Part I

Policy and Politics

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Policy, Politics and Sustainable Transport: The Nature of Labour's Dilemma

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The 1997 Labour government promised to introduce radical transport policies aspiring to the goal of much-improved economic, environmental and social sustainability. Central to this was the desire to build on the 'Consensus for Change' in transport policy identified by the party while in opposition in the mid-1990s.[1] This consensus was built around the recognition that past policies aimed at accommodating relentless increases in the demand for travel were failing. Reducing the dominance of the car would be essential since a deepening transport 'crisis' was developing.[2] Increasing congestion and unreliability of transport services undermined the sustainability of the economy; transport-related pollution, deteriorating local air quality and greenhouse gas emissions, threatened the sustainability of the environment; and unequal access to transport contributed to the problems of social exclusion that jeopardized the sustainability of many local communities.

Despite its promises to make 'hard choices' in transport policy, Labour has struggled to implement sustainable transport strategies in government, and to convince the public of their value.[3] This chapter provides an overview of Labour's record and its stated plans for the future, analysing why it has been unable to live up to its own aspirations to radically change the direction of transport policy. It charts a series of key events in the government's first six years, such as the launch of the 1998 White Paper, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*, and the fuel tax protests of 2000, and addresses ministers' fundamental unwillingness to implement the changes required to enhance the sustainability of the economy, the environment and society.[4]

Historical Context

The increased flexibility and individual choice of when and where to travel associated with widespread car ownership and use has transformed almost

every aspect of our society. As access to cars has increased, people have travelled further between their homes, workplaces and places of consumption. The urban decentralization and deconcentration of the post-war era have also made these patterns more complex, as trunk radial flows of movement to and from major urban centres have been supplemented by a complex web of circumferential and tangential trips.

Over time, changing patterns of land use have reflected the widening availability of transport, and its increased effectiveness in reducing the friction of distance. Before 1800, the land transport systems that provided the means of economic exchange between settlements were exclusively based on roads for the use of pedestrians and horse-drawn vehicles. However:

> Major changes in transport technology which began to emerge during the first quarter of the 19th century had a major influence on the growth of cities, the organization of their internal structure, and the supply, demand, efficiency, speed and opportunities for movement within them.[5]

The subsequent shift from 'foot cities' to 'tracked cities' had profound implications for settlement form.[6] Land uses became increasingly separated and specialized, and technological advances, such as the development of tram and metro networks in the early twentieth century, further encouraged urban dispersal. The suburb, built at much lower residential density than the historic areas of the inner urban core, became the aspirational choice of residence for the majority.

But the 'tracked' era was to last little over 50 years. After 1920, transport in the UK, as in most countries of the developed world, was transformed by the introduction of motor vehicles, particularly the private car. Although it is widely perceived that the political rhetoric underlying the promotion of widespread car ownership came from the Right – for whom the car was crucial to both personal liberty and the promotion of flexible, responsive markets – it is important to recognize that the Left also has a long tradition of regarding increased car ownership and use as desirable.[7] At the heart of this position is a utopian vision of the economy and society, which incorporated universal car ownership as a solution to the transport equity dilemma of unequal access to travel, and the opportunities for employment and consumption that it creates, between social groups.[8] As Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most eloquent advocates of this vision, eulogized:

> What nobler agent has culture or civilization than the great open road made beautiful and safe for continually flowing traffic, a harmonious part of a great whole life? Along these grand roads as through human veins and arteries throngs city life, always building, building, planning, working.[9]

Indeed, such was the importance attached by the Left to the accommodation of the private motor vehicle within overall urban transport policy that the origins of the notion of 'predict and provide' – the idea that the amount of road space should be expanded as far as possible to meet the demand for car travel – can be traced back to the celebrated prewar socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who said:

> we cannot doubt that – whatever precautions may be imposed for the protection of foot-passengers, and whatever constitutional and financial readjustments may be necessary as between tramways, omnibuses and public revenues – the roads have once more got to be made to accommodate the traffic, not the traffic constrained to suit the roads.[10]

After 1945, Britain embarked on a significant road building programme designed to support the regeneration of the economy. Whereas before the war, strategies had focused on piecemeal upgrading of existing major routes, there was now the opportunity to greatly increase the scale and ambition of the strategy. Inspired by the freeways and parkways of North America, strategic regional plans, such as Sir Patrick Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* and *Clyde Valley Regional Plan*, envisaged a dense network of express roads around each major city.[11] A programme for the construction of a national interurban motorway network was also drawn up, with the first section, a bypass of Preston, Lancashire, opening in 1958.

As the national road building plan was gaining momentum in the early 1960s, the then government published a seminal document which crystallized debate on what a car dominated future would look like. *Traffic in Towns*, better known as the 'Buchanan Report' after its author, the late Sir Colin Buchanan, envisaged the changes in the physical structure of British towns and cities required if they were to adapt to accommodate unrestricted use of the car. Although the report was much vilified at the time as representing 'motorway madness', its core message was that severe congestion was the inevitable outcome of the failure to match increased supply of road space to the voracious appetite for car travel.[12] Put simply, the government could either try to predict and provide – build sufficient new road space to match the forecast increase in car traffic – or find alternatives to unrestricted car-based mobility. Yet Buchanan was also the first to identify how a 'car-owning democracy' had emerged:

> It seems futile to deny these things [the advantages of motorcars]. The motor vehicle is a remarkable invention, so desirable that it has wound itself inextricably into a large part of our affairs. There cannot be any going back on it.[13]

The importance of the concept of the car-owning democracy is that it neatly summarized how the demand for personal mobility was likely to be

insatiable as more and more people's lives were transformed by the possibilities offered to them by the car. However, the UK's adoption of the North American 'orthodoxy' of universal car ownership and use has become every bit as problematic as Buchanan (and others) feared it might.[14] Britain's towns and cities have followed the American trends towards low density suburban sprawl and the rapid growth of satellite dormitory settlements around major cities, encouraged by a *laissez-faire* attitude to widespread car use.[15] A vicious circle was created, as people tried to escape the congestion and declining quality of life of major urban centres by commuting ever-greater distances.

These trends in land use and transport then reinforced each other over several decades, resulting in a situation of widespread 'car dependence'. Many people, particularly those locked into sub- and ex-urban land-use patterns, now require (very) high levels of mobility simply to maintain their lifestyles.[16] For example, a major MORI/BBC survey in 1999 found that fully 79 per cent of drivers agreed that it would be difficult to adjust their lifestyles to being without a car.[17] At the same time, people without access to a car find their situation deteriorating, as public transport provision declines in response to reduced demand and the shift of major activities, such as employment, leisure and retailing, to sites on the urban fringe that are difficult to access without a car. The result is social exclusion, or the erosion of social sustainability, as the American writers K. H. Schaeffer and Elliott Sclar explained almost 30 years ago:

> It is our contention that the urban crises which manifest themselves in so many ways have at least one common root. This is the increasing reliance on the automobile. In every urban area, the automobile has become the only means of transportation by which every part of the region can be reached . . . Wherever the automobile is the mode of travel, there access to transportation is distributed very unevenly between individuals. This is probably the greatest social fault of the automobile.[18]

That both Buchanan's prediction that the increase the supply of road infrastructure would fall far short of meeting rising demand, and Schaeffer and Sclar's bleak vision of urban economic and social decay, have come true underlines the extent of the 'travel sickness' afflicting modern Britain.[19] The depth of this malaise is in part explained by the state's late realization that it could not simply build its way out of congestion. Despite the elusiveness of predict and provide – which was neither a desirable (in terms of sustainability) nor indeed feasible basis on which to construct a strategy for transport – successive post-war administrations tried hard to prove Buchanan wrong by attempting to expand road space as much as possible.

Until the early 1990s, the core concern of roads policy (and by implication transport policy more generally) in Britain remained the straightforward implementation of predict and provide. In many ways, the policy process was really quite simple. The basic premise was that rising standards of living necessitated increased car ownership and use. This trend was well established and showed no signs of changing (Figure 1.1). Moreover, greater car-based mobility was seen to both enhance individual liberty and boost the economy – directly through the growth of the motor industry, but also more generally since increased physical mobility helped to liberalize housing and labour markets. It was therefore deemed essential to accommodate as much car use as possible, or, as Phil Goodwin neatly summarized, since 'private car use would increase . . . it was necessary to increase roads capacity. And public transport use would decline, therefore it would be logical to reduce service levels'.[20] Gestures towards the goals of better social and environmental sustainability were largely limited to the maintenance of some 'lifeline' public transport services in fragile communities and attempts to mitigate against the impacts of car traffic on local air quality, such as the move to unleaded petrol.

By the end of the 1980s, the combination of the Thatcher government's support for the car owning democracy and the Lawson economic boom set the scene for the pinnacle of predict and provide with the publication of the

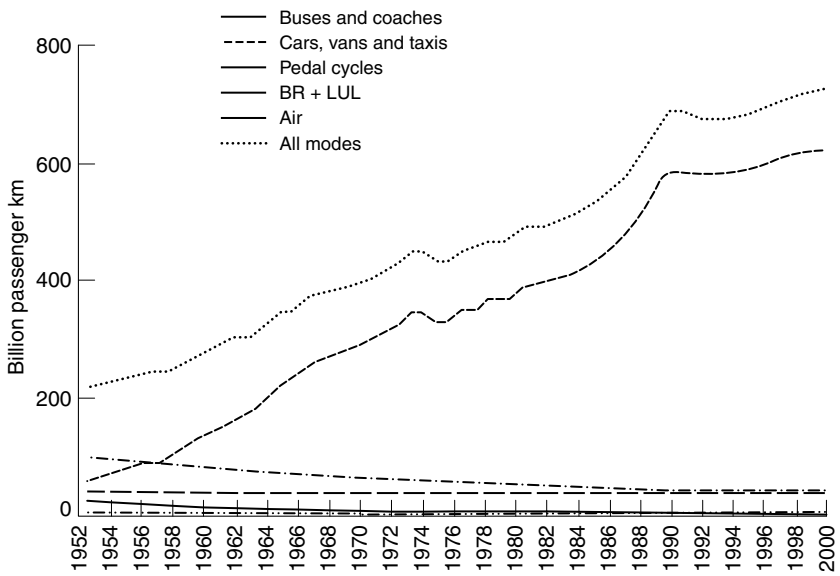


Figure 1.1 Passenger transport by mode, 1952–2000. Source: Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001) *Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2001 Edition*. DTLR, London.

White Paper, *Roads for Prosperity*.[21] The White Paper's 494 road schemes in England would have cost more than £12 billion. With the addition of maintenance and minor improvements to the existing network, the total package represented an investment of some £23 billion (over £33 billion at 2003 prices), and was championed by ministers as 'the largest road building programme since the Romans'. Yet this was 10 years after the OECD (an organization not noted for advocating radical state intervention in the market) warned that a strategy focused on road building would be unlikely to solve the transport problem:

> since further extension of the road infrastructure to meet growing demand for car use is not everywhere possible for urban planning and financial reasons, nor desirable from environmental, energy and often social policy standpoints, the only remaining transport policy option is to swing modal split in favour of public transport by investment and/or pricing policy measures.[22]

Sustainable Transport as a Political Issue

In retrospect, it is highly ironic that the whole discourse surrounding transport policy in the UK was to change fundamentally almost as soon as *Roads for Prosperity* was published. As in many other areas of politics, it was unforeseen 'events' of the kind famously bemoaned by Harold Macmillan that were to disrupt the *status quo* of British transport policy. The first such 'event' was probably the reaction to the publication in 1987 by the UN Commission on Environment and Development of a far-reaching report on the future of the global environment. The report, *Our Common Future* (commonly known as the 'Bruntland Report' after the Commission's Chair, Gro Harlem Bruntland), for the first time set out the scale of the environmental problems that could arise if contemporary development trends were left unchecked, especially the voracious consumption of natural resources and increasing pollution of air, water and land. In a very well-known passage, the Commission offered a definition of sustainable development, which has since been widely adopted: 'sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.[23]

In essence, it was the realization of the potential scale of any impending environmental crisis, and transport's contribution to any such crisis, that placed the word 'sustainability' in general usage and marked the 'turning point' or 'watershed' in transport policy.[24] As William Black put it when paraphrasing the Bruntland Commission, the challenge for transport was to achieve a sufficient level of sustainability that would 'satisfy current transport and mobility needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet these needs'. The emerging concept of 'sustainable transport' was somewhat

slippery and ill-defined, since, as Black continued, 'there is no limit placed on ''future generations'' and nothing is sustainable forever'.[25] Nevertheless, over the next few years, the imperative – at least at the rhetorical level – would become finding ways of minimising the environmental impacts of transport.

If any single event could be said to mark the beginnings of the search for a sustainable transport paradigm, then the 1989 meeting of the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) seems the most likely candidate. Following the dynamic created by the 1987 World Commission Report, the 1989 ECMT received a number of scientific papers arguing that transport was an ever-increasing threat to environmental sustainability, particularly through the emission of greenhouse gases.[26] The message that the transport sector had become one of the most rapidly growing sources of global pollution was stark enough, but what was most striking was the acknowledgement that the majority of this pollution could be attributed to private traffic. The relentless increase in car use, which had already undermined the social sustainability of countless *local* communities, was now threatening to undermine the environmental sustainability of the *global* community. In other words, the environmental impact of ever-increasing traffic had made apparent the futility of predict and provide in a way that arguments over its usefulness as a planning strategy never had.

After a succession of further events, most importantly the UN *Earth Summit* held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the UK government was prompted into action and formally changed its transport policy. The realization of the scale of transport's environmental impact reinforced the value of long-standing policies of enhancing public transport and expanding opportunities for walking and cycling which had been prevalent across most of continental Europe for several decades. But in the UK, where an essentially North American model of car use had been prioritized, achieving the goals of sustainable transport would pose more fundamental challenges. In response to Rio, the 1992–7 Major government charged the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) with advising ministers on how UK policies should be adapted to meet growing global environmental concerns. The Commission's eighteenth report, *Transport and the Environment*, restated the need for a fundamental change in the government's official stance on the future of transport policy in Britain:

> There is now general recognition that a continuing upward trend in road traffic would not be environmentally or socially acceptable. The need is to find transport policies for the UK and Europe which will be sustainable in the long term.[27]

After the publication of the RCEP report, the government transformed its official position almost overnight, ditching the last vestiges of predict and

provide. Roads policy was now to be more about managing the car and its impacts rather than accommodating them, and transport policy was to be less about roads and more about a balance between modes. But however much advocates of sustainability claim the recognition of the environmental impacts of transport led the reappraisal of existing strategies, it is at least as likely that the move towards this approach to transport policy was inevitable even without increasing environmental concern.[28] The recession of the early 1990s reduced the resources available for road building, and underlined the impossibility of meeting the aspirations of plans like *Roads for Prosperity*, even if this were deemed desirable.[29] At the same time, popular protest against numerous road building schemes made delivering even quite modest new roads more time-consuming and expensive.

On assuming office in 1997, Labour began the process of delivering the 'Consensus for Change' it had identified whilst in opposition.[30] Within six weeks of taking power, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott (whose responsibilities included those of Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions) was characteristically bullish about the government's ability to implement a more sustainable agenda for transport. Faced with road traffic forecasts predicting 50 per cent growth in 30 years (Figure 1.2), he agreed that 'doing something about traffic' was essential since 'the forecast growth in traffic is clearly unacceptable'.[31] In a memorable statement, he demonstrated considerable belief in the government's (and his own) ability to deliver by saying: 'I will have failed if in five years time there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car. It is a tall order but I urge you to hold me to it'.[32]

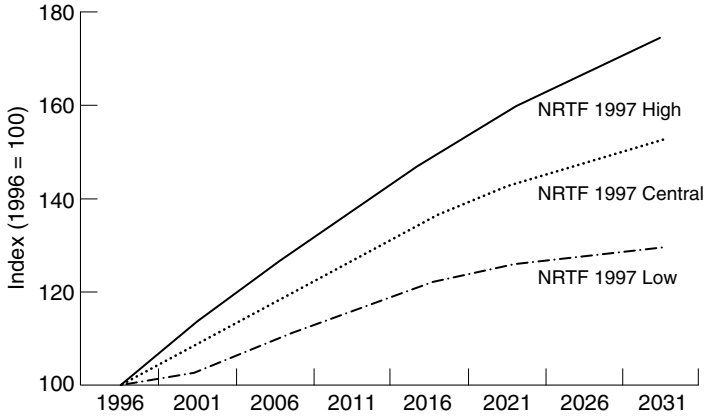


Figure 1.2 National road traffic forecasts (NRTF), 1997. Source: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1997) *National Road Traffic Forecasts (Great Britain) 1997*. DETR, London.

Despite offering such a 'hostage to fortune' (the targets were not attained), there appears little doubt that John Prescott's enthusiasm for, and belief in, the sustainability agenda was genuine.[33] In the government's early weeks in office, he instigated a number of radical initiatives. These included a complete review of the inherited trunk-roads programme utilising the New Approach to Appraisal (NATA), which was designed to incorporate a wider set of criteria than had been used previously to evaluate roads projects (Chapter 4). He also reiterated his commitment to introducing a much stronger direction to railway policy (which was widely seen to have 'drifted' since privatization), by proposing the creation of a Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) charged with developing the network (Chapter 5).

Within four months of taking power, Labour began to expand on its initial statements when it published a consultation document, *Developing an Integrated Transport Policy*,[34] which represented a 'dispassionate account of the problems as they appeared to the incoming Government'.[35] The problems identified were many and various, but can be grouped together under the three general concepts outlined in the introduction to this chapter: sustainability of the environment, sustainability of the economy and sustainability of society. On environmental sustainability, Labour acknowledged the growing global concern over climate change, and the work of the RCEP in informing the debate over how the environmental impacts of transport could be reduced. At the 1997 UN conference on climate change in Kyoto, one of its first major international summits, the new government (represented by Prescott) supported the adoption of the protocols committing developed nations to significantly reducing their carbon emissions to below 1990 levels by 2010. Since transport was estimated to account for around 25 per cent of the UK's emissions – with road vehicles accounting for four fifths of the transport total – this was widely seen at the time to be an important early signal that the new government was indeed prepared to act to reduce the environmental impact of transport generally, and road traffic in particular. Early policy statements reinforced this perception, with ministers floating a range of potential demand management measures including congestion charging, motorway tolls and workplace and retail parking taxes. Particular journeys, such as the 'school run' and supermarket trips, were highlighted as being especially amenable to modal shift. In its first Budget, the government even raised the fuel tax escalator – the additional annual increase in fuel duty above inflation introduced by the Conservatives on the advice of the RCEP – from five per cent to six per cent.

The sustainability of economic prosperity was highlighted as equally important by Labour. Keen to be portrayed as 'the party of business', the new approach to transport policy was presented as being in the interests of key producers. The economic cost of delays to traffic, estimated at around

£15 billion annually by the CBI, was highlighted, as was the importance of improving international links for export-led sectors increasingly at risk from unreliability of logistics chains in an era of 'just-in-time' deliveries.[36] Although not analysed in detail, there were also some references to the importance of transport infrastructure and provision in attracting inward investment, and to the role of public transport in larger towns and cities in sustaining their position as competitive locations for service and knowledge industries.[37] This was seen as particularly important in London, where the reduction of average travel speeds to near nonmotorized levels was perceived as a serious disincentive to economic development.

The third 'problem set' was that of the impact of transport externalities on social sustainability. Reflecting the desire to ensure 'joined-up government', some quite insightful statements were made on the impacts of transport patterns on health, social polarization and urban regeneration. One of the biggest criticisms of Conservative policy was that transport – and even each individual mode within the transport sector – was treated in isolation from interconnecting activities and policies. To counter this, Labour's early statements made much of two issues in particular, namely health and social exclusion. On health, the government encouraged a debate on the human and financial costs of transport-related pollution, estimated at more than £17 billion per annum, with an estimated 24,000 premature deaths per year linked to air pollution.[38] Statements on walking and cycling also linked these modes to the promotion of healthier lifestyles, since both modes have a clear role to play in preventative health care by encouraging people to undertake more physical activity.

On social exclusion, improving the availability and quality of public transport was deemed especially important, with the low levels of car access in particular social groups, including women, the elderly, the young and the unemployed, as being a major barrier to 'a fairer, more inclusive society'.[39] Proposals to extend access to excluded groups were undoubtedly weakened, however, by Labour's desire to keep the provision of public transport services in the private sector. None of the government's statements satisfactorily explained why private transport companies would (or should) be willing to alter market-driven service patterns and fares to suit the aspirations of policies aimed at reducing social exclusion.[40]

Labour's explicit recognition of the importance of economic and social as well as environmental policy aspirations aligns the Party's approach to transport with the oft-quoted 'three legged stool' conception of sustainability. This is clearly not unreasonable for an elected administration, since the 'eco-authoritarian' or 'deep green' standpoint elevates the protection of the environment above all other considerations including the maintenance of democracy and justice.[41] 'Light green' approaches to sustainability can be, in theory at least, very effective provided that policies designed to safeguard

the environment are credible and given equal weight to those pursuing economic or social objectives. In short, a 'three legged stool' depends on each of its legs to stay upright. Since 1997, however, poor policy carpentry has made it look increasingly likely that Labour's stool will tip over.

The Beginnings of Retreat?

Although an 'unprecedented breadth of support for a radical strategy' was reflected in the energy of the government's early words and actions, its policy rhetoric was already noticeably softer by the time of the publication of *A New Deal for Transport*, the first transport White Paper in 20 years.[42] Although it was clearly less radical than it might have been (particularly in light of the hopes raised by the government's earlier rhetoric), the White Paper was still greeted with considerable enthusiasm. In particular, it set out a very reasonable analysis of the range of transport-related problems to be tackled, including road traffic growth and congestion, local air quality, social exclusion, climate change, urban sprawl, and rural sustainability, but with its relatively modest policy measures, it fell 'short of the promised radicalism and vision', and some critics even considered it to be a 'poorly focused and indecisive document'.[43]

In many ways, the White Paper can be seen as the beginning of Labour's nervousness over the possible political reaction to radical transport policies. Potentially significant interventions, such as motorway tolling and retail car parking charges, were dropped from the final document at the last minute, following media discontent and concerted lobbying from particular business groups such as the major supermarkets. The language had also changed – rather than an explicit focus on 'sustainability', the document praised the virtues of 'integrated transport', and even revisited the rhetoric of 'choice' which had underpinned the Conservatives' championing of roads-based policies a decade earlier.

This shift in rhetoric towards the notion of 'integrated' rather than 'sustainable' transport is important, especially since the idea of what exactly 'integration' meant was never really made clear. Was it improved physical integration between buses and trains to make public transport more attractive? Was it integration between the car and public transport through policies such as park and ride? Or was it a more general integration between policies designed to improve the transport system in other ways? Such uncertainty perhaps illustrates the oft-claimed divisions between John Prescott and Tony Blair on transport policy. Despite Prescott's apparent enthusiasm for making a genuine attempt to follow the sustainability agenda through actually reducing car use, by the time the White Paper was eventually

released a year after Labour came to power, the Prime Minister's desire for less radical, more business- and voter-friendly policies based on ephemeral ideas such as 'integration' and the 'Third Way' between market provision and state regulation, was in the ascendancy.

In pursuing the mantras of 'integration' and 'choice', the White Paper had much more to say about potential 'carrots' designed to entice motorists out of their cars, rather than the more powerful 'sticks' fashioned to force them out. Carrots included proposed improvements to public transport (increased service frequencies, extended hours of operation, higher quality vehicles, enhanced integration, accessible real-time information), support for personal modes (cycling, walking), integrated land-use policy and attempts to influence an overall change in attitude.

In contrast, the 'sticks' were either not taken up, or were only addressed indirectly. True, policies such as bus priority or congestion pricing measures are not always physically or politically easy to enact.[44] But they have been reasonably well documented as successful within Europe, and even quite radical policies – such as the comprehensive urban road pricing systems introduced in the Norwegian cities of Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim – have found favour among initially sceptical electorates.[45] The challenge for Labour was to demonstrate that there was substance behind its words on sustainability by articulating the benefits of these and similar policies in terms of reduced congestion, better environmental quality and improved public transport.

Overall, *A New Deal for Transport* gave the distinct impression that, despite its words, the government was not wholly committed to tackling the root of the transport problem, that is the unsustainability of current transport patterns caused by car dependence as opposed to simply car ownership and responsible use. The result of the May 1997 general election was, at least partly, regarded as a reflection of majority support for a government which would lead and inspire public opinion through taking a principled stand on 'hard choices' such as the negative externalities of car dependence. Yet radical measures to reduce the impact of the car were quickly assumed to be electorally unpopular, because they affect the politically crucial sections of society who have become the most sub- or exurbanized, and hence car dependent. Much of what 'middle England' consumes – exclusive suburban estates, extensive convenience shopping – results in over-use of the car and the corollary of continued inner urban decay.[46] Intervening to address these trends in the name of sustainability would require a fundamental change in the lifestyle of the 'Mondeo Man' that brought Labour back to power, and it was this realization that forced the government's radical transport policies into reverse.

From Radicalism to Pragmatism

Two years after the publication of the White Paper, Labour formalized its vision of what it could achieve in *Transport 2010: The 10-Year Plan for Transport*.[47] The *10-Year Plan*'s headline figure of £180 billion in 2000 cash terms (£150 billion in real terms) of investment over ten years was broadly welcomed as representing a significant increase in transport spending, which would begin to close the gap in transport spending between the UK and its major European competitors (Figure 1.3). However, closer examination revealed a considerable degree of uncertainty over many of its forecasting assumptions, and over whether the planned resources were likely to materialize in the later years of the plan.[48] Of particular concern is whether the proposed split between public and private finance will be achievable in practice. As the House of Commons' Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions noted in its review of the *Plan* in 2002:

> The Plan must not be undermined by funding uncertainty. There are concerns, particularly for the railways, that the necessary levels of private sector support may not be forthcoming either at the right time or on the right terms . . . A more detailed breakdown of future expenditure for all aspects of the Plan is required if it is indeed to be a Plan rather than a wish list.[49]

With long-term resource allocation inevitably subject to significant uncertainty, the most important aspect of the *10-Year Plan* was the way in which it confirmed a change in the government's aspirations for sustainable

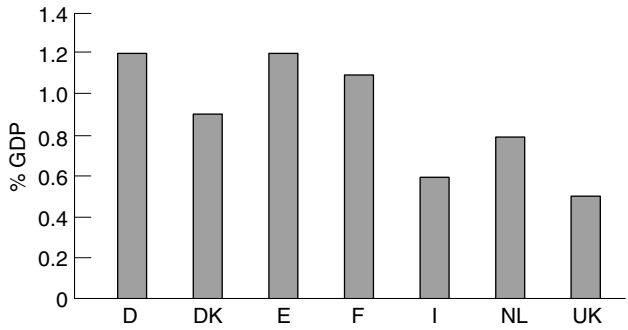


Figure 1.3 Transport infrastructure investment as a share of GDP, 1995. Source: Commission for Integrated Transport (2000) *European Best Practice in Delivering Integrated Transport – Key Findings*. CfIT, London.

Key: D = Germany, DK = Denmark, E = Spain, F = France, I = Italy, NL = Netherlands, UK = United Kingdom.

transport policies. One of the *Plan*'s most striking features is the return to identifying congestion as the most important transport problem that policy and investment must overcome. Environmental problems, which are generally summarized as local 'pollution' rather than the emissions that threaten global sustainability, follow in second place. As Phil Goodwin – formerly the government's most senior independent transport advisor – notes in the final chapter of this book, the formal setting out of priorities at odds with previously articulated policy strategies suggests that the publication of the *10-Year Plan* marks the point when the government's retreat from a more sustainable policy agenda was made real.

Targeting of congestion as the primary problem affecting the transport system allowed ministers to sidestep the rather more difficult pursuit of a real reduction in the overall level of traffic. Such a change of priority revealed that, as for the Conservatives previously, the potential for transport investment to address *short-term* economic imperatives, rather than longer term objectives such as safeguarding the environment, lies at the heart of Labour's transport policy. Just as the 'new realism' – a normative policy position proposed by Goodwin which challenges continued large-scale road building – reflected the economic impossibility of predict and provide as much as it did emerging environmental concerns, so the focus on 'solving congestion' rather than reducing overall levels of road traffic was inevitable given the ingrained culture of car dependence and parlous state of the public transport system in the UK (Chapter 10).[50]

In its early months, the government had looked towards road pricing as the most credible solution to the congestion problem. Many transport academics and professionals, led by Goodwin, argued that the price mechanism could be applied to ration the supply of road space in the same way as any other scarce resource. The elegance of road pricing as a remedy for congestion is that it generates large revenue streams for investment in quality public transport alternatives, as well as prioritising scarce road space towards high value users. This in theory encourages further modal shift away from the car, improving economic efficiency by reducing congestion, and at the same time helps promote social inclusion by providing better transport options for disadvantaged groups with low levels of car ownership. Despite claims to the contrary, road pricing can also be an egalitarian, redistributive policy, since the costs of congestion are more clearly attributed to those who cause it, rather than being indiscriminately ascribed through general taxation.

Yet in the face of increasing public protests against the high cost of motoring and other policies perceived as being 'anti-car', the government quickly became reluctant to use pricing as a direct instrument for reducing traffic levels. Although support for some road pricing in the form of urban congestion charging in was maintained long enough for enabling legislation

to be included in the Transport Act (2000), the government delayed its likely introduction by handing responsibility for implementing charging schemes to the local level.[51] The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has used his unique personal mandate to pioneer the implementation of a congestion charging scheme for inner London, but it is uncertain that many provincial cities will quickly develop similar schemes. This is because the potential risks of political unpopularity and economic competition from other centres that resist charging, either through road pricing or by other means such as nonresidential parking levies, are just too great for most local politicians seeking re-election (Chapter 4).

The cost of this abandonment of demand management through pricing at the national level is a return to a policy of boosting the supply of mobility through increased road and rail capacity. Ironically, this means the government is faced with a policy paradox of its own making – by rejecting pricing, not only is congestion not directly suppressed, but potential revenue streams for new infrastructure are ruled out. This means the government will need to work (even) harder at expanding infrastructure capacity, but with greater constraints on available resources than would otherwise be the case. This is bad enough, but the need to meet self-imposed congestion targets – these were included in the *10-Year Plan* (and are discussed further in Chapter 10) – with restricted budgets also exerts considerable geographical bias on the government's strategic priorities. For example, the need to tackle traffic in the massively congested South East of England logically dictates that the majority of investment in the National Rail network should be directed to that region, even if this is at the risk of 'improvements north of Watford . . . [being] put on hold or axed'.[52]

The government's second policy shift concerns its strategy for minimising the environmental impact of the car. What is particularly revealing is the way in which it chose to interpret the evidence and advice given to it, which has had the effect of shifting the transport policy debate away from some of the 'hard choices' required to pursue a radical sustainable agenda. The government's attitude to the work of the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT), which played a major role in assimilating the knowledge on which the strategies of the *10-Year Plan* were based, is a particular case in point. Early CfIT advice to government was positive that genuine road traffic reduction, especially in urban areas, was attainable: 'Over time it should be possible to reduce traffic in the areas where most people live; we recommend that the Government should work in this direction'.[53]

The government chose to quote CfIT's advice in a selective way, however. The same report, *National Road Traffic Targets*, was also used to underpin another, perhaps more fundamental, change in the government's attitude towards the environmental impact of road traffic. This is simply that ministers pinned their hopes on improvements in road vehicle tech-

nology (the so-called 'technological fix'), rather than reductions in the absolute level of road traffic, to play the major part in reducing carbon dioxide emissions beyond the level required by its Kyoto Agreement commitments. By 2010, it is forecast that incremental design improvements in conventional vehicle engines will account for a cut in carbon dioxide emissions more than twice as large as that attributable to modal shift resulting from the package of public transport improvements contained in the *10-Year Plan*.[54] In the longer term, it seems that the government is hoping that the adoption of new forms of motive power, such as 'ecocars' running on hydrogen fuel cells, might prevent the renewed increases in emissions forecast in the *10-Year Plan* if the substantial technical problems can be overcome.[55] CfIT has also suggested that the level of 'transport intensity' might decrease, with future economic growth less dependent on increased mobility as previously. The evidence for this is mixed, however, with some studies reporting an increase in transport intensity during the 1990s.[56]

CfIT also claimed that even with modest policy intervention to reduce the *rate* of car traffic growth (that is, assuming continued increases in actual traffic levels), 'far more substantial reductions (up to 75 per cent) are forecast in the [nitrous oxide] emissions and [particulate] emissions that affect local air quality'.[57] This perhaps explains the prominence given by the government to local air quality targets, since if these forecasts are accurate, ministers can be confident that substantial environmental improvements can be achieved with little or no need to introduce policies aimed at actually curbing car use.

Taken together, these shifts in priority suggest that the aspiration to reduce the need to travel seems almost to have disappeared from Labour's agenda. In the middle of the 'environmental turn' of the 1990s, the Major government's *Planning Policy Guidance Note 13: Transport* (PPG13) clearly stated that in future, 'plans should aim to reduce the need to travel, especially by car'.[58] Management of the demand for travel was to become a favoured policy strategy, with direct intervention to reduce car traffic, most notably through the implementation of the fuel tax escalator as recommended by the RCEP. But it now seems that Labour is replacing this with the much more laissez-faire approach of giving people even more choice of whether and how to travel, implying that public transport will have to continue to compete for trips in a market system, where many car journeys remain underpriced in terms of their true economic, environmental and social costs.[59] This also chimes with public opinion. Research commissioned by CfIT during the development of the *Plan* demonstrated that reducing congestion in towns and cities was the top priority for the public after improved road maintenance, with reducing congestion on motorways and other major roads also figuring strongly.[60] In other words,

a substantial constituency for more sustainable transport policies has emerged, as increasing numbers of people felt their quality of life to be significantly diminished by the impacts of road traffic. If ever there was an opportunity for a government to demonstrate leadership by seeking to convince the public that radical initiatives such as pricing were necessary to address their underlying concerns, this was it.

It could be argued that one of the most fundamental underlying messages in the *10-Year Plan* – indeed the message which marked the *Plan* out as the point where Labour's retreat from sustainable transport became fully apparent – was the much reduced emphasis placed on demand management. Although it offered the scenario that up to 20 towns and cities will have introduced some form of charging by 2010, this is likely to prove a hugely optimistic assumption, which neatly disguises the political choice made to omit other potential demand management measures such as motorway tolling. Instead, given that there was virtually no emphasis on reducing the need to travel, the only way open to the government to reduce congestion was to rely on a strategy of investing heavily in new and expanded transport infrastructure to accommodate as much mobility as possible, albeit by tweaking modal split to enhance the role of the railways. As a result, significant road building was back on the agenda.

The government's roads policy has now become quite adventurous, with the *10-Year Plan* containing among its commitments a very significant element of new road building. Jon Shaw and William Walton's study of the *Plan*'s trunk-road building proposals for England found that the mean number of roads completed each year from 2008 could reach 35, and so exceed that achieved by the Conservatives at any stage during their 1979–97 administrations (Chapter 4).[61] Shaw and Walton characterize Labour's approach as 'pragmatic multi-modalism', where high(er) levels of road building are pursued alongside enhanced public transport investment to produce a policy compromise based on what is politically realistic to deliver.

A similar picture has emerged in Scotland, where the devolved Scottish Executive has followed a transport policy path very similar to that of the UK government. After initiating a wide-ranging review of inherited roads schemes which led to the shelving of many long-standing projects, Scottish ministers floated radical demand management measures, including motorway tolling and workplace parking levies, just two weeks after the establishment of the devolved institutions in 1999.[62] But, as in England, by the time early words had crystallized in the form of the *Transport Delivery Plan*, Scotland's transport policy was again dominated by major road building without any central government commitment to new transport charges.[63] In Wales, devolution also pushed policies in the direction of improved internal road links, since these had been neglected at the expense of

connections to England in previous years. Across Great Britain, therefore, the contrast from the early optimistic days of 1997 could not be more apparent: whereas the government then saw 'new roads as a last resort rather than a first', today its commitment to more sustainable strategies is much less clear.[64]

Back to the Car-Owning Democracy!

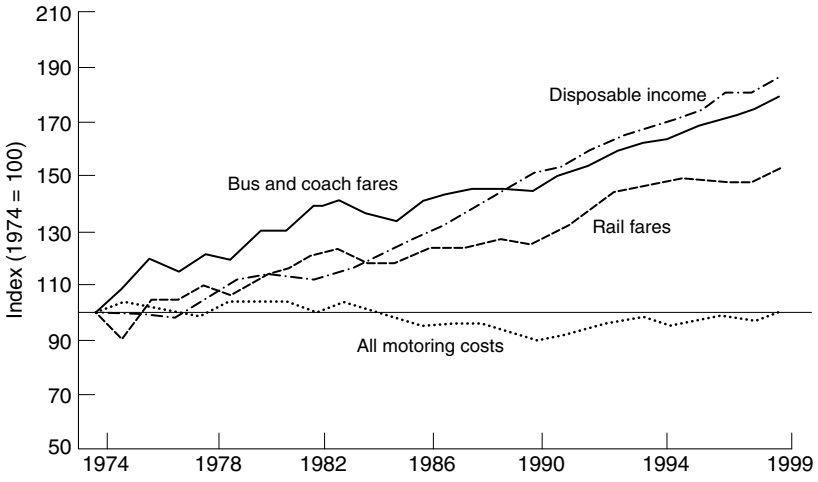
With Labour's commitment to the sustainable transport agenda already in doubt for many commentators, the remarkable events of September 2000 demonstrated both that the car-owning democracy was very much in evidence, and that the government was willing to appease motorists' demands. For almost two weeks, Britain witnessed unprecedented direct action as farmers blocked fuel depots and truckers created 'go-slow' convoys choking the motorway network, with petrol stations running dry as a result. As the economy and essential public services teetered on the verge of collapse, the government faced a defining moment in the development of its transport policy: whether to capitulate to the protestors' demands for an immediate significant reduction in fuel taxes, or to keep faith with the policy of steadily increasing fuel taxes in order to restrain the growth of traffic.

The seriousness of the government's *volte face* on transport taxation and, by implication, its attitude to sustainable transport more generally, was brought into sharp focus by its response to the fuel tax protests. Having already abolished the fuel tax escalator early in 2000 just a matter of weeks after publishing its *Climate Change Strategy*, the government found itself trailing in the opinion polls for the first (and only) time in the 1997–2001 parliament.[65] Desperate to reverse the situation with only months to go before its preferred date for the general election, the Chancellor announced a two pence per litre cut in fuel duty in his November Pre-Budget Report, along with further reductions for lower-sulphur fuels, claiming that the rate of fuel tax had 'no impact on traffic levels', and was 'not designed to do so'.[66] These actions were backed up with statements from the Prime Minister, who ad hoc abandoned the earlier policy that increases in fuel tax revenues would be hypothecated to public transport schemes, stating that the treatment of money from fuel taxes was to remain as any other part of the general revenue stream.[67] Throughout the election campaign that followed, Blair repeated the twin mantras of 'investment' and 'choice' in outlining his strategy for transport, adopting a tone completely at odds with his previous statements promoting a 'coalition for the environment'.[68]

In essence, these decisions made it clear that the government had chosen to abandon its previous strategy of articulating the environmental case for higher fuel taxes as pioneered by the RCEP, in favour of populist cuts in

taxation at the altar of political expediency. And this at a time when evidence was emerging that showed British motorists were not nearly as badly off as the protestors liked to make out. First, the real costs of running a car had remained stable for 25 years while rail and bus fares had risen by 50 per cent and 75 per cent respectively (Figure 1.4).[69] Second, CfIT demonstrated that when the *total* level of car taxation is taken into account rather than focusing on fuel costs, UK motorists were *not* particularly highly taxed compared to others in Europe (Table 1.1).[70] Third, calculations suggested that there remained a significant gap – up to £24 billion in 1998 – between the amount of revenue raised through motoring taxes and the overall cost to society of road vehicles.[71] Finally, and perhaps most damning for the government, was that evidence suggested that the increases in fuel tax might be just beginning to work. Writing days before the pre-election Budget of 2001, David Begg urged the government to resist the pressures to cut fuel taxes since:

> (in 2000) road traffic in the United Kingdom grew by only 0.3 per cent – one of the lowest increases ever recorded in the modern age. What makes this volume all the more surprising is that it coincided with an economic boom: GDP was growing by 3 per cent. Between 1998 and the final abolition of the fuel tax escalator in 2000, the rate of traffic growth stabilized for the first time under conditions of economic growth.[72]



Note: 'All motoring costs' includes petrol and oil costs and cost of vehicle purchase

Figure 1.4 Real changes in the costs of transport and disposable income, 1974–99. Source: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000) *Transport 2010: The 10-Year Plan*. DETR, London.

Table 1.1 Comparison of total taxes on car ownership and use across Europe for 2000, £ sterling at purchasing power parity, ranked for 1600cc engine size

		Engine Size		
Rank	*Country*	*1,000cc*	*1,600cc*	*2,000cc*
1	Netherlands	978	1,295	2,096
2	Finland	800	1,032	1,565
3	Denmark	723	1,024	1,551
4	Ireland	652	1,006	1,467
5	UK	731	976	1,201
6	Italy	758	968	1,301
7	France	756	955	1,191
8	Belgium	627	906	1,233
9	Greece	548	823	1,581
10	Norway	644	809	1,217
11	Germany	565	747	962
12	Sweden	582	743	982
13	Spain	546	709	1,035
14	Luxembourg	392	524	691

Source: Commission for Integrated Transport (2001) *European comparison of taxes on car ownership and use*. CfIT, London.

But perhaps the most striking illustration of the irony of the fuel tax protests was to be drawn from the evidence that later emerged of the significant changes in transport behaviour they brought about. CfIT reported very significant reductions in traffic levels of up to 39 per cent on motorways and 25 per cent on other major roads, with people making much more informed choices about when to use their cars, and for which journeys.[73] Around 75 per cent of people changed their travel behaviour in some way, with 20 per cent of parents abandoning the 'school run' in favour of walking, cycling or other modes.[74] Many train companies reported increases in patronage of up to one quarter, demonstrating that significant modal shift away from the car could be achieved in certain circumstances without heavy investment in new infrastructure. Finally, huge improvements in urban air quality were measured across Britain's major cities.[75]

The extent to which this about-turn in the government's transport strategy resulted directly from public resistance to its earlier promotion of so-called 'anti-car' policies such as road pricing, the fuel tax escalator and reducing the roads programme is contested. Writing in the summer of 1999, Phil Goodwin concluded that this 'backlash' was a temporary phenomenon caused by a lack of perceived improvements in public transport despite road traffic reduction measures and increased taxes on car ownership and use.[76] But this was before the fuel tax protests demonstrated just

how powerful the car owning democracy remained, particularly for a Labour government dependent on the support of swing voters in 'middle England' in its bid for a second (and now, third) term.

It has become clear that, despite the rhetoric of its early days, the Labour government's record in office marks something of a return to policies of the 1980s.[77] Most ominously for advocates of the sustainable transport agenda is the surprisingly large proportion of promised resources directed towards roads projects.[78] Put simply, the evidence outlined in this chapter demonstrates that the government seems to have rejected the core objective of sustainability, that of managing the demand for transport. Instead, partly because of its focus on growing the economy, partly because of the promise of the 'technological fix' as an escape route from the worst of the environmental impacts of car traffic, and partly because of the public backlash against transport policies perceived as anti-motorist, Labour has reverted to a transport strategy designed to accommodate much greater mobility, albeit with parallel investment in the railways and local public transport in an attempt to tweak overall modal share. If a real, sustained increase in public transport investment can be delivered over the government's second term, this will represent a welcome and genuine break from the past, since increased resources for roads have invariably been found at the expense of public transport. But there remain substantial doubts about whether this will really happen, especially given the concerns about the level of commitment that both the government and the private sector have in seeing the level of funding envisaged in the *10-Year Plan* actually delivered.

Whether Labour's retreat on sustainable transport represents a pragmatic response to the dilemma of how to deal with the renewed mobility demands of a steadily growing economy, a more cynical capitulation to vocal demands for an end to 'anti-car' policies, or a combination of the two, is a matter for debate. The House of Commons' Transport Select Committee for one was in no doubt when it decided that the government was 'mistaken' and 'wrong' in its overall transport strategy, that it formulated policy statements that were 'ill balanced', 'incomprehensible' and 'over-optimistic,' and that it relied too much on 'casual enthusiasts' to reassure it that it is delivering on its promises.[79] But what is certain is that the government's policy stance has changed significantly over its first six years. Although Labour's transport policy was originally founded on 'choice', this choice was aimed at reducing car dependence to tackle car-related congestion and pollution. What the policy strategies and investment programme embodied in the *10-Year Plan* are likely to result in is a different kind of choice: choice to travel to more places, by more modes, more often.[80] There are many carrots to promote all kinds of travel, but very few sticks to prevent unnecessary mobility. Government rhetoric envisions a less congested, more reliable future for transport, but ministers are

unwilling to back up their words with radical policies to alter the structures of transport governance and argue the case for sustainable transport policies so that this future can be created. It seems that the car-owning democracy is alive and well.

Introducing the Rest of the Book

The remainder of the book analyses the government's transport strategies and record of delivery in greater detail. The first section, 'Policy and Politics', continues by examining the roles of the different levels of government in the UK in implementing the sustainable transport agenda. In Chapter 2, Austin Smyth reviews how devolution, one of Labour's 'big ideas', has influenced the development of transport policies by different administrations across the United Kingdom. The theme of central-local relations and their impact on transport policy is developed further in Chapter 3, where Geoff Vigar and Dominic Stead examine the role of local authorities in delivering Labour's transport agenda.

The central section of the book, 'Progress in Policy Implementation', assesses Labour's record with respect to each of the UK's main transport modes. In Chapter 4, William Walton critiques Labour's road-building policy since 1997, then in Chapter 5, Jon Shaw and John Farrington question whether the promised 'railway renaissance' is likely to materialize. Chapter 6 is also concerned with rail transport, but focuses specifically on light rail systems and the London Underground. Richard Knowles and Peter White analyse the 'stop-go' story of investment in light rail and the 'Tube', and ask what Labour's approach to big city transport reveals about its commitment to the sustainability agenda more widely. The government's recognition of the vital contribution the bus industry could make to its transport plans is scrutinized by John Preston in Chapter 7, and Rodney Tolley then appraises Labour's policy on the so-called 'personal' or 'benign' modes – walking and cycling – in Chapter 8. In the last chapter of this section, Brian Graham addresses the expansion of air travel, one of the most profound challenges facing any government in its desire for better sustainability.

Looking towards 'The Future', the book's final chapter assesses the prospects for the implementation of genuinely sustainable transport policies over the next five years and beyond. Written by Phil Goodwin, formerly the Labour Government's most senior independent transport advisor, the chapter develops the issues raised in the book to construct a critical overview of Labour's performance in terms of its own policy goals. Although it was always likely to be difficult to achieve a genuine shift in UK transport policy towards even politically realistic sustainable outcomes –

Goodwin argues Labour has found itself in a position that would have confronted any government – the chapter offers a view on how a credible sustainable transport agenda might develop. Applying his experience at the heart of transport policy decision making, Goodwin outlines how attitudes in the UK will have to change if tangible steps towards a more sustainable agenda for transport are to be made.

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