

## Keeping cities moving

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‘Britain among the world’s worst for traffic jams’ - the headline of a news item in *The Times* newspaper, on 6 February 2018. The report revealed that, as measured by the average amount of time spent by motorists in peak time traffic, Britain ranks as the world’s tenth most congested country - behind Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia, Venezuela, Russia, the USA, Brazil, South Africa and Turkey. London was, by a very substantial margin, the most congested UK city, ranked seventh in the world - behind Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Sao Paulo, San Francisco and Bogota.

There is nothing at all new in this. Thus it was that, about half a century ago, a high flying young civil servant and academic (he later served for many years as a valued member of PAI’s Advisory Group) called William Plowden, was standing at a South London bus stop, ‘watching my bus wedged a quarter of a mile down the road, in a solid block of traffic made up mainly of private cars carrying one or two passengers.’ He began to wonder how Londoners had got into a situation in which the users of private cars had come to dictate the movement of traffic and ‘to maximise their own comfort and convenience at the expense of the vast majority travelling by other means.’ His bus-stop frustrations prompted him to write a major book, *The Motor Car and Politics* (1971), tracing the complex ramifications of UK government policy towards cars, since they first appeared on British roads in the 1880s. It remains a fascinating and thought-provoking piece of work – as much a study in social history as of public policy.

But the many challenges posed to modern societies by car usage – including traffic congestion, environmental pollution, road safety, motoring-related crime and vehicle and fuel taxation - are just one important part of a very much bigger picture, a picture that is far from unique to the UK and its capital city. Policy makers and transport providers around the world have constantly to wrestle with the economic and social necessities of facilitating the safe and effective transportation both of their home populations and of those from further afield, travelling for touristic, social and commercial reasons. In doing this they must try to balance the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of various categories of transport user (local residents, commuters, tourists, etc); and of reconciling the characteristics of different modes of transport - cars, buses, trains, trams, taxis, delivery vans, cyclists, pedestrians and animals.

Some of these challenges are essentially technical (for instance, the technology of motor cars has changed enormously, even in the few decades since Plowden’s book); and some of the possible solutions may be technical, too (IT systems, now such a taken-for-granted part of our infrastructure, were not around when he had his bus stop epiphany). But the quest for solutions also has a political dimension; vocal lobbies of providers and users try constantly to bring influence to bear; transport-related issues often feature in election manifestos.

Transport-related challenges are particularly acute in major cities and conurbations. Without an efficient transport infrastructure, they will grind to a halt and become economically and socially dysfunctional. London, currently with a core population of 8.5 million people, with a commuter belt of around five million, and with some 38 million overseas visitors every year, is very much a case in point.

London’s transport system mostly works well – but by no means always. The number of travellers has grown exponentially and much of the infrastructure is old. The system has developed piecemeal over many years, through a mixture of public and private enterprise. The first underground railway – the beginnings of the ‘Tube’ network – opened in 1863; other lines

were later added, and there is a never-ending saga of repair and upgrade. Tunnels built in the Victorian era by the great engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, originally to allow horse-drawn vehicles to pass beneath the River Thames, are now used by trains. The Docklands Light Railway, an automated light metro system, with driverless trains, opened in 1987 to serve the redeveloped Docklands area of East London. Although much of the road network is quite modern, much of its layout still shows signs of having been conceived in a more leisurely age, when ‘horsepower’ really did mean horses.

Governance of London’s transport system involves a sprawling patchwork of organisations – some more joined-up than others. London buses are operated as commercial franchises under the auspices of the directly elected Mayor of London and the separately elected Greater London Authority (GLA). The main transport network (tubes, buses, trams and river transport) is overseen by an entity called Transport for London (TfL), which is answerable to the Mayor; taxis and mini cabs (privately operated) are licensed by TfL. Other transport-related functions are in the hands of the 32 London boroughs and the Metropolitan Police. The national railway system, partly privatised, partly nationalised, is separate from but linked in various complex ways – including shared railway stations - with London’s local transport system. At the apex of the whole institutional edifice there is a central Government ministry, responsible for English transport policy and funding at a macro level - and answerable to the UK Parliament. Those seeking a neat and readily comprehensible organogram of the governance of London’s transport will seek in vain.

Much has been and is still being done to modernise and improve the system – albeit not always to the benefit of organisational simplification. Recent and continuing developments include the introduction of congestion charging for vehicles entering central London; the still ongoing construction of a massive Crossrail overground link running east to west across London, and beyond; a facility for hiring bicycles from numerous locations (administered by the GLA, with commercial sponsorship); the proliferation of residents-only parking zones (now a significant source of local authority revenue) – and much else besides.

In 2018, the Mayor of London launched an ambitious transport strategy, with six main aims:

- Healthy streets designed to tackle the physical inactivity crisis
- Reduced traffic on London's streets
- Better air quality and work aimed at making London a zero-carbon city
- A reliable public transport system that can cope with more passengers
- An accessible, affordable and safe transport network
- Investment in transport to support the creation of new homes and jobs

Meanwhile, the picture of our transport system is mixed – with many upsides, many downsides and a lot of daunting challenges still to be overcome. We in London have a lot both to learn and to offer from sharing and comparing our transport experiences with those of other cities and urban communities around the world. PAI has designed a one-week professional development workshop for that very purpose. Our professional development workshop, *Keeping Cities Moving: London’s transport system in the 21st century* will run from 10 to 14 September 2018. Details of the programme and guidance on how to apply can be found at <https://www.public-admin.co.uk/programmes/keeping-cities-moving-londons-transport-system-21st-century-2/>

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