

In praise of the car

For many young people passing their driving test is an important rite of passage to adulthood. Acquiring your first vehicle is a major advance in your personal freedom. Yet today government, Councils and better off greens from the security of their homes in major cities lecture the rest of us on the wickedness of the car. The better off Green city dweller can rely more on the tube or mass transit and has the money for taxis when needed. The aim is to get people out of car ownership or to reduce their use of the car, and in the meantime to cow people into keeping quiet about their reliance on this flexible and most popular form of transport.

Many Councils work away to make their localities hostile to car traffic, blocking off roads, and deliberately creating unsafe juxtapositions of bus lanes and cycleways with highway, and altering junctions to increase tensions between different road users. I have recently reviewed the many journeys I need to make for work, for shopping and for social and pleasure purposes. All the ones I need to do in my home constituency area either cannot be done by train, or if attempted by train would take me between three times and ten times as long depending on the distance I needed to walk from the destination station, the frequency of the timetable and whether I needed first to go into Reading by train to then get out on another line. All these trips would also be dearer given the relative marginal costs of each mode of travel. Like many people I conclude if the train option is both much longer and dearer it is not a sensible choice. Added to that how would I manage a weekly shop on the train and carrying the groceries to and from stations. In Central London I do mainly walk or use the tube where the shorter distances and the regularity of the trains makes those the best options now the roads have been so blocked and parking removed or priced so high.

Most people in my local area come to the conclusion they mainly use the car. Many take the children to school by car unless they live close to the school. They go on to their place of work in the car because most offices, shops and factories are not near a station. They take the family to a cafe or restaurant by car because it is easier with many of the family items they might need in the car already. They visit Granny by car because Sunday transport services are so poor.

Sensible Councils understand we need to live with the car. Its flexibility is the ally of better town centres and shopping areas if the Council allows easy access and cheap or free parking. It is the ally of young people being able to enjoy their lives and make more social contacts, it is the friend of events, theatres and concerts wanting people to get back from them at hours of less public transport, and the stand by means to tackle many emergencies for a family. The car can get you to the chemist, the doctor or to the direct rescue of a family member in trouble.

Sensible car policy means designing junctions that encourage freer flow and segregates different types of road user to make them safer. It means building a better local network of strategic roads designed with the needs of the van, truck and car driver in mind, allowing more time and attention for pedestrians, bikes and buses on other local roads. Above all it needs more capacity to ease congestion and tensions on the ever popular roads.

Governments local and national will discover that if they make it too difficult to get about by car there will be a voter backlash. The polls may tell us people want to use their cars less and are worried about air quality, safety and other important issues. If you look however at what people are actually doing they are relying more and more on their cars to buy the food, get to school and work and have some fun. Even before all lockdown is lifted traffic levels are back to pre pandemic levels whilst train and bus travel is struggling to get back to 50% of former levels.