

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Transport's future in tumultuous times

Can transport bring together a divided kingdom? Will a stimulus now replace austerity? Can devolution maintain its momentum?

► In pub quizzes of future years, when the question is asked which begins 'In what year did...' it feels like there's a fair chance the answer will be 2016. Or to put it another way a famous Russian revolutionary once said: "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." It is of course far too early to say what these tumultuous times means for transport... but let's have a go anyway.

### A new United Kingdom?

It feels like we live in a fractious kingdom these days with its inhabitants waving different national flags. A kingdom riven in different ways. Between those happy enough with being part of a wider cosmopolitan freebooting world and those who yearn for the comforts that nationalism and protectionism might bring. Between those whose drawbridge is down and those whose drawbridge is up. Between those who benefit from a more connected world which puts a premium on both what you know and who you know, and those who know that they, their communities and traditional industries are no longer valued.

Theresa May's opening line outside 10 Downing Street was she wants to reunite this divided kingdom. If she means it then transport policy could make its contribution. Because transport can contribute to reconnecting the areas that found an outlet for expressing disenchantment and dispossession in the EU referendum. Provision of stable,

affordable and high quality public transport services say that no part of the realm is being abandoned. And in practical terms public transport - and in particular the bus - does this through linking the jobless with the jobs and giving young people access to education and opportunity. It gives people transport links that allow them to be social and active and in doing so contribute to their physical and mental wellbeing.

The key test in recent years for a transport plan or policy has been "What will that policy do for economic growth?". Perhaps in future this will be tweaked to "What can a transport policy do for inclusive economic growth?".

### A trading nation

One of the cornerstones of the outers' case was that leaving the EU opens up a wider world for the UK to become a great independent trading nation again. This has found expression in the form of a new cabinet post - and a new Department of International Trade. If the focus is now on what we create that the rest of the world wants to buy from us, then a key question for transport policy is how can it help get that stuff to the world. One beneficiary of this new way of thinking could be ports.

Hitherto the ports sector has chosen to keep itself to itself - with national policy tilted towards moving freight through a few mega ports in the south east and then trying to deal with the consequences of routing it onwards through the most congested corner of the country. That's changing as the northern ports assert themselves individually - and now collectively, from June of this year, through a joint pact. Good timing as the case for ramping up rail capacity into those ports just got stronger.

Also strengthened is the approach that some of the new pan-regional bodies are taking - with Transport for the North in the vanguard - of mapping where their regions have industries and sectors that the world wants and which could grow further. For the north these four 'prime capabilities' are advanced manufacturing, digital development, health innovation and energy. And players in these sectors will have different transport needs that could start to receive more targeted attention.



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# “The question now is will the momentum behind devolution be continued?”

## Austerity versus stimulus

Former chancellor George Osborne was good at the “there is no alternative” thing. His message was you can do what I say by following my brand of austerity (plus capital investment). Or you could recklessly take a different approach, but then you will end up with an economy like Greece. It’s my way or no way. Now suddenly there is an alternative to Osborne’s approach because there is no Osborne. Economic policy is up for grabs again.

With the threat of the UK economy drifting into stagnation - or worse - will we see a shift to stimulus? A stepping up of capital investment to show that the UK is confident about the future. That we are open for business. Investment that could also create jobs in the areas that need it. Especially when the EU’s efforts to even out economic performance through regional aid will no longer be applied in the UK. Or will it be more of the same - but with new branding?

And if we are about to see some waves of capital spending will it all be about the mega schemes - the ones that can be seen from space. Or will there also be room for transport schemes that not only provide urban centres with the linkages they need to other urban centres but also those transport schemes that make those urban centres more attractive places to live in, work in and enjoy. The schemes that benefit the urban realm whilst making that better urban realm easier to get around. The kind of urban realms that the creative, tech, pharma, business and finance service sectors increasingly want to locate in. Sectors that the UK is good at and which we need to nurture. And even if there is a new wave of capital schemes how will transport schemes in general fare against housing investment or schemes that can demonstrate greater, immediate direct employment?

## The future of devolution

A key theme of these columns I’ve written for *Passenger Transport* have been the benefits of devolution so I won’t repeat the arguments again here. The question now is will the momentum behind devolution be continued? And will its focus change? Osborne’s Treasury was unique in that he moved it from being a department of fiscal policy to a department which also determined economic and regional policy. In some ways it was even



Manchester Metrolink is an example of a transport scheme that has helped to make a better urban realm

broader than that. A policy unit for the government as a whole which, when it liked its ideas, made them happen. Often without telling the affected departments first. And often wisely, otherwise the sand would have been poured into the fuel tank of those initiatives in the time honoured way of officials protecting their patches.

In this way did Osborne drive forward devolution at a pace we haven’t seen in recent times. Question is will this pace be maintained or will we see departmental clawback, man marking of devolution by departments, playing for time? Because despite recent progress we still lag well behind counterpart

countries on levels of local autonomy and there’s still a long way to go before we have city regions that really do have all the tools at their disposal to make the most of their potential. Which is why it would be a mistake to let that momentum dissipate. ■

## 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.