

Blocking the roads

Each time I use my car to get to work or to visit places in my constituency to keep in touch I encounter some new obstacle to getting around. Each journey poses its own mixture of traffic jams, temporary lights, closed roads, restricted carriageways, narrowed lanes, reduced lanes and new speed restrictions.

Some of the disruption is the result of the UK madness of putting most cables, pipes and wires under tarmac roads then digging them up every time you need access for repair and improvement. The utilities and Ministers I have talked to over the years about why not place new or replacement cables and pipes in accessible conduits, preferably under pavements to avoid digging up main roads have always agreed but failed to implement. Management of road closures to allow access to existing pipes and cables is often poor with much wasted time with the road closed but no work underway.

Some of it is Councils wanting to force people out of their cars and vans. Councils who claim to have no cash to pay for decent social services or to maintain a good refuse service have bundles of banknotes to change kerbs, pavements, install more traffic lights, paint roads and festoon them with new signs and surveillance cameras. Many Councils take a sadistic delight in making the lives of the motorist, the van driver and goods delivery driver almost impossible.

Some of it is pressure of traffic on the diminishing number of roads that survive. We invite in hundreds of thousands additional people each year but fail to put in extra roadspace for their cars. In fast growing areas like Wokingham the Conservative Council did put in some important new roads and by passes, but the Lib Dem led Council is now busy narrowing or closing roads to make life difficult.

This is a major impediment to productivity and business success. Those running businesses to help us at home book fewer appointments to allow for the delays on the roads. They need to add to the charges the costs of Congestion and low emissions zones, car parking charges and the extra fuel used in traffic jams. The London Mayor's widened ULEZ zone is very unpopular, seeking to stop people with older vehicles and lower incomes from using their cars.

Wokingham surveys

I have been reading through the survey returns we have been getting from local residents. I have been particularly interested in the question about what change people would most like to see to improve our area.

The winner was to build fewer new homes. I agree and have been pressing the Council to produce a new local plan with lower development rates, and have worked with other MPs to persuade the government to allow greater local determination of building rates going forward if there is a new local plan in place.

In second place was the wish to see more police on the streets. This was coupled with some who wanted a police station in central Wokingham again. The government has supported Thames Valley Police in recruiting and training more officers, which we want to see reflected in Wokingham patrols.

In third place was unhappiness about what were seen as dangerous electric scooters and bicycles. There was considerable opposition to cycle lanes and some wish to see electric scooters banned altogether. If you added the comments on cycles and bikes to the comments on the wish to see better roads and fewer potholes that became a most important issue.

Several opposed the ending of weekly waste collection, wanted more surgery capacity to cope with more homes and people, and some wanted free parking for shoppers. No-one wrote in for higher parking charges, a worse refuse service or restrictions on getting to the town centre and parking. The Council should take note of these views.

[My Telegraph article on parking and driving to towns](#)

I often see people wrestling with the latest technology in Council car parks. It is not just the elderly or the technology challenged. Quite often the newer systems do not work, or require several attempts to find the way to unlock their iron grip over whether you can get in or out of the park. My constituents keep me informed of their daily struggles and their car park paying nightmares.

Locally some have recently experienced the hospital car park where the number plate recognition to let you out when you have paid does not always work. They had to put in an employee standing by the exit ready to check you had paid and then to manually override the exit barrier control. Another complainant told me she drove to a car park, tried several times to pay without success and so left the car park frustrated to find somewhere else that would take her money. She was then fined for being too long in the first car park without paying! The last station car park I used required me to pay before travelling. It refused to accept my credit card contactless, it refused to accept it with the number typed in, yet the card paid readily for other items before and after these bruising rejections. Fortunately that car park had a cash option which did work.

Many Councils are pursuing an anti road vehicle strategy. If you manage to negotiate the mushrooming sets of traffic lights, the complex

junctions, the restricted lanes, the changing hours of regulated uses, the road closures, the neighbourhood limitations, the incessant changes of speed limit, the cycle and bus lanes and the widened kerbs and pavements you may end up in a car park out to thwart you at journey's end. Visiting a cathedral city recently I was directed out to a car park which said it catered for longer term stays, only to find a queue of people wrestling with the technology to pay. In the sunshine it was difficult to make out the messages on an unhelpful and often malfunctioning touch screen. A visitor will stay longer and spend more in a town if the parking arrangements are friendly and sensibly priced. If car parks in town centres are geared to under two hours of parking people will not have the time both to go to the shops and buy a meal.

Councils just do not want to accept many of us have good reasons to take to the car or van. You cannot do your weekly shop going to the store by train as you could not carry and stow all the items you bought. The car boot does the job well. An electrician, plumber, builder or other service provider to your home needs to arrive by van with the tools and materials in the back. Given the deliberate delays and congestion Councils create on our streets they book fewer engagements to allow for the increased journey time. They are worse off, prices go up and more people are frustrated. If you want to take a family in for a meal or the cinema the car may be the only realistic option, particularly at weekends or evenings with reduced public transport.

The ultras in parties of the left who condemn the road vehicle seem to forget that the food they eat is taken to the shops by large lorry, and delivered to homes by van. They forget that the power they turn on and the water in their tap is maintained by engineers who need vehicle access to installations. When they do get to the local shops they forget that without the trade of people who go there by car the shops would fold for insufficient business. We see too many declining shopping streets and centres in our towns, the casualties of too few customers. Stopping people going there on impulse and preventing easy and cheap or free parking is part of the reason for the shuttered properties and the decline of prosperity. So many Councils seem to think they need to charge us a fortune for us to park on Council owned land, land we paid for as taxpayers in the first place! Instead of wanting to serve the public, plenty of left wing Councils want to fleece us.

So what is the answer? Keep it simple. I usually welcome new technology. Mobile phones and internet communication have enhanced our lives. I see the advantages of the sat nav over a map book. Not all new technology however is better if it is unduly complex and slows you down. Touch screens are difficult in sunshine where a button to press would solve the problem. Putting cash or card into a simple parking ticket machine works well. Paying by cash or card on exit against a record stating the time of your arrival works well. Making you download an app, entering your index number and then relying on vehicle identification technology greatly increases the chances of something going wrong as well as slowing you down. It is clearly dearer and more complex technology to install. Councils should change their mentality on car parks. Instead of seeing them as big sources of revenue and opportunities to make our lives worse they should be a service we need in order to support and encourage flourishing town centres. Paying should be easy and include a cash option.

The road to net zero is damaging the UK car industry

My latest Conservative Home article:

The latest figures for UK car sales remain disappointing. The industry has been in denial since lockdown, claiming poor sales resulted from a lack of supply. They say they were unable to buy enough microprocessors as the digital industries hoovered up the output from world chip factories. They now tell us supply shortages are behind them. It is true there was a useful recovery in car sales from low levels so far this year, but it is also true that they remain way below the levels of the previous decade. It is also notable that whilst fleet or business purchases have advanced well this year, sales to individuals are static at low levels.

During the long Brexit debates the Remain political parties claimed the UK motor industry would lose out were a 10% tariff to be imposed. Motor industry lobbying was one of the reasons the UK government paid quite a high price to secure a free trade deal with the EU so cars and other items would remain tariff free. No-one suggested a 10% tariff would have done anything like the damage to sales that has in fact occurred for other reasons. We need to ask why are car sales so depressed and why don't the main political parties and government do something about it?

We need to look at public attitudes towards battery electric cars. Government, Opposition and industry are united in telling us these are the products we must buy. The latest figures show battery cars stuck at just 14% of the total market. By now if the net zero UK car ambitions are to be hit battery vehicles should be the majority choice. The car buying public remains sceptical. Whilst polling shows general support for decarbonisation and the road to net zero, it also shows a marked reluctance for people to adopt electric cars themselves anytime soon. Many worry about the range of the vehicles. Some worry about battery life. Many are concerned about the lack of reliable charging points around the country. Vehicle reviewers taking EVs for longer drives often report reaching a charger place to find the chargers unavailable, or a long queue of cars to use them, or difficulties with the payment systems. People think that battery electric vehicles are still too dear compared to petrol versions. There are questions about repairs to damage and the complications if the battery resting in the chassis is also affected.

Urban dwellers with travel patterns within their urban area are less concerned about range. People on good incomes who can afford a second car to provide long distance back up often like electric cars. More fleet buyers are persuaded as their company seeks to meet its net zero objectives and helps put in home or workplace charging. We still await the inventor of

the Mini or the Beetle of the electric revolution, they must have a product that does not need subsidy and special regulations to get people to buy it.

Meanwhile government policies are very good at stopping people buying new diesels. Once the government's poster boy of the CO₂ revolution, praised for their greater fuel economy, the diesel is now briefed against and regulated against. Councils are busy making it more difficult to use any kind of car. The government has announced it will ban new diesel and petrol car sales from 2030. Far from making people keen to buy electric cars it is simply putting people off buying any new car at all. Higher taxes on new vehicles also present another obstacle to new car buying.

If the government continues with its proposed ban it will act as a block on new motor industry investment in petrol and diesel vehicles in the UK. That will pass to countries who will not be banning these vehicles so early as motor manufacturers seek to earn returns on ranges of vehicles that remain popular. Many UK customers are likely from 2030 to want to buy nearly new imported cars instead if they cannot buy the cars they want in the UK. If you are planning a transition you need to concentrate on creating success for the thing you wish to replace what you have. The danger of UK policy is it will be better at destroying the existing motor industry than at building the new one they want. The West has anyway let China gain a big advance in accessing the raw materials needed for vehicle battery production and in rolling out cheaper electric models that do sell in China.

It is time for a rethink. The net zero revolution needs more popular engagement, which in turn needs more attractive and affordable products. Whilst we await those it is folly to demolish the things that do work and people want, whilst our competitors abroad continue to produce them. The government should lift the proposed ban, review the taxes, and welcome more motor investment here. Councils and government should also allow van and car use as necessary aids to the provision of goods and services productively, ensuring a road system that is safe without so much congestion born of bans and restrictions.

[The sad history of the Exchange Rate Mechanism](#)

In interviews about Nigel Lawson I have discovered a lot of journalist uncertainties about shadowing the DM and seeking to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism. Let me tell you more of what I know, based on the advice I gave Margaret as her Economic Adviser /Head of Policy Unit in the middle period, and as an informal adviser in the later years.

I argued that ERM membership would be destabilising. When the pound was rising money would be created to sell pounds, swelling sterling money and credit. This would prove inflationary. When the pound wanted to go down the Bank would buy up pounds. This would be contractionary. I wanted the government to stick with the Medium Term Financial strategy Nigel Lawson had helped to create. Margaret agreed and thought her new Chancellor accepted the position. She made her view clear.

It later became apparent to me that despite the MTFs in place, despite the PM's wishes, and despite the absence of any formal statement to Parliament of a change of economic policy control the Treasury and Bank were shadowing the DM. Interest rate moves seemed to be related to maintaining the exchange rate. I appreciated this was an inconvenient view for the PM but she came to believe it. One day when I was with her in the study she turned on the news only to hear the BBC claim a policy shift based on DM fluctuations. In later years Treasury pressure to join the ERM worsened the relationship with Number 10 more.

It was a sadness that a good reforming Chancellor who worked well with a reforming PM and her advisers on tax cuts and privatisation got into a fight over using the DM exchange rate as the economic control. In the later Thatcher years following the DM led to excessive money and credit creation and to inflation. The Treasury who never much liked tax cuts tried to blame them for the inflation. In the 1980s the Treasury and Bank worked closely together and Ministers were involved in interest rate and money policy.

The ERM led to the economic problems of the early 1990s, undermined the Conservative reputation for economic competence and was the reason for the defeat in 1997. The irony was this bad economic policy was supported by the other main parties, the CBI and TUC.