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Turning declarations into decisive actions

The climate crisis moved up the agenda in 2019 and ambitious new targets were set - 2020 will be about how we achieve them

► On and on we hurtle deeper into the turbulent unknown. What would have been unthinkable five years ago in global and domestic politics is now our shared new normal. And in climate change what even a couple of years ago seemed a deferrable threat now feels uncomfortably and unavoidably close. So what can 2019 say to us about what 2020 might look like for transport?

Most significant of all for 2020 is that 'what to do about our warming world' elbowed its way to the position of primacy that it deserved. This translated into politicians pressing the panic button through signing up to climate emergency declarations and ambitious net zero targets. In 2020 the big question will be '...and now what?'

The truth is that decarbonising the UK is a monumental task, and on these timescales it's mission nearly impossible. Totally impossible if the cautious incrementalism that characterises the current overall policy approach continues. Officials in both national and local government know this. But how and when are we going to move from incrementalism to action on a scale that is consistent with what the word 'emergency' implies? Especially when a strategy of holding down the cost of road freight, air travel and car travel (with inadequate incentives to shift to less carbon intensive cars) whilst pumping in more money to keep public transport in the game - clearly isn't going to cut it.

Over all of this looms the question of public

acceptance. Climate has been one of the biggest issues in recent Canadian, Swiss and German elections (and much more significant this time around in the UK - even given Brexit). However environmental measures have also triggered backlashes in France (the gilets jaunes) and Norway (on road pricing) and going further back - the fuel duty protests in the UK in 2000.

Some of this also relates to the 'metro versus retro' divide. In the 'metro' city centres and the inner suburbs there can be an appetite for (or at least acceptance of) radical green measures - even when they hurt. Meanwhile in the 'retro' outer suburbs, towns and countryside they can be seen as the last straw -

even prompting a transition from saloon bar complaining to manning the barricades. Get the calculation wrong on what the public will accept by being too pessimistic and you don't make enough progress on decarbonisation. Conversely, if you are too optimistic and a backlash ensues, then the political fallout could set you back for years. And on the timescales necessary for carbon reduction we don't have those years to spare.

In 2020 this is a conundrum that will come more to the fore. The most obvious way through (and I'm not arguing this would be adequate) is that city centres and inner suburbs do more of the hard stuff on climate (driving becomes way harder and more expensive) and everywhere does the easy stuff.

Among the easy stuff (it's all relative) should be the electrification of transport, and this is starting to happen with the car fleet. Right now we are looking at about 5% of new cars being electric. This time next year it's forecast to be 10%. We are starting to get scale (same with electric buses).

As the grid becomes greener you can see how this looks like an 'easy' route to decarbonisation. But scaling up on electrification of vehicles also means we need to scale up on how we get electricity into those vehicles. And that in turn means nailing a mass charging infrastructure for road vehicles and prodding a sluggish electricity industry into greater levels of proactivity on transport's mega electrification project than is currently the case. A tentative prediction for 2020 is that we will also spend

The gilets jaunes protests are partly a backlash against environmental measures





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a little less time talking about electric vehicles (now they are on their way) and a bit more time on the interface with the energy sector so that we can keep them powered up.

A further prediction is that it is going to look increasingly weird that Great Britain just went on a diesel train buying spree and in the process blew what was an obvious ‘easy’ win on climate - which was having a rail system you could power by renewable energy and then being able to promote the climate benefits of rail travel with an entirely clean conscience.

The sudden, and deserved, re-framing of the transport debate around climate change also contributed to a subtle change in the optics around some other big transport topics. In 2018 a giddy headlong rush towards an inevitable tech-determined and pre-programmed future of a consumer paradise of CAVs (Connected and Autonomous Vehicles), micro-mobility, and MaaS (Mobility as a Service) was in full flow. In 2019 some conference agendas on tech started to mutate into asking how all this relates to the more existential and collective challenge of climate. This, coupled with some of these initiatives falling foul of the ‘hype cycle’ (as well as high profile bad behaviour of big tech), means that

perhaps in 2020 we may see a more thoughtful debate on transport tech.

I suspect that in this new age of climate anxiety there will be implications for other transport issues too, including more calls for moratoriums on road building. Indeed it’s going to be tough to defend the yawning gap between declaring a climate emergency and filling up the spending annex of your shiny new sustainable transport plan with bits and pieces of sprawl-distributing legacy highway schemes.

At the other end of the spectrum I would expect that calls for free fares are going to become more common as the most dramatic and striking quid pro quo for whatever needs to be done to make car use harder. This will put some further heat under the cauldron filled with the churning morass of intractable, complex and inter-related problems that is UK public transport pricing and ticketing. Perhaps it will give the task of addressing these problems more urgency? If free fares isn’t the answer then what’s the alternative reform plan that gives the way we do things now on fares and ticketing relevance in an age of climate anxiety?

Meanwhile, more widely, climate change puts buses in a good place given that mass electrification of a larger bus network

looks eminently doable even on the cliff edge timescales demanded by the climate modellers.

However, climate change adds to the challenges for the mega rail schemes (HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail, Crossrail 2) which will need to find ways of burnishing their climate credentials at a time when confidence in the costings of mega rail schemes has taken a severe knock. 2020 could be the year of some big decisions on them - and Heathrow too.

Finally, 2020 will also see the make or break climate COP26 summit being held in the UK (in Glasgow in November). With the world’s eyes on the UK, this will add to the impetus to make 2020 the year when we move beyond big declarations in principle (but climate caution in practice) to a new era of climate decisiveness. ■

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.

