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Traffic Reduction: a last opportunity?

Introduction

Labour's transport policy is in disarray. It came into power committed to reducing then reversing traffic growth. Its 1998 White Paper claimed that the Government was committed "*to giving transport the highest possible priority*".

Yet half-way through the maximum life of the current Parliament, the flagship legislation on which Labour's transport policy depends is only just being enacted. Meanwhile many other ships in Labour's armada of transport policies have been sunk, are under heavy fire or are sailing in the wrong direction.

Most commentators have put the blame for Labour's transport failure squarely on the shoulders of the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. There's no doubt he's made mistakes. Yet much of the blame must also fall on Tony Blair. He didn't give Mr. Prescott the money he needed for public transport in the first Labour Budget or time for his Transport Bill in the 1998/9 Parliamentary session. His policy advisors forced Mr. Prescott to water down and delay his plans and briefed journalists against them.

This briefing outlines the promises Labour made to cut traffic levels. It shows the opposition to John Prescott's plans from Tony Blair's policy advisors, how Mr Prescott undermined his own case, and how road hauliers, motoring organisations and the Conservatives have attacked his policies. It puts the environmental, social and economic case for real cuts in road traffic and shows the need for a national traffic reduction target.

Big promises

Labour came to power in 1997 committed to radical changes in transport policy. In June 1997, John Prescott told *The Guardian*: "I will have failed if in five year's time there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car. It's a tall order, but I urge you to hold me to it".

Labour's commitment went beyond Mr Prescott. Its General Election web site said it would "reduce and then reverse traffic growth", as did its candidates' handbook. What's more, over 300 Labour MPs, supported parliamentary motions calling on the Government to set a national target to cut traffic by 10 per cent.

Little action

In 1997, in its honeymoon in Government, Labour's plans for an integrated transport policy were widely welcomed. Former Conservative Environment Secretary, John Gummer promised unprecedented cross-party support for crackdowns on pollution. Three months after the General Election, John Prescott launched a major consultation on the direction of transport policy. "The public mood", it said was "for change". Over 7,000 responses showed "overwhelming agreement" that a change in transport policy was needed, the AA being a notable exception.

However, things soon started to go wrong. In February, 1998, John Prescott was caught walking to work with his 4-litre Jaguar following a discreet distance behind. Three days later, he left Scarborough by train, only to be spotted jumping into the Jaguar at the next station, three miles down the line.

In March, 1998, the Chancellor Gordon Brown infuriated rural voters by increasing fuel duties by six per cent above inflation, but only spending an extra £50 million a year more on rural buses. The AA took out full-page ads in national newspapers arguing: "Motorists have been a soft touch for too long. It's time they had a fair deal". A perception was developing that the Government's policy amounted to little more than increased taxes on the motorist.

Opponents of the White Paper bypassed Mr Prescott and lobbied the Prime Minister's Policy Unit directly. In May, 1998, Prescott blew his top after a critical paper by Geoffrey Norris, Tony Blair's transport advisor, was leaked to the press. Prescott called Mr. Norris a "teenybopper" and said he expected Mr Blair's support.

Yet when the much delayed White Paper, "*A New Deal for Transport: better for everyone*" was eventually published, in July 1998, key policies proposing charges for parking at shopping centres had been removed. There was no commitment to traffic reduction, only to reducing the rate of traffic growth. And the delays in publishing the White Paper meant there was not enough time for the new laws it proposed to be drafted in time for the 1998 Parliamentary session.

Instead, Labour published a series of 'daughter documents' on the detail of its proposals. "Carry on consulting" said the Conservative transport spokesman, Bernard Jenkin.

Truckers' revolt

The extra £1.8 billion, over three years, that Mr Prescott had secured for road maintenance, railways and local public transport did little to mollify his critics. In March 1999, faced with another six per cent above inflation increase in fuel duties, angry road hauliers revolted.

Driving their lorries into central London, and blocking Park Lane for a day, the hauliers got prominent attention from the national media. Their action was widely condemned but their case was quickly backed by the Conservatives and freight trade associations.

Shadow Transport Secretary, Gillian Shepherd said: Labour's "answer to transport problems is to tax the motorist off the road and put hauliers out of business". Ex-Tory Minister and Director of the Road Haulage Association, Stephen Norris called for "a genuine review of the draconian rates of tax that are crippling the industry".

Through the spring and early summer, the hauliers continued their direct action. The AA teamed up with the UK Petrochemical Industries Association to give out 15 million leaflets about fuel taxes at petrol stations.

Trading on reports that Tony Blair had ordered John Prescott to remove a bus lane on the M4 after his car had been seen using it to escape a jam, the Tories launched their '*Fair Deal for the Motorist*' campaign in July 1999. "The public," they said, "feels the Government is 'anti-car'. Target voters feel particularly victimised".

The Party's "*10 commitments to the motorist*" included halting the annual fuel duty increase which, it said discriminated "against the average motorist" and opposing plans for road pricing and workplace parking charges.

But the 'Fair Deal' went much further. The new Shadow Transport spokesman, John Redwood claimed Labour had cut 100 "vital road improvement and local bypass schemes" and said he would construct the most pressing "with minimum delay". He promised to scrap "experiments which disrupt traffic flow such as the M4 bus lane" and only fund local bus and cycle lanes which don't "interrupt traffic flow". He would only support traffic calming if it is "genuinely needed" and refused to promote the use of "environmentally unfriendly traffic humps". All in all, in their own admission, the new Conservative policies were "overtly pro-car".

With transport a key battleground between the parties, media interest was intense and the road lobby exploited the interest to the full. The Freight Transport Association launched a £1 million campaign to end annual rises in real fuel duties.

John Prescott didn't help himself. At Labour's Bournemouth conference in September, he jumped into a car for the 300 yard trip from his hotel to the conference centre, in full view of the national press. When pressed, he joked that his wife didn't like her hair being blown about. "Hypocrite" screamed the Mirror's front page.

Tony Blair had already been reported to be sympathetic to the truckers' case. With Prescott's credibility under daily fire, Labour began back-tracking on many of the policies contained in the 1998 White Paper. In November, the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, abandoned his commitment to increase fuel duties by six per cent above inflation until 2002. Though, he did promise any future increases in real fuel duties will be ring-fenced for spending on transport.

In December, in a speech to motoring groups, John Prescott announced his intention to speed up existing road-building plans and reinstate some of the schemes that he'd put on hold the year before. He also said that charges to drive into town centres or park at workplaces would only be levied in a few towns and that schemes were unlikely to be put into effect before 2005.

And he made it very clear that he wouldn't set a national target for traffic reduction and that his policies won't actually cut traffic levels at all, merely facilitate a slightly lower than forecast increase.

Even with intensive application of the 1998 White Paper's policies, traffic is now forecast to rise by about 21 per cent by 2010. For every five vehicles on the roads now, there will be another one by then.

Finally, Mr Prescott was forced to pass responsibility for many key decisions to his Minister for Transport, Lord MacDonald. Lord MacDonald is widely seen as Blair's man. His first act was to approve 18 new local road projects. Shortly after, he told *The Daily Telegraph* that the Government had conceded defeat in its battle to cut car use.

Meanwhile the road lobby's successful campaign against higher fuel duties has prompted other industry groups to attack other White Paper policies. Tesco's and other supermarkets say they will fight plans to cut the amount of parking that can be provided at new stores.

What went wrong

Academics will no doubt spend years debating where Labour's integrated transport policy went wrong and what prompted its U-turn. Three failures stand out.

Firstly, the Government increased taxes on motoring without providing money for alternatives - and especially cheap, quick improvements to public transport. Secondly, it took far too long both to publish the White Paper and to introduce its Transport Bill to Parliament. Thirdly, it failed to set a long term target to cut traffic levels. This would have inspired green groups and the public to rally to its aid. The first failure gave the opposition cause to revolt, the second time in which to gain momentum, while the third left Mr. Prescott's natural supporters confused about his real intentions.

Notwithstanding Mr. Prescott's own behaviour, the blame for failure lies more with the Prime Minister, Mr Blair. It was him and Gordon Brown, who controls the purse strings, who didn't see transport as a spending priority. It was his staff who told journalists that he opposed key aspects of Mr Prescott's policies. It was his staff who delayed and watered down Mr Prescott's White Paper.

The case for traffic reduction

Labour's election pledge to "reduce then reverse traffic growth" was not made thoughtlessly. It was a response to genuine public concern about the environmental, social and economic effects of traffic growth. These concerns are as important now as they ever were.

Congestion

Research for the Commission for Integrated Transport shows that, even with intensive application of the White Paper's policies, congestion will still be as high in 2010 as it was in 1996. Congestion currently costs the country £19 billion every year. It is likely to cost it just as much in ten year's time.

Pollution

The UK National Air Quality Strategy shows that, although new technology will cut emissions of toxic pollutants, Government standards for small particles and ozone will still be widely exceeded in 2005. As a result, the Government has watered down its target to cut small particles and abandoned plans to make local authorities draw up action plans to cut ozone levels.

In January, modelling by Cambridge Econometrics suggested that road transport emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) will be 19 per cent higher in 2010 than they were in 1990. Carbon dioxide is the principal cause of dangerous climate change. Cambridge Econometrics say this "would make it highly unlikely that the UK would meet its target under the Kyoto Protocol, of a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5 per cent by 2008-2012. The Government's unilateral target of a 20 per cent reduction in CO₂ emissions from 1990 levels by 2010 would be missed by a long way."

Road-building

Government figures clearly show that traffic will grow fastest on motorways and A roads in rural areas. Failure to prevent this traffic growth will lead to more pressure for road-building. If not resisted, this road-building will inevitably damage some of Britain's finest wildlife sites and landscapes. Next year, for example, the Highways Agency is due to bulldoze through Bingley South Bog,

a nationally important site for orchids and marsh plants. Over the next year, Lord MacDonald will decide whether to go ahead with 50 schemes that Labour has put on hold. If he approves all these schemes, at least 15 Sites of Special Scientific Interest for wildlife and 6 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are likely to be damaged as a result.

A fair society?

Traffic growth of 21 per cent implies that more people will own and drive cars, but not everyone will. At the moment, three fifths of the poorest households have no access to a car, whereas 24 out of 25 of the richest households do. Two thirds of women do not have first access to a car, whereas two-thirds of men do. Only a quarter of pensioners have first access to a car.

Government forecasts say that, even in 2011, a quarter of households won't have access to a car. 45% of households will only have one car. That means that in 2011, millions of people will still depend on public transport, cycling and walking to get around for some or all of their journeys. Yet as traffic levels rise, life for public transport users, cyclists and pedestrians tends to get worse. If bus use falls, fare revenue also falls meaning bus companies have to cut frequencies or routes. As traffic rises, cycling becomes more dangerous and crossing the road more difficult. And as more people own cars, facilities (such as supermarkets, DIY shops, hospitals and cinemas) tend to get bigger and be built in places convenient to reach by car. As a result access for people without cars gets more difficult.

Other impacts

Road transport consumes almost half the oil used every year in Britain. The movement of this oil regularly leads to pollution as tankers run aground or clean their tanks. Meanwhile 20,000 tonnes of engine oil are disposed of improperly every year in Britain - often straight into sewers and watercourses. The Environment Agency says that metals including lead, zinc, copper, chromium, cadmium, nickel and iron and chemicals such as poly-aromatic hydrocarbons are present in the run-off from roads. These come from tyre and brake dust, de-icing compounds and oil. The Agency says this run-off is "a significant risk to the environment" which costs the UK £1.2 billion every year. Traffic growth directly increases the need to move oil and the run-off from roads.

The Government says that many of these impacts can be reduced, through new technology, without reducing traffic growth. This is true. However, others, such as the impact on people who don't have a car, or the impact of road-building on the countryside cannot. Also, in many cases, for example on air pollution, the benefits of new technology are not enough to meet environmental and health targets.

That's why, for many years, environmentalists and others have been calling for traffic reduction. The more traffic growth can be reduced, and the more real reductions in traffic levels achieved, the more all of these impacts would be prevented.

The case for traffic reduction targets

Targets are needed for three reasons. Firstly, targets guide policy. Taking account of new technology and the economic, social and environmental effects of traffic, the Government could set a traffic reduction target to ensure that its goals in respect of air quality, climate change, social exclusion and so on are achieved. This could then be used to determine whether planning policy needs strengthening or whether more money should be spent on public transport. Without a target, the Government won't know whether its goals will be achieved.

Secondly, targets show local councils what they need to do to play their part in the integrated transport strategy. The Government has said that local transport plans are the cornerstone of its policy. Yet without a target for traffic reduction, local councils don't know how far they should be implementing its policies. As a result, many councils are doing very little.

Thirdly, long-term targets show the public that the Government is serious - and help them to plan their activities accordingly. Businesses making investment decisions need to know whether the Government will or won't make it easier for their workforce to use public transport. Households need to know whether they should buy a second car, whether they won't need to or even if they could do without their car altogether.

None of these needs can be met without clear targets.

MacDonald rules out traffic reduction targets

Friends of the Earth, with a host of other environmental groups, and the green wings of all major political parties has therefore been campaigning to persuade the Government to set a target for traffic reduction. The target we have been calling for is to return traffic levels nationally to about 90 per cent of what they were in 1990 by 2010. However, despite the support of hundreds of MPs, the Government has resisted this campaign.

The Labour Government had promised to set "transport targets at both national and local level" and has set a range of targets for air quality, climate change and other impacts. In 1997 and 1998 Parliament passed Road Traffic Reduction Acts that aimed to encourage first local councils and then national government to set traffic reduction targets. Yet despite strong encouragement from MPs of all parties, the Labour Government has refused to set targets for overall traffic levels - either nationally or locally.

Labour's White Paper '*A New Deal for Transport*' ducked the issue of targets for traffic reduction by asking the newly formed Commission for Integrated Transport to advise it on the issue.

The Commission's advice was published in January 2000. It said that "a single national end-year target on road traffic ... will not be the best tool to confront congestion or the other problems arising from road traffic". And Lord MacDonald took this advice as justification for his refusal to set targets.

Yet MacDonald misinterpreted the Commission's advice. It also said the Government should develop "a series of 'benchmark profiles'". "Each ... would be a benchmark, or a yardstick, against which to measure progress" and a "profile in that it consists of a specific indicative level for each year, or every 2-3 years, over the next 10 years". These levels would vary from place to place. The Commission explicitly said the Government "should not shy away from using benchmark profiles" for "underlying traffic levels" and even that "it should be possible to derive national benchmark profiles" for traffic levels.

But when the Government published its response, in January 2000, Lord MacDonald ruled out setting national benchmark profiles and implied he would only consider benchmark profiles for congestion.

The Transport Bill

On 9-10th May, 2000, MPs will debate the Government's Transport Bill. Friends of the Earth has persuaded Simon Thomas MP (Plaid Cymru, Ceredigion) to table an amendment which would force the Government to set targets for traffic reduction in England and Wales (the setting of targets in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Parliament). The amendment introduces a new clause NC3 to the Bill. The clause reads:

“(1) It shall be the duty of the Secretary of State (in respect of England) or the National Assembly for Wales (in respect of Wales), within one year of the coming into force of this Act, to prepare a strategy specifying an indicative level of road traffic for each year over the next ten years such that by the year 2010, total road traffic miles do not exceed 90 per cent of the levels which apply on the day when this Act comes into force.

(2) In preparing the strategy the Secretary of State or National Assembly for Wales shall consult such persons as they see fit.

(3) The Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales shall as soon as is practicable after its completion publish the strategy and take such steps as are in their opinion necessary to ensure the indicative levels are met.

(4) The Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales shall thereafter report from time to time on the progress of the strategy.

(5) The Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales may amend the strategy from time to time as they see fit to ensure that the indicative levels are met”.

As can be seen, Friends of the Earth (FOE) has been flexible about the level of the target. “90 per cent of the levels which apply on the day when this Act comes into force” is probably about 20 per cent higher than 90 per cent of traffic levels in 1990 - because traffic has risen so much in the 1990s. That gives MPs who've previously supported FOE's target even more reason to vote for it now.

What you can do

- Write to your MP (House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA) asking him/her to sign NC3 and send it to the Public Bill Office.
- Telephone your MP and urge him/her to sign NC3. Call the House of Commons Switchboard on 020 7219 3000, or try Directory Enquiries for your MP's local office. The House of Commons also has a "message board" to leave messages on).

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