

# **WHY WE SHOULD ENCOURAGE TRAVEL, STOP DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CAR OWNERSHIP AND BUILD MORE ROADS**

**Roger Lawson \***

## **Introduction**

My thesis is simple. That UK transport policy has been distorted in the last few years by those who oppose the use of road transport, and particularly private cars. This opposition is based on false environmental claims, but is motivated by other factors in addition. More latterly when some have come to realise that transport of any kind generates significant carbon emissions, there have even been demands that all kinds of travel should be reduced.

I was asked by the organisers of this conference to tackle some specific questions and I will deal with these first. My answers are based on the policy views of the Association of British Drivers which represents the interests of all drivers, but particularly private car owners, in this country and takes a keen interest in environmental issues.

## **Question 1: By what sort of level do we need to reduce carbon emissions?**

Many people in my organisation question the need for any reduction in carbon emissions, or question whether it is economically justified to pursue such an agenda. I will not attempt to argue that stance here as it would take too lengthy a debate to adequately cover the issues, and there would be no certainty in the result. Undoubtedly the Government has to form a view on whether total emissions should be limited and by how much. But one thing is clear. Road transport is not the main producer of emissions, and yet it is one of the main targets for national environmental policies. For example the recent proposals to introduce sharply higher Vehicle Excise Duties which have been justified on emissions grounds. In reality the impact on overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will be negligible and this is primarily a tax raising measure by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Let me remind you that the percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the UK generated by road transport of the total emissions is probably about 20% (different sources quote different figures depending on how the calculations are done, but that's an approximate estimate). Roughly about half of that is generated by cars, with a quarter produced by HGVs, a smaller amount by LGVs and a minor fraction by buses.

To quote (Reference 1): *“Recent years have seen rapid progress in tackling the environmental impact of road transport. Vehicles are cleaner than ever - it would take 20 of the cars built today to produce the same emissions of local air pollutants as just one built in the 1970s. And because of the tough new standards that the cars built in the next few years will have to meet by 2006 that number will be even higher. Cars are getting more fuel efficient - under a voluntary agreement between the motor manufacturers and the European Commission, the average new car bought in 2009 will be 25% more fuel efficient than one bought today. Fuels too are cleaner than ever.”*

Private cars constitute only 10% of total UK CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and the position appears to be both under control and improving, largely due to technology (Reference 2). Incidentally the largest coal fired power station in the UK (Drax) generates more CO<sub>2</sub> than all the passenger cars combined (21 million tonnes versus 19 million tonnes).

So there are two points to emphasise here:

A – Emission totals are directly related to population levels and business activity. More people with more houses and more jobs generate more emissions. If you wish to tackle emissions growth then one of the key priorities must be to reduce population growth, otherwise you are swimming against the tide. So for example, it was odd to see the recently departed Mayor of London produce a strategic plan which envisaged a major growth of population and business in the capital while advocating “environmental” policies such as the proposed Emissions Related Congestion Charge that would have a trivial impact on emissions growth. Such muddle headed views can be characterised by the phrase “gesture politics” which is only too prevalent when discussing transport and environmental matters.

B – If you wish to reduce emissions then you have to tackle non-transport generators much more aggressively than has been attempted in the past. Such areas as reducing the generation of electricity from fossil fuels (coal, gas, oil) can make much more substantial impacts on total emissions than trying to improve the efficiency of road transport. While vehicle manufacturers take leaps and bounds in improving efficiency of their vehicles, the Government dithers over nuclear energy generation.

Lastly I would say this on the subject of emissions. Vehicle emissions are obviously a substantial health hazard in some areas (e.g. in central London) and reducing them should be advantageous. But I am much more concerned with reducing pollutants rather than CO<sub>2</sub>. Noxious and cancer inducing emissions need to be focussed on, and encouraging a switch in vehicle types (e.g. to more economical diesel vehicles) may not be the best solution.

## **Question 2: What is the role of transport in delivering a reduction in emissions?**

Certainly improving the efficiency of transport should be a worthwhile objective – it does of course have significant economic benefits as well as environmental. And as road transport is the main mode of transport, clearly that must do its share. But it is already doing so, and there is much misinformation published on this subject.

For example, when Islington Council circulated a leaflet to all residents in their borough on the CO<sub>2</sub> based permit parking proposals in 2007, the council Leader, James Kempton said in it that “Carbon dioxide emissions impact on climate change and one of the contributors to rising emission levels is cars.” Although I personally told Mr Kempton that he was wrong at least on the latter point when I met him at a meeting in Islington, I did not have the proof immediately to hand. But it is given in an interesting document published by Transport for London (TfL). This is the report entitled TfL “Environment Report 2006” which can be found on the internet at: <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/corporate/Environment-Report-2006.pdf> (Reference 3)

Although the introduction by Peter Hendy, Transport Commissioner, repeats the spurious claim that air pollution has reduced as a result of Congestion Charging (not borne out by actual measurements incidentally as confirmed in the recent Sixth Annual Monitoring Report), it contains some other useful information. Page 31 contains the really important data though. It provides estimates of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from different transport modes, in 2005/2006, including a “per passenger” figure.

### ***Air Pollution from Cars Not Increasing***

The figure for total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of cars is given as 4.73 million tonnes. Even though it does not show the change from the prior year, in the previous years report, page 7, it gives estimates of total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 1999, and that shows a total of 4.67 million tonnes for cars – in effect no significant change over 7 years.

### ***But Pollution from Buses Increasing***

The latest report shows total emissions from buses actually rose by 5%, including an incredible figure of 7% increase for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger over the year.

### ***And Buses are Barely Better than Cars***

The other revealing figure in the table is that it shows that the average CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger for buses is 103 gms/km in London, whereas for cars it is 124 gms/km. In other words, there is not much difference.

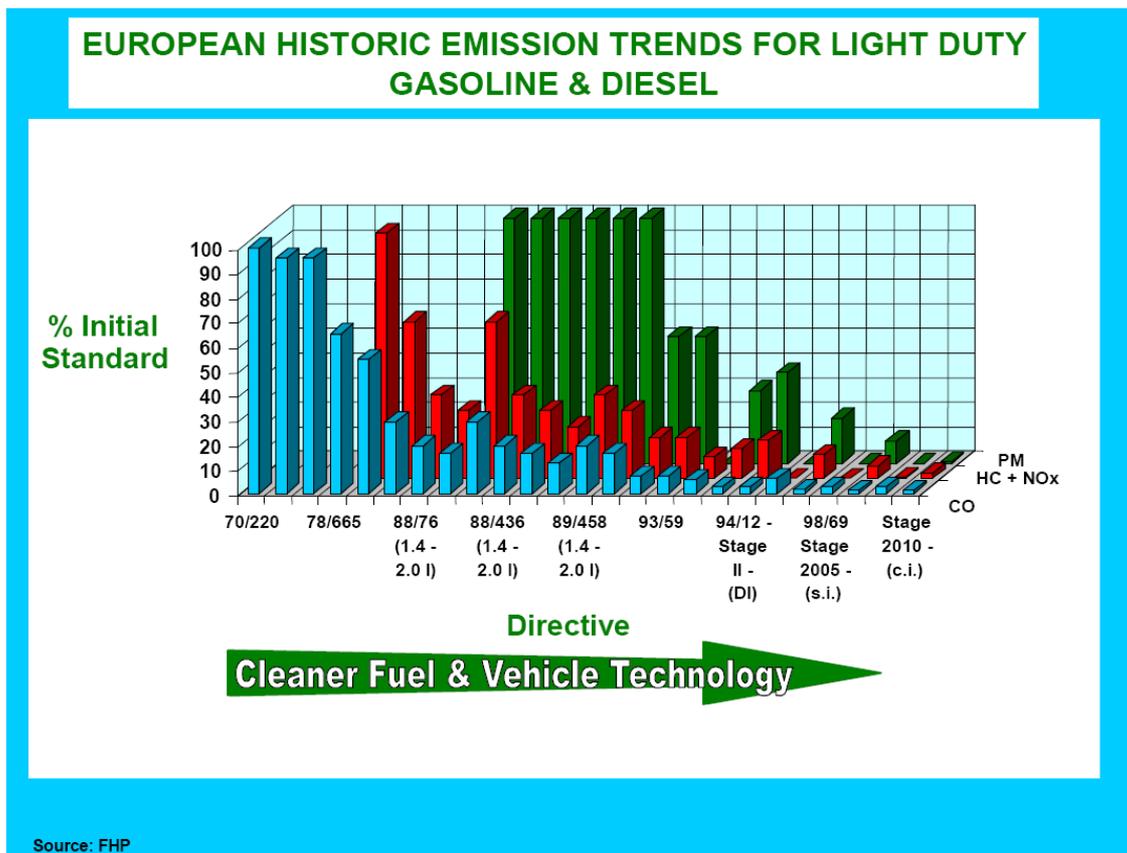
That is probably based on the average occupancy of cars of not much better than one. So if there are two of you in a car, you are almost certainly “greener” than going by bus. The figures for underground and tram travel are better, although it does not make it clear whether that data includes their total emission costs, including those from the power stations needed to generate the electricity to drive them.

Of course all of these figures are based on TfL estimates and they provide few details of how they arrived at these figures. But knowing the preference by TfL for public transport over private vehicles, it seems unlikely that they overestimated the emissions from buses.

Note also that heavy rail is no better environmentally and can even be worse so moving people onto it to try and reduce emissions is not the answer either, although there may be some benefit in moving short haul air flights to surface rail.

Other supporting evidence on the emissions from cars in the UK was provided by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) in 2007. They claimed cleaner new cars have saved five million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in the last decade. SMMT economists have calculated that car makers saved nearly five million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in the last ten years - thanks to the development of cleaner, greener cars. Average new car CO<sub>2</sub> has fallen by 22.6 g/km to 167.2 g/km since 1997, down by nearly 12 per cent. That equates to current annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions savings approaching a million tonnes. "Car makers have made significant progress in cutting CO<sub>2</sub>" commented SMMT chief executive Christopher Macgowan. "Total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the UK from cars have actually fallen since 1997, down 3.2 per cent from 72.2million to 69.9 million tonnes in 2005. That's despite a 16.5 per cent rise in cars on the road from 26.3 to 30.7 million."

The trend in vehicle emissions is well represented in the following diagram (Reference 5)



Other information on transport emissions is available from Defra (Reference 7 CfIT). To quote: *“While cars are the most significant mode, their emissions have stabilised at roughly 1990 levels, despite an 18% increase in car traffic over this period. Public transport emissions have fallen by 9% since 1990, though this has had marginal impact overall, given public transport’s small share of the market. Aviation emissions have grown fastest of all. Since 1990, domestic aviation has seen emissions growth of nearly 100%; international air travel emissions have grown by 123%. Use of vans has resulted in steep growth in emissions, up nearly half since 1990 so that they now account for 13% of domestic transport emissions. Lorries currently account for 22% of transport emissions and have grown by almost a third over the same period.”*

Despite this and the above evidence that total emissions from cars are at least not rising, and may well be falling, while emissions from other vehicles are growing rapidly (and of course those from larger vehicles are of the worst kind), the Commission for Integrated Transport said there should be a *“particular focus on cars”*. A typical failure to get basic priorities right from a Government sponsored body that tends to promote public transport because it is seen as “socially good” when it is nothing of the kind, and irrespective of the merits of the situation.

### **Question 3: How should transport achieve these reductions?**

It is clear that moving people from one kind of vehicle to another does not help a great deal - for example, moving people from private cars to buses is not going to make an enormous difference. So there is no great merit in discriminating against private cars on environmental grounds.

Neither is there any justification in introducing “congestion charging” or “road pricing” schemes to try and produce environmental benefits. It has not been demonstrated to be the case in London (to quote: *“no clear scheme impacts from either the original central or western extension zones can therefore be discerned”* as regards ambient outdoor air quality – Reference 4). It’s a myth that congestion charge schemes generate any environmental benefits but car haters continue to promote this agenda.

One of the main reasons why there is no environmental benefit is that car drivers simply drive further to avoid the high charging zones, and hence on a wide area basis total emissions rise.

But one thing that could be done is to encourage people to switch to more efficient vehicles. Regrettably though the Chancellor of the Exchequer has chosen a false basis for doing so which is Vehicle Excise Duty – this is a tax on vehicles irrespective of the miles they do and the emissions they generate, so it’s nonsensical. It’s also retrospective so it penalizes people for decisions they made unknowingly some years ago.

Most new vehicles are a lot more efficient than older ones so one might simply introduce a policy to encourage people to scrap older vehicles and replace them with new ones. But as any intelligent person realizes, the CO<sub>2</sub> generated in the production of a vehicle is often more than it generates during its whole lifetime of usage. That of course is particularly the case with more sophisticated vehicles such as hybrids. So let us not jump down that path without care.

Likewise encouraging the use of electric vehicles can be counterproductive if the electricity is generated via a relatively inefficient process in a coal fired power station (at least in comparison with an internal combustion engine and allowing for transmission inefficiencies).

Increasing fuel taxes to encourage the purchase and use of more efficient vehicles might also be proposed, but the UK already has one of the highest levels of fuel tax and this is distorting competition with our neighbours, particularly in the road freight industry. The high price of oil recently may at least have had a similar beneficial impact, but with other negative aspects of course.

One has to come to the conclusion that there is no simple solution. But clearly encouraging technological innovation must be a positive move. In particular, there must be concentration on HGVs and LGVs, where emissions are tending to rise and a lot more initiatives in this area would be a good thing. Private cars tend to take the brunt of political gestures, while not being the main problem.

#### **Question 4: What other priorities are there for transport policy?**

Some people have argued that, given the above scenario, we should simply discourage people from travelling altogether, and likewise we should interfere in the natural commercial flow of goods. This seems to me to be a basic attack on the freedom of the individual to travel as he wishes, or would require a Stalinist approach to direction of the commercial transport infrastructure.

They even suggest that a national road pricing scheme, with a penal rate of charge, could reduce travel to meet the required targets. But the ability to travel at low cost, and at will, empowers people to make new personal connections, to change jobs, create new businesses, and has enormous social and business benefits. Likewise, the benefits of private motor car access for individuals have been well documented by past academic research.

To quote from a recent RAC Foundation report (Reference 6): "*Owning a car improves people's quality of life by one-third, but authorities are not doing enough to plan for increased travel demand*".

The Foundation is calling for appropriate, car inclusive planning to acknowledge the fact that sixty percent of people in England live in car orientated sub-urban or rural areas. Based on past traffic growth and future projections, the RAC Foundation forecasts that these areas will experience strong population and traffic growth up until 2021, resulting in a 25% increase in suburban traffic.

Currently three families out of four have a car and people spend over £50 per week on private transport - nine times as much as they spend on public transport.

Owning a car for the first time increases a household's opportunities to engage in social and economic activities by one third. In houses where there is no car, on average 15 trips per week are made. This increases to 20 trips per week when one car is available and 22 trips when there are multiple cars available in the household. More non-drivers get lifts from family friends or relatives than take the bus, showing that the car is an important source of mobility even for non-drivers.

Looking to the future, Sheila Rainger, Head of Campaigns for the RAC Foundation, said "*The private car has fundamentally changed the way in which people live, making broader education and social activities, and better employment opportunities, available to the many not the few. The genie of travel demand cannot be put back into the bottle. The quality of life benefits of increased travel must not be overlooked when it comes to forecasting demand and planning our future road and transport network.*"

As people becoming wealthier, they have more time and more money to spend on travel. Are we really going to propose that we artificially try to reverse this trend by making them "travel poor"? This would definitely be one of the most politically unacceptable proposals that one could imagine. Of course the ejection of Mr Livingstone from London, and the deep troubles of the Labour party may well partly have arisen because of their promotion of "travel tax" schemes (ie. road pricing and congestion charging under other names).

Neither will "tele-commuting" have a significant impact in my view on total travel demand.

There are some basic economic facts that the public are not generally aware of and which epitomises much of what is wrong with UK transport policy. Each year the Government raises over £50 billion in taxes from road users and that's why we have some of the most expensive fuel in Europe. Only a very small fraction of the money raised is spent on improving our roads (about £7bn). The result — you end up sitting in traffic jams.

On any international comparison basis, the UK comes out as having one of the worst transport infrastructures of any developed country with higher than average commute times for the average worker, more time spent in traffic jams, more overcrowding on public transport, and higher fares than comparable countries.

This has been known for many years, and yet the failure to improve the transport network because of objections from environmental lobby groups has meant almost nothing has been done in the last ten years to solve this problem.

We also have increasing goods vehicle volumes and this has meant much local degradation of the transport network with significant air pollution problems and yet the only national policy seems to be one of trying to deter such usage, which has very little impact.

Maintaining freedom of travel, and at low cost, I would suggest are absolute policy priorities. I do not agree with road pricing as it charges different people different amounts for road space that might have cost the same to provide. It would also result in total costs rising as there is no way to pay for the required road pricing infrastructure without raising total taxes for road travel. In addition, it will hit the less wealthy, who typically have jobs with fixed hours, more than the well off – a socially divisive and retrograde step in my view.

### **Question 5. Do these policies support or conflict with the above objectives?**

Is it possible to have one's cake and eat it? Can we cope with increased travel demand, and reduce traffic congestion, say by improving the road transport network, while still reducing emissions (assuming the latter is necessary and that other countries follow similar policies so that we are not saddled with the additional costs with no worldwide benefit)?

I suggest the answer is yes, and it does not take enormous leaps in technology to achieve this, although it may take some time to implement unless you want to incur excessive costs from attempting too rapid a change. For example, changing the vehicle fleet takes many years, and even changing people's habits so they purchase smaller vehicles is not easy to achieve. There is no justification for forcing people to change vehicles, or scrap existing ones, and there will be major objections from the public if such policies are pursued.

Neither should we waste money on "modal change" initiatives to try and change people's habits. Social engineering never works because personal behaviour is often based on a combination of economic logic and ingrained personal preferences that no amount of hectoring will change. Encouraging more cycling and walking may be good for the nation's health, and is supportable on those grounds perhaps, but it is not going to have any major impact on national transport statistics except in a few small localities.

Let us not pursue the kind of policies pursued in London in recent years. Although there has been modal shift, in reality these policies have produced worse congestion on public transport (particular underground and surface rail), and no better congestion on the road network. To quote from Transport for London (TfL): "*congestion rises back to pre-charging levels*" (Reference 4) .

One of the only ways we can improve the UK transport network relatively cheaply and with a good return on that investment, is to build more roads. Even the Eddington report (Reference 8) made it clear that some kinds of road improvements showed a very substantial return after taking into account any environmental impacts. But substantially increased UK road capacity is opposed outright as not being a solution by many people, when in reality it is the only viable solution if we are not to revert to a "pre-industrial" society. Only by so doing will we improve the quality of life of the average member of the public, as public transport is simply not a viable option for most rural communities and is uneconomic in comparison with private cars even in suburban areas.

### **Question 6. What is my view of a balanced transport strategy moving forwards?**

Global warming may or may not be happening – I am one of the sceptics. But reducing air pollution, particularly of those pollutants that are known to affect health, is surely a sensible thing to do so long as it can be done at reasonable cost. Improving the air quality in cities such as London will make life more pleasant and most people would be willing to pay something for that.

But clearly, tinkering at the fringes by making minor adjustments to the rates of car vehicle tax, or introducing a higher London congestion charge for more polluting vehicles is not going to make a real difference. We don't need "gesture politics" – what we need is some real steps to cut pollutants in total.

Therefore the really big emission generators such as power stations and industrial processes must be tackled and the issue of population growth examined. At the same time, transport emissions must also be improved, and that should not be done by simply stopping people from travelling, or attempting to move them all to public transport (the latter would not make much difference anyway) but by much more aggressive encouragement of technological solutions. Cars, LGVs, HGVs, buses and taxis can all be made a lot more efficient and cleaner than they are at present – in fact some cars are already remarkably improved. Even people who like to buy high performance or larger vehicles could have their needs satisfied but they need strong, but reasonable, financial incentives to make the change.

Clearly a high fuel cost may help but it is probably not sufficient and causes problems for rural communities who have fewer pollution problems anyway. Perhaps a more aggressive car license duty in terms of higher rates for more polluting vehicles may be appropriate, but implementing it retrospectively will simply annoy people. But both of these approaches are very blunt instruments and cause problems for people who have recently bought vehicles unless they are phased in gradually or only applied to new vehicles.

In addition they are unselective about the type of pollution being generated. Carbon dioxide is not detrimental to health unlike other pollutants such as particulates or NO<sub>2</sub> so the wrong incentives may actually make matters worse – for example they might encourage the use of more diesel engines which may be more “economical” but are a lot worse for certain pollutants.

An alternative approach is simply to direct that cars must meet certain improved standards over time, if they are to be sold at all. Such targets can be made pollutant specific of course, not just based on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Such targets would probably require much stronger commitments from the European Union and national governments however and may take some years to implement.

At present, the measures being taken are in my view too weak and too mixed up with illogical emotions to really achieve much. You cannot cut air pollution significantly by simply reducing car usage, as has been well demonstrated by the London congestion tax. You need to encourage technological improvements much more forcefully such as using electric or hybrid powered buses and delivery vehicles. Note that the EU set a target of 120g CO<sub>2</sub>/km for 2010 for cars, but that target is unlikely to be met unless more vigorous action is taken at an international level.

But any such steps should not just target private vehicles but even more importantly goods vehicles, buses and taxis. There should be no separate attack on the private motorist and the reductions should apply across all vehicle types.

## **Question 7. How should such a strategy be implemented?**

How to sell these policies to the public is the key question. Regrettably there is much misinformation spouted by environmental groups and politicians who are often grossly misinformed about the transport “facts of life”. The lobbying by public transport pressure groups and the freight transport industry often does not help either.

Unfortunately policies in these areas tend to be decided by politicians and civil servants based in central London whose day-to-day travel experience is very different to the average UK member of the public.

In addition, when measures are introduced they are often implemented in a way that creates major objections from the public. The proposed rise in VED rates was a classic example of how not to do it, with no consultation on the idea beforehand. Any proposals have to be clearly justifiable on environmental grounds, and introducing “green taxes” that have negligible environmental benefits just gives the whole environment movement a bad name – the VED changes and “emission based permit parking charges” are both good examples of how not to do it.

So rational policies, sensitively introduced, with proper advance consultation would be a good starting point. When have motorists ever been consulted fully on national transport policies that affect their day to day life? Never in a meaningful way! Doing so would be a good starting point for a new UK transport strategy which we urgently need.

Reference 1: Cleaner Vehicles Task Force Report Department for Transport (DfT) 2005.

Reference 2 : Evidence given by Transport for London to the Thames Gateway Bridge Public Inquiry

Reference 3: Transport for London Environment Report 2006.

Reference 4: Transport for London Sixth Annual Congestion Charge Monitoring Report 2008

Reference 5: Presentation to the Association of British Drivers by Professor F.H. Palmer, 2007

Reference 6: Travel Demand and its Causes. RAC Foundation Motoring towards 2050 - Roads and Reality Background Paper No.3, David Bayliss . July 2008

Reference 7: Transport and Climate Change, UK Commission for Integrated Transport, 2007

Reference 8: The Eddington Transport Study, R.Eddington, HMSO 2006

**\* Roger Lawson, B.Sc, M.B.A, M.B.C.S, the author of this paper, is the London Region Co-Ordinator for the Association of British Drivers, a non-profit organisation run primarily by volunteers that promotes the interests of private motorists. See [www.freedomfordrivers.org](http://www.freedomfordrivers.org) for more information**