

Transport Planning Society Annual Christmas Drinks
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Reflections on the past year in transport

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When Victoria contacted me to ask if I would like to speak tonight I was really rather hesitant initially given her mention of the theme of reflecting upon the last year in transport.

I have to say that for me it has seemed something of a blur which I suppose either reflects that I am getting busier and am struggling to keep up or that the world of transport planning at large is getting busier in terms of the number of issues arising and changes that are taking place.

What I do know is that **predict and provide** does not work. I'm not yet talking about transport however. I'm talking about how we **manage our workloads!**

The **flow** of work exceeds the **capacity** of time to do it. So, in my case in 2007 – have I managed to make **smarter choices** and decide what work is important and necessary and which is discretionary and need not be done?

Well, to a point perhaps but hardly enough to balance the flow of work with the supply of time to do it.

So instead I find myself subscribing naively to a predict and provide approach – the alarm clock gets set a bit earlier, I leave my desk in the evening a bit later – in the hope of reducing **workload congestion**.

It does sometimes offer short-term reprieve – the deadlines move a bit further away and the pressure of too much work abates.

However, do I then **lock in the benefits** by shortening my working day and trying to work smarter?

No – because there is a phenomenon called **induced work** – that work which would not have arrived on my desk had I not cleared the space to allow it to appear!

Why do I say this? Well I think it is telling that for me as an individual I know that restraint and behaviour change are really the long term strategic answer to my problems yet I can't help but be drawn into the short term tactical solution - namely predict and provide. (The trouble is if I set the alarm clock much earlier it really will be doing me more harm than good!)

So – I know what the right thing to do is but I also know how hard it is to do it. What this gives me, I've come to realise, is a degree of empathy with our decision makers in transport and indeed a feeling of some sympathy towards them.

This said, I'm not going soft – I still want decision makers to think strategically and not tactically.

So with that backdrop, I'd like to pick up upon a selection of issues that have arisen over the last year and to connect with tonight's theme of Christmas drinks by asking – is transport's glass half empty or half full?

What I will touch upon are the following: road pricing, climate change & obesity, predict and provide and the smoking ban.

Road pricing

In terms of column inches I would guess that 2007 has been the year of greatest exposure ever to the topic of road pricing since its early proposition in the 1960s. But is it *ever* going to happen outside of London in the UK?

For all the early possibility of the Transport Innovation Fund it seems that political appetite at a local level is hard to galvanise and we wait to see whether a single authority will in fact progress to the introduction of a scheme.

Will we ever have a national scheme (even if other countries such as the Netherlands are considering it themselves)?

There are economics involved in addressing such a question of course, but the thorny issue at every turn where road pricing is being considered is public acceptability. Regrettably perhaps, 2007 will be a reminder that some barometers of public opinion on road pricing can be potentially misleading but nevertheless headline grabbing. The No 10 website petition. Ah yes – 1.8 million people (a small minority of the population one must note) *apparently* saying to the Government they were opposed to road pricing.

I say apparently because I have my doubts if all or many of the people who were signatories really had a clear picture of the specific proposition they were addressing. I suspect many were being swept along by the media spotlight on the petition and perhaps seizing the opportunity to more crudely say to Government – *we don't like paying more tax.*

You may recall at the time that an exact opposite version of the petition was set up to *support* road pricing – this only attracted a few thousand signatures.

What does this tell us? Probably that, with most thorny policy issues, the opposition will be more vocal than the support and indeed that bad news spreads more quickly than good news.

In some work we have been involved with during 2007 on public acceptability of road pricing, we noted a distinction between acceptability and *inevitability* – a public view was expressed that for the government to continue to entertain a policy so apparently unpopular with the voters then it *must* be something they really think is necessary and thus it must be coming.

Of course, Mr Blair in his response to the 1.8M people was quick to assure them that, and I quote, “*it would be ten years or more before any national scheme was technologically, never mind politically, feasible.*”

I am optimistic about public sympathy, if not positive support, for the need for road pricing being something which will increase (or could be helped to increase) rather than abate.

Mr Peter Roberts of the Association of British Drivers and his famous petition should not be cause for alarm.

However, as an aside, what the petition does highlight is the power of the Internet in enabling spread of information and communications across huge swathes of the public.

We are beginning research ourselves now to look at how this connectivity is leading to new 'bottom up' innovations and initiatives that can have a bearing, positive or negative, on transport.

Climate change and obesity

Just as road pricing has 'enjoyed' a large helping of column inches in 2007 so too has climate change.

And we may well see the attention given to health now continue to increase, following the latest Foresight study on obesity.

Both climate change and obesity serve to intensify the pertinence of transport to the challenges society faces.

Transport is part of the problem and in turn becomes part of the solution.

Our individualised sedentary society may appear good for economic growth but moving towards a more co-operative and physically active society would likely be even better with prospects for improved wellbeing.

One might think that by adding the problems of climate change and poor health to congestion, the Government would be in a stronger position to stamp its authority on the need for measures such as road pricing to bring about behaviour change.

However, there are worrying signs that we have a huge capacity to remain in denial – leave us alone, we don't want to change and so in turn we want to believe that the problem is not as critical as suggested or that it can be resolved by other means.

One signal of this mentality in society was the 'counter attack' to the "Uncomfortable Truth" film of Al Gore by the Channel 4 Programme "The Great Global Warming Swindle" in March 2007.

We hang on to the thread of hope that the climate change problem might go away. Another expression of denial of sorts, is that mankind's *technical ingenuity* is capable of making the problem go away.

In January 2007 LTT reported Mr Blair as saying that "*All the evidence is that if you use the science and technology constructively, your economy can grow, people can have a good time, but do so more responsibly*".

He went on to say, in addressing the issue of aviation "*I think that what we need to do is to look at how you make air travel more energy efficient, how you develop the new fuels that will allow us to burn less energy and emit less.*"

My glass is most definitely half empty with such dangerous rhetoric.

Technology is only *part* of the solution, albeit that it can be very important.

This aviation matter is what prompted my first ever letter to LTT at the very beginning of the year.

To me we are staring *plane dependence* in the face and learning nothing from our decades of experience of car dependence.

Technology may make each passenger kilometre of air travel less damaging but the fact is it cannot offset the huge increases in air travel that are being countenanced.

Once we come to see air travel as *necessary* rather than *desirable* to support our social networks, business and leisure pursuits and economic status then it will be a huge and perhaps impossible challenge to step back from this.

A stitch in time saves nine.

What I remain perplexed by is a lack of serious and explicit recognition in transport policy and strategy of the growing opportunities for technological developments to *substitute* for *some* of our travel.

One might think in terms of climate change that motor manufacturers would be feeling the heat by now (so to speak!) but we can mark 2007 also by the survival instinct of this industry and its ingenuity and perhaps audacity.

Land Rover has pledged to offset the first 45,000 miles of motoring of all vehicles it sells from the 2007 model range onwards: I quote from the LandRover website – “*As part of an ongoing commitment to address the challenges of climate change Land Rover offers a comprehensive CO2 offset programme. In a pioneering step, Land Rover has chosen to source all offsets for the programme by investing solely in energy efficiency, technology change and renewable energy projects.*”

And carbon offsetting seems rather cheap – prices are typically £40 to £70 per 15,000 miles.

So for about £50 a year you can carry on driving with a clear conscience.

Predict and provide

So – road pricing is 10 or more years away at least, and we can carbon offset our car driving (and of course our economy has not yet collapsed to put a dent in our growing disposable incomes) – so what is to be done about our congestion problem?

Well, one idea which seems to have slowly crept back out of the darkness much like Voldemort in Harry Potter or Sauron in Lord of the Rings is to provide more road capacity.

We have at least two options it seems – the first is set out in a new RAC Foundation report (covered in the latest edition of LTT).

We are told through the report I understand that the New Realism agenda has gone too far and delivered too little.

Well, in my book it hasn't gone particularly far – a few carrots but not much sign of sticks – no surprise therefore that it hasn't realised its full potential.

I confess I have not yet studied the report “*Roads and reality*” but the suggestion it seems is that we need 600 new lane kilometres a year to position ourselves to cope with the projected 37% increase in distance travelled by car by 2041.

I gather that while the report's authors acknowledge that growth could be suppressed by rises in taxation, this is considered to be politically infeasible, especially in the face of population growth.

I look forward to reading the report – if only to feel entitled subsequently to air more developed views of my own.

With Stephen Glaister as one of the authors I'm sure it is a report of stature and rigour but my standpoint when I begin reading it will be to assume that it has taken the view that transport *serves* society (i.e. seeking to service the travel demand and traffic that society is seen to require) rather than the more challenging view but one I believe in which is that transport must *support* society (i.e. seeking to enable transport to play its part in developing a better society – economically, socially and environmentally), recognising that one is shaping the other.

But if all this new-build capacity doesn't sit well with public expenditure then we are also presented with an alternative means of capacity increase tried and tested by the Highways Agency on the M42.

They have demonstrated that by using the hard shoulder as a running lane at times of serious congestion, this can appreciably contribute to reduced journey times and improvement in journey time reliability.

It seems that the Government is keen to support the national roll-out of this with Ruth Kelly hailing it part of "*practical and cost effective solutions to cutting congestion*".

Hard shoulder running is part of the HA's 'Active Traffic Management' initiative. What seriously worries me here is that distinguishing between traffic management and demand management is difficult.

It may be traffic management at the time the hard shoulder is opened and the variable speed limits are applied but the *cumulative* effect is surely adverse for demand management.

If you make motorway journeys quicker and more predictable then isn't it a lesson already learnt from predict and provide that some new traffic will be generated?

I'm afraid I wouldn't call this Active Traffic Management but *Active Traffic Growth Management*.

Oh dear – my glass is feeling half empty.

Building new roads, opening hard shoulders.

Of course this will produce instant impacts on traffic flow which provide welcome sound bytes for ministers.

Much quicker impacts than a rather lack lustre attempt to introduce soft measures and the new realism could achieve.

But the point is government needs to step up a gear on demand management and get serious with its sticks and recognise that reshaping travel patterns and society doesn't happen overnight in the way that cutting the red ribbon on a new road scheme has an immediate impact.

Something I have found increasingly pertinent in several respects during my thinking about the issues in 2007 is the frogboiler.

How many of you are familiar with this?

If you put a frog in a pan of hot water it will jump out.

If you put a frog in a pan of cold water and gradually heat it up to boiling point the frog will happily sit in the water until it is too late because it adjusts to the increasing temperature and is thus not aware of the mounting problem.

This strongly reflects society and growing levels of car use (and in the future plane use).

The public don't really see congestion as a problem for themselves – their lives continually adjust to accommodate its gradual worsening.

Hard therefore to persuade them that any form of uncomfortable solution such as traffic restraint – turning down the gas under the pan of water so to speak - might be needed.

Smoking ban

However, since I'm also anxious that my glass doesn't feel half empty for the remainder of the evening, I want to finally reflect upon the fact that the frogboiler thinking can be reversed.

A gradual cooling down of the frog's pan of water could be possibly happening around us even though we won't feel a dramatic change in our lives and transport. Repeated exposure through the media to talk of climate change, road pricing and obesity, increasing use of trains and some buses, increasing fuel prices (now comfortably over £1 a litre), increasingly attractive urban centres, increasing opportunities afforded by the Internet to do things and interact without travelling – all of these things are gradually even if perhaps imperceptably adjusting norms and attitudes.

Oh – and by the way, recalling Mr Peter Robert's and his petition, good things can come from Internet polls too – congratulations to Sustrans at the end of 2007 who have the people's wish behind them in spending £50M to further help in reintroducing society to active travel.

If we want proof that gradual but dramatic change for the better can be brought about let's turn to smoking.

In July 2007 smoking in enclosed public spaces was banned.

Yet a rummage on the Internet allowed me to find an old smoking advert fitting for Christmas [see end of speech] – it shows a young bell-boy in a red and black uniform about to climb down the snow covered chimney with a sack of Philip Morris cigarettes – the message on the advert is “*Merry Christmas and Happy Smoking – Call for Philip Morris America's finest cigarette*”.

So – in the space of a few decades we have gone from smoking being a sign of social acceptance and success to advertising bans, increasing taxation, health warnings on packets, increasing societal disgust at the fact that smokers affect non-smokers to now a ban on smoking.

Is this a fitting analogy for the use and encouragement of motorised transport? Well, I quote from the Guardian on 24 October of this year –

“The advertising industry has been dealt a major blow after proposals for tobacco-style warning messages to appear in all car ads were agreed in a European Parliament vote today”.

So let’s hold firm and encourage a continuance of the era we have experienced since the 1998 White Paper nearly a decade ago – indeed lets intensify our efforts to bring about behaviour change with carrots and sticks.

My New Year’s resolution is to try and turn my back more firmly on predict and provide in relation to managing my workload – if I fail in this resolution then I only hope we don’t collectively fail in our resolution to do the many good things in transport that are the alternative to more road capacity. Here’s to a bright future ahead.

Thank you.



<http://thehashmark.com/2007/06/20/only-in-america-thank-you-phillip-morris/>