks, showed he is well aware that motorists cautious support in principle can soon be blotted out by fear of the unknowns that attach themselves to particular propositions. And unless this is avoided there will be trouble ahead for Oxford whose traffic restraint initiatives are made up of overlapping plans for a Workplace Parking Levy, an extension of the Zero Emissions Zone and traffic filters.

There's a realisation that you need to engage with both sides of the brain. That's why Hicks has behavioural scientists, advertisers and human psychologists in the room when key decisions are made. And why he commissions representational polling to ensure that the loudest voices don't dominate the discourse.

There's also a realisation that you need to be alive to fairness. On whom do the costs and benefits of schemes fall? And how do you factor that into the details?

Interestingly, Cllr Hicks also made the point that - psychologically - relying on bus service improvements to sell traffic restraint isn't enough of a carrot. Improvements to the urban realm need to be part of it too because this speaks more directly to people about the kind of place they want to live in.

These were themes that also came up at the recent Local Transport Summit in Cardiff. David Lucas from Atkins said that neighbourhood design (including reorganising street space to prioritise more sustainable modes) is primarily a communications issue. There was disappointment from some consultants about too many one dimensional briefs for bus priority schemes that are missing the bigger picture about how to ensure these schemes will also make streets that people want to be in, and thus get public support.

The need to take people with us is a theme that I've also heard recently from ministers and officials. How do we take people with us on this journey to the single macro objective of net zero as well as the multiple micro



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objectives of better streets?

All of this raises the question of whether the transport sector (traditionally dominated by hard engineering and a quasi-military heritage) needs to move more into the persuasion game and take on, and take seriously, those with skills in those arts that traditional transport folk might lack.

If we are going to make the frighteningly rapid progress we need to cut carbon from transport - we will also need leadership alongside persuasion skills. This is something that was amply displayed by the deputy minister for climate change for the Welsh Government, Lee Waters MS at the Local Transport Summit. In his speech he illustrated the urgency of the task ahead by pointing out that the Cardiff Bay hotel, where the conference was being held, would be one of many around the world that would be underwater if we fail to act decisively on climate change.

Waters was clear that he was putting some markers in the ground on ambition

for Wales (including bus franchising, 20mph neighbourhood speed limits, a roads programme freeze and review). All good in themselves but also designed to deliver the message to the system that this isn't about fiddling in the margins of the existing status quo - it's about a fundamental rewiring of transport policy and practice.

Water's speech was well received at the conference - but it's those staying in the rest of the hotel that will need to be persuaded; the hotel (though not yet surrounded by seawater) was an island in a sea of car parks and dual carriageways. The hotel reception for a hotel serving the capital city of Wales assumed you had come by car. The task we face is formidable and it's going to take both leadership and the persuasive arts. Wishful thinking and factual argument alone will not be enough. Because as recent history has shown - if you come at King Car you'd better not miss. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.