



COMMENT

JONATHAN BRAY



A breakthrough that has taken 20 years

Over the past two decades I have witnessed urban transport policy slowly moving in the right direction. Campaigns take time

As the clock winds down to zero on my time at Urban Transport Group I thought I'd look back at the people and trends that have made the biggest difference to urban transport in the 20 years I've been at UTG and its predecessor body, pteg.

On the people who made the biggest difference, I'm giving it to Ken Livingstone and George Osborne - and here's why.

As the former head of the GLC Ken Livingstone didn't need to waste time learning the job when he became London's first elected mayor in 2000. He was decisive from the get go. He pumped money into buses and pressed ahead with road user charging. This showed that it was possible to improve urban public transport - and quickly - whilst constraining

road traffic. And from that base he earned the right to go further.

Given the undying emnity of the Labour right there then followed an odd couple alliance between Livingstone and both the Treasury and the City of London. The money poured in to transform just about every aspect of London's public transport as London cemented its position as the golden goose of the UK economy.

But, in doing so, London also provided a benchmark for transport investment and integration aspirations for the rest of Britain's urban areas. It also showed that significant devolution (and the mayoral model in particular) was needed to achieve it.

After all, the contrast with the drift and



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George Osborne outflanked the Department for Transport

decay of transport in London when the boroughs and Whitehall were in charge of it couldn't have been any starker. Livingstone also showed that you could take action on traffic and get re-elected - if you used a substantial mandate early and skilfully. And unlike the rest of the transport establishment at the time, Livingstone was also a supporter of bus regulation for the rest of the country.

Which brings us onto the second individual who made the most difference, George Osborne. The man, who to the Department for Transport's horror and consternation, imposed the need for workable bus franchising legislation.

Prior to Osborne telling them to do it, I'd been in a meeting a few years previously with a senior DfT official who barked at me contemptuously: "I don't care what the minister says, it's going to be partnership."

But all those ghastly types were outflanked by Osborne's surprise attack. He didn't ask them if they should do it, he told them they were going to do it and to be fair the DfT did finally carry out the mandate they'd been given.

Osborne was a man with a wider plan which was that there was no reason why places like Greater Manchester shouldn't vote Conservative. But to get there you would need to give Greater Manchester more power to grow its own economy. He also made HM Treasury into the economic development department of Government rather than just Whitehall's all powerful bean counters.

All of which led to the Local Transport Act. Finally a workable (if difficult) piece of legislation to allow bus franchising to happen. Shortly, and finally, to burst forth and flower in yellow in the wider integrated Bee Network in Greater Manchester as well as in equally vivid yellow in the Liverpool City Region. The single biggest and most progressive change in local transport outside London in the last 20 years.

If Livingstone and Osborne made the biggest difference as individuals, here's what I think the most significant trends have been.

Firstly there's the rise and fall of rail. Rail experienced a meteoric rise during the period fuelled largely by the growth in urban economies and rail's USP of being able to move large numbers of people into urban cities rapidly. Rail also enjoyed unprecedented public support and investment until it dominated wider DfT spend. However, whilst London



made the most of its own golden age by transforming its estate, I can't help thinking that the rail sector squandered too much of its time in the sunlight swaggering around defending an unworkable structure and failing to find a way of delivering improvements efficiently and cost effectively.

Covid finally burst rail's bubble and now rail's spending spree is under scrutiny at the same time as a baffling and overstaffed rail reform programme (which can never explain what a station will actually look like when you get to a station - other than it's not private and it's not public) has ground to a halt. Shame.

Meanwhile, over 20 years, active travel has gone from being the preserve of the weirdy beardy at the end of the corridor at city hall to being a flagship urban transport policy for mayors. Bikes have gone from the margins to the mainstream. Concerted investment (back to Ken again) in London showed that build it in the right places and they will come.

Another big trend has been the rise of new mobility formats. Fuelled by venture capital (which saw transport as ripe for monopolisation in the same way that the internet has been), waves of investment flooded into first Uber, then dockless bikes, then e-scooters. All of which were seen as a foot in the door for a full takeover.

Meanwhile, before long we were all going to be chauffeured around in self driving pods with capital flooding into connected and autonomous vehicles as another means to rewrite the way transport is provided.

But the future isn't what it used to be. The disrupters have been disrupted. The reality has been rather more mundane. The dream of fully autonomous vehicles anytime soon (if at all) has faded and new mobility formats (like e-scooters and taxi apps) are becoming part of the fabric of wider transport networks but have not changed the nature of those wider transport networks fundamentally - despite the billions poured into them.

The age of technological hype - and gullibility of those on the receiving end - is over and we are now in an era of more pragmatic and realistic approaches to what tech can do for us.

The final key trend is the way that the polarisation over motoring has mutated in recent times, mirroring the wider cultural and political divide that is taking place in



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the global North between the cities and the spaces in between. The ideal of city living based on public transport and active travel is being pursued with vigour in urban centres, while elsewhere the car is king as lifestyles and landscapes are nearly entirely dependent on the car. And whilst charging for road access is becoming more common in cities, more widely, the most intractable problem we face is that land use, a zombie national road programme and taxation regimes are still broadly pushing in the wrong direction.

And finally. When I took the job at pteg, part of the motivation was to win the battle for re-regulation of buses - as only the PTEs were big and ugly enough to do it. And if that battle could be won then it would unlock the door to getting decent, properly planned public transport again in places like West Yorkshire where I grew up. Although I never thought it would take 20 years!

I recently read a new volume of poems ('The Ballard of Yellow Wednesday') about the battle, 30 years ago, to stop the M3 being built through Twyford Down in Hampshire. I

wasn't involved in the direct action but I did work with the poem's author, Emma Must, as part of the wider anti roads movement of the time. Much of what I have done at Urban Transport Group has been in the prose of transport argument - not poetry. But reading Emma's book about that campaign provoked the thought that win or lose, and however long they take, these kind of campaigns reverberate in subtle ways more widely, not just in politics but in the lives of those involved in them as well as in the wider culture and collective imagination. They have value in themselves. And that, as Martin Luther King said: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." ■

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.