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**Action or Inertia?
One Year on from 'A New Deal for Transport'**

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It was back in February that the Transport Planning Society invited me to do this lecture, on a date as close to the first anniversary of the White Paper as we could manage. It seemed the right time to make an professional assessment, and I suppose we thought that there would be some wider interest at the same time. But I don't think I had quite expected how extensive the media treatment of the anniversary would be.

In the last week we have been surrounded by the superficial symptoms of *backlash*. Though it's a paradoxical, strange sort of backlash because as often as not, the newspaper articles and speeches start out by using the language of dissatisfaction that the Government has not made more radical changes, faster, and finish by somehow suggesting that therefore it will decide to make less radical changes. The logic becomes a bit obscure in the middle. There is one recurrent theme - more money for investment - but this requirement is not being attached to any sort of consistent strategic logic. Rather, it seems as though we are seeing statements of the form: 'because the Government has not yet delivered enough investment funds to secure dramatic achievements already in public transport quality, therefore...'

And then anything goes. Therefore it ought to abandon road pricing? Therefore it ought to be kinder to motorists? Or tougher? Therefore it ought to rely more on the private sector? Or less? Set up more new institutions? Stop setting up new institutions?

What I want to do is try and unpack this treatment, to make an assessment of the current stage of thinking about the long term transport strategy.

This implies a logical series of connected questions. In principle, all of them ought to be answered, in turn, but that's not entirely practical and in this gathering it's not all equally necessary. But let me list the questions anyway:

First: what *is* the long term strategy?

Second: is it, broadly, correct?

Third: how much real progress has been made so far?

Fourth: separately, how much real progress is *perceived* so far. Are people satisfied?

Fifth: if they are dissatisfied, what is the significance of this? - does it constitute a backlash, or impatient support?

I suppose you can see the logical framework here, but it's a bit tedious and I want to focus mainly on the last question, because it's new and it's in our minds. So let me be a bit presumptuous and assume for the moment that in this gathering we all know what the White Paper strategy is, we all more or less agree with it, that we trust the Government's goodwill in

implementing it, but that we admit the existence of some real dissatisfaction which - *whether it is justified or not* - must be considered seriously.

(I know that's all very presumptuous, and I'll come back to re-examine whether such an unrealistic degree of agreement actually exists, but I'd ask you to bear with me for the moment).

So what are the characteristics of this widely reported dissatisfaction?

Here are a few pointers, monitored by some of my colleagues in the last few weeks.

I'll start with an article in the Guardian (30.6.1999):

'John Prescott wants parents to abandon the school run, leaving their children to go to school on foot. No way, says Joanna Moorhead'

She argues that the 'school run' is pretty horrible, but there's no acceptable alternative, it's all part of the longer distances generated by greater parental choice of school. 'Get real' she says, 'When we were children cars drove relatively slowly, and there weren't so many of them around. These days, speeding is a national malaise...giving us one of the worst child casualty rates in Europe...and today's mothers aren't just getting into their cars and driving their children to school: they're getting into their cars, driving their children to school (perhaps one to one school, and another to another) and then driving on to work...every day begins with a frantic race to beat the clock...Mr Prescott, why don't you leave off the school run, and turn your sights to those besuited businessmen I see hurtling past me every morning as I take my children to school...they're usually alone in the car'.

Until now, 'safe routes to school' has had an almost unique degree of support - a genuinely popular concept, and underpinned by economic, traffic, sociological, educational and health considerations. So is this article a symptom of the breakdown of such an important consensus?

Well I don't think it is. I think there are three important undercurrents in this crie de coeur. First, emphasis on the overwhelming power of immediate constraints, now, of domestic and working lives. Second, a general support for speed reduction and more strict enforcement. And third, the identification of the importance of traffic reductions - aimed at someone else.

Now that's interesting - traffic restrictions aimed at *other* car users. It's interesting because exactly the same theme arose at a recent conference on freight and logistics policy - attended by completely different social and economic group to mums on the school run. One can identify a widespread impatience among freight operators - 'too many cars. For goodness sake, when is the Government going to deliver on its promises. We *need* the road space, for our own commercial survival and the economic good of the country'. Commercial bus operators have of course been saying the same for some years, and are now doing so with more vigour, but freight operators have tended either to see their interests in enough general road building for everybody, themselves included, or to be too timid about their perceived unpopularity to risk asking for special treatment.

What I find difficult to read at the moment is the evolving position of the AA and RAC, which had both come to terms with the unreality of unrestricted traffic growth but now, on occasion

seem to be relocating their public affairs position somewhat: it's not at all clear to me whether this is real or cosmetic.

But what is clear is that we are *not* seeing a reconstruction of the traditional 'road building alliance', motorists plus lorry operators plus business. Rather than the illusion - but a politically powerful one - of a common interest, what we now have is a more realistic recognition that there are competing interests, and - very properly - each of the contestants wants to improve its own position.

I'll come back to that, but first, being a researcher by trade, I naturally also like to keep a check on the role of research and methodology in the development of policy. When I was a graduate student, over 30 years ago, my professor said to me 'if you ever do any research which is any good, it will take 20 years before anybody takes any notice'. I wasn't too pleased about that 'if you ever..' but I took the point. It's not always true, though. Sometimes research has a much more rapid effect. Here's where I suppose I'm likely to reveal my own impatience.

There does seem to me to be a curious reluctance, at the moment, to actually use the findings of some research which is, broadly, supportive of the new strategy, and useful to its implementation. I've been struck by this in relation to three of our own recent research projects. Some of you may have been following the 'park and ride' debate, and it really is most odd. I would have thought that by now my colleague Graham Parkhurst really has made his case unanswerable that in certain circumstances park and ride can increase traffic, not reduce it, by attracting some proportion of previous bus users to use park and ride instead. As he says,

'It seems only common sense that if you provide one standard of service for car drivers and a lower standard for bus users then it'll only be a matter of time before bus users switch to park and ride. Park and ride is often actually cheaper and quicker than taking the bus all the way from people's homes'

I did regret the speech that Glenda Jackson was given appearing to contradict this. It would have been so easy to say 'yes, of course we now recognise that this is a problem'. After all, it's a problem that can be reduced, or reversed, by doing things that are sensible and entirely consistent with the Government's strategy - being careful not to locate the park and ride too close to the town centre, giving bus services priority on the more distant trunk routes as well as the inner city routes, and not restricting use of park and ride bus services exclusively to the car drivers.

There was a similar sort of half hearted response to the results of the work by Sally Cairns, Carmen Hass Klau and myself on the impacts of highway capacity reduction - what happens to traffic if we give priority to buses, or pedestrian areas. For years these policies were treated at arms length because of fears of the 'traffic chaos' they would cause. We looked at dozens of these things and the one lesson that was quite clear was that they *can* be done successfully, that forecasts of 'traffic chaos' are most frequently overestimated, and that behavioural adaptation to allow this to be the case is much wider and deeper than is normally modelled. So I really was a bit miffed to read the DETR Draft Guidance on Local Transport Plans (November 1998) which said rather gloomily that it was a nice piece of research but

'It is too early to draw significant conclusions, as further development and research work is needed'

The DETR helped to pay for this research, for goodness sake! And agreed the text for the conclusions sentence by sentence, word by word. Mind you, the relapse was only a draft. In the final document *Guidance on Provisional Local Transport Plans* (April 1999) the identical sentence still exists but has properly been shifted so that it is attached to the methodological question of symmetry of induced and suppressed traffic, rather than on the viability of such policy instruments overall. No objection to that. It must be an odd life, redrafting guidance notes after consultation.

Another example is the research by Joyce Dargay - consistent with a trend in econometric studies going back for decades - which shows that elasticities of demand are significant, higher than has recently been assumed by the DETR, and marked by one dominant pattern, that longer term effects are deeper and broader - and the elasticities normally higher - than shorter term effects. Such an important result for any long term strategy, and really not challengeable any longer. But what an uphill struggle to convince the guardians of recommended methodology.

I don't want to exaggerate that difficulty, now. I think there is an increasing recognition that new policies will need new methodologies. It's just that policy changes faster than methodology. I don't know why, but it does.

But this is becoming an urgent issue. The natural speed of change of behaviour is central to the desirable speed of implementation of the strategy - we simply cannot judge one without the other. And that means that we must have methodologies in which the speed and path of change are explicit. This traditional focus on equilibrium end states is becoming so massively irrelevant. We don't know what the 'end state' of the new strategy is. Nobody does. Nobody can. It's like asking what is the end state of universal education, or giving people the vote. All we know is the direction that we have to move in. That is relatively clearly defined: trajectory and pace are everything.

Let me give an example. If we want to encourage a reduced use of cars and greater use of alternatives - which isn't the whole strategy, but is certainly part of it - the concept of 'changing behaviour' needs to be very carefully defined, because behaviour is changing radically all the time, sometimes for reasons which are very distant from transport policy. That's where the Guardian's mum's manifesto is right and wrong. Of course expecting somebody to rearrange the complexities of domestic schedules overnight is unrealistic. But that same person will - on their own initiative - have to rearrange their *own* schedule drastically every time one of the children starts school, or changes school, anybody else in the household changes job. Domestic and work constraints are incredibly binding at any moment of time - at all moments of time - but they change over time and that's what makes it possible to intervene. I would say that the only successful pathway to substantial change in transport behaviour at the aggregate level is by intervening to secure an 'asymmetric pattern of churn'. It means that we should stop talking in terms of encouraging people to stop driving and start using public transport - but seeking to increase a little the numbers of people who are already, every year, doing exactly that in huge numbers, and reducing a little the numbers of people who are already, every year, doing exactly the opposite, in equally huge numbers. Those are

two quite separate decision processes, and they have to be targeted separately. The irony of it is that our standard models do not even recognise the existence of either group.

The significance of this approach - broadly - is that changes are bigger, and easier, but slower, than has been traditionally assumed. Now if that's true - and of course you may not agree with this - but if it is, then it does have a profound importance for the assessment of success, and for the setting of realistic targets, and for the policies that we have to set in place now in order to secure effects later.

After that methodological digression, I come back to the interpretation of what people are saying and thinking *while they are in the middle of all these transitional processes*. The central point for policy is, that this dissatisfaction is not remotely close to producing any sort of viable alternative strategy which could challenge or contradict or head in a different direction from that of the White Paper. Imagine if there was a new coalition, of Guardian mums, and besuited businessmen, and freight operators, and the AA and the RAC. Undoubtedly a formidable political force, and one which you would expect Downing Street to take seriously. *But what would they campaign for?* Roads to Prosperity? I'm not saying this as a cheap debating point, 'oh, you can't even agree among yourselves'. That doesn't matter at all. It's about the *existence* of an alternative strategy.

Let us just remind ourselves why Roads to Prosperity, as the core of a roads programme and indeed the heart of a transport strategy, collapsed. It was because it didn't, and couldn't, work. That's what the whole debate was about in the 9 years between 1989 and 1998: the trends were such that even the 'largest roads programme since the Romans' could not keep pace with traffic growth. Do you remember, even the British Road Federation's hypothetical road programme 50% larger than Roads to Prosperity, as they proved themselves, could only slow down the pace at which congestion got worse. The need for demand management, traffic reduction, a reborn emphasis on public transport and walking and cycling, and on planning to reduce the volume of unnecessary travel, arose logically and directly from this recognition. There was an underlying logic there that applies just as much now as it did then.

Or does it?

I promised to re-examine the presumptuous assumptions about what the strategy is, and whether it is right, and whether we ourselves all agree with it. Now one of the difficulties of retrospective assessment of policy is that one tends to rewrite what one thought then into the acceptable language of now. So I thought I would tie my hands by working from the first speech I made - a bit like this - just after publication of the White Paper, about what I expected to be the problems of implementing it.

'Now, the implementation of the White Paper is not going to be problem-free. I'd like to talk through seven problems which we are going to have to work out over the next few years'. I said. What were these seven problems?

'First, the 'integration', which is the key word, is going to have to be genuinely multi-modal. It is going to major on walking and cycling as central, not peripheral, modes, and extend outside transport itself to the interaction with land-use and with the activities of other

Government departments. That has been talked about before, but it has not been delivered. Some of you will be aware of the differences in culture and assumptions between, say, the planning department and the transport department of a single local authority. Imagine how much more complex it is when we want to ensure that action to improve efficiency in the national health service does not cause extra pressure on hospital access and its effects on car use’.

(Back to now: how are we doing on this? I think the cultural shift is actually going faster than I expected. ‘Joined-up government’ is a terrible cliché, patronising and simplistic, but it has cleverly come to symbolise this change)

‘The second problem: there is the formal abandonment of ‘predict and provide’ as the strategic core of roads policy - a rejection of the sustainability of indefinitely extending past trends in traffic growth, a move to reductions in traffic growth in most places, and reductions in the actual traffic level in some places, and more emphasis on better road management and maintenance. Those specific new road schemes which do go ahead will need to be justified with reference to their relationship with the whole strategy, not only the temporary relief of congestion. I think that is right. But I wonder if you know the power of an already-designed road scheme, cut from the road programme - it sits there in the city engineer’s or the county surveyor’s top drawer saying ‘build me, build me, build me’, and diverting attention for years, even decades’.

(Yes, we are seeing that, but in a half-hearted and unconvinced way. A diversion, but not in any way constituting a revival of ‘predict and provide’).

‘Third, there is commitment to the importance of public transport, and especially to the prospect of reversing its long term decline in a big way. But what we are talking about is probably of the order of a 5% growth in the public transport market, nationally, per year, sustained for 30 years. And that’s just an average. For cities the rate will need to be higher, and faster - in some cases, 50% or more in two or three years. That is new territory. It means that public transport has to grow, in the next few decades, faster than it has declined in the last few, and we simply do not know what the industry and the market conditions would be like in those circumstances’.

(Here we now have a different problem. There is actually a dispute about the current facts of the case - has this growth actually started to happen? And if so, why? It’s important, and I’d be very interested in hearing local experience on this in the discussion).

‘Fourth, there is recognition of the role of reallocation of road capacity - if there is not enough for unrestricted use by everybody, then improving conditions for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport users will include priority access to limited road space. That is also new territory. It says that in some locations we are better off reducing the vehicle-carrying capacity of road networks. It has been done, it works, but it still goes against the grain. It doesn’t feel right. Some courage is necessary’.

(What’s my assessment now on this point? I think it’s still valid, but it has - it always had - an implication which is only now becoming apparent. If there’s not enough road space for unrestricted use by everybody, and there is going to be priority allocation, then it is virtually inevitable that there must be a debate, a conflict, a battle between the relative claimants. I

think this is how we should see the Guardian mum's focus on suited businessmen, and the freight focus on excessive car use. This is not a breakdown of the consensus. It is the working out of an inevitable feature of that consensus, namely the contest for scarce road space. Quite unavoidable. 'The greatest good for the greatest number' is possible, but 'keeping everybody happy' just is not. This raises questions of democratic processes and political priorities, that we are now seeing in concrete form whereas previously they were notional, words on paper).

'Fifth, there is no plan for comprehensive renationalisation of rail, nor for return to the pre-1986 situation for buses - but there is an intention to make some changes in regulatory arrangements, partnerships and institutional structures. Now what that means is that we have, and will continue to have, a largely commercial transport industry, to carry out largely non-commercial objectives. There is no reason in principle why it should be impossible, but we can expect some divergence of approach, which will need to be resolved by very clever incentives. That, I think, is the main point of the 'quality partnerships' in public transport. Essentially this is a bargain: we'll give you priority access to the network, which has a clear cash value in business terms - but only if you give us reliable, well-maintained, comfortable, frequent services. There's some tough talking to be done on both sides. A favourable outcome is possible, because both sides have a lot to gain, but it may not happen automatically or smoothly'.

(Well yes, it's not happening automatically or smoothly. My own feeling is that it is this area where the pace of change needs to be accelerated most).

'Sixth, there is no huge increase offered in national government expenditure on transport as a whole (as indeed for any other sector), for reasons of public expenditure policy. That means no Government-led large scale improvements in investment: few big grants for light rail schemes, for example. There will be some extra money, but will it be enough?'

(The mood there is clear. Not enough. The debate is now entirely about mechanisms for increasing it, not the issue of whether it should be increased at all. Compared with a decade ago, that is an incredible advance).

But let's consider that in connection with my seventh problem was about road pricing - broadly defined, ie to include electronic or paper methods, fees, parking charges etc. 'There was, at last, the firm statement in favour of charging motorists (and indeed all transport users) prices which cover the costs of congestion and environmental damage they impose on others, and they have said in terms that this only makes sense politically if it is initiated and controlled at local authority level, and would only work if all or a substantial part of the revenue is kept locally and used for transport improvements. To me, that is potentially the most important new tool in the tool box. The amounts of money involved - potentially - are enormous: quite enough to solve the financial crisis of the cities and buy quality at a level that we have brainwashed ourselves into believing is not the British way. But that also is uncharted territory, and it is not surprising that many cities are being very cautious indeed'.

(What can we add now? Well, the most interesting thing to me is that there is universal agreement that more money is need, for public transport, for street quality, for maintenance standards, for civic renewal. And we have - nearly have - a new funding mechanism which is the only conceivable one which could produce the funds required. And we have the most

famous victory of the White Paper - the acceptance of recycling, hypothecation. In my opinion we will either solve both of these problems together, or neither).

There is an intriguing element of the degree of contingent support which has arisen for traffic reduction measures generally, and road user charges in particular. People say - well, yes, but only if alternatives are improved first. *First*. Now in an extreme form that is unworkable: it's one of those impossible conditions that are just a tactful way of saying no. But the basic idea is absolutely sound: the time scale of implementation of sticks and carrots must be connected - probably leapfrogging rather than in a strict sequence or absolutely simultaneous, but consciously and deliberately co-ordinated. It's another example of the way in which the new policy agenda requires an emphasis on phasing and sequence, rather than end state, and therefore requires analytical procedures which can give insights on evolution over time.

So in summary, my interpretation is that we have a weak breakdown of goodwill, but not a breakdown of the underlying consensus for the strategy as a whole, and not the content of backlash in any sense which is connected to the rejection of this strategy and its replacement by an alternative. It is the irritation of impatience, not the hostility of opposition. It would be a complete misjudgement to use the appetite for results, faster, as an excuse for doing less, slower.

For today, I suppose it also leads to an embarrassingly tame conclusion: 'it's too early to say'. Which is true, in a way, but hardly an upbeat message to finish on. So I'll rephrase it. I think my advice at the moment is 'don't panic'. The widespread perceived dissatisfaction ought to be a source of strength and encouragement to the Government, not at all a signal to slow down. It's dissatisfaction which springs from the identical analysis of the transport problem as that which produced the White Paper itself, and the tensions were predictable and, in some cases, predicted.

So, action or inertia? In this hall I think we should remind ourselves that 'inertia' refers to the tendency of moving bodies to continue moving, just as much as for static bodies to remain static. I think we are still moving.

Thank you for your attention. Meetings of the Transport Planning Society are structured in order to give full and adequate time for real discussion from the floor, not just a few token questions and answers. Please tell me whether I'm right, or wrong, or barking up the wrong tree altogether. Over to you.