4. The Dynamics of Regime Strength and Instability: Policy Challenges to the Dominance of the Private Car in the UK

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1. The Car Regime and the Impact of Sustainable Mobility

Since the early 1990s, the concept of sustainable mobility has emerged from environmental niches and entered the mainstream of policy debates and content. It is a potentially potent idea, that has offered significant challenges to the long time dominance of the car regime. For example, sustainable mobility can have major impacts on car design, the amount and type of fuel used, highway construction, the development and use of information technology, and demand management policy instruments, together with affecting travel behavior itself. Yet at times it can also appear an extremely fragile concept, particularly when influential interests seize the opportunity to frustrate its implementation.

One key to understanding the varied fortunes of sustainable mobility is that it is subject to a wide degree of interpretation, and as such there are a number of different implications for the dominance of the car regime. For example, over the past two decades there has been a growing awareness of the impact of vehicle emissions on public health. More controversially,
there is also the issue of the impact of ‘greenhouse gases,’ such as carbon
dioxide, on climate change. Albeit with some reluctance, the motor industry
has been prepared to act on these issues, with such developments as the
compulsory fitting on all new vehicles within the EU of catalytic converters,
and in more recent years the wider availability of alternatively powered
vehicles, such as petrol-electric hybrids. In these cases, although
 technological change may have significant economic implications for the
industry, the car regime hitherto has been prepared to absorb the concept of
sustainable mobility. Indeed, it can perceive environmental awareness as a
significant asset in developing its public image, as a type of fit-stretch
exercise in terms of adjusting to changing societal norms.

At the same time, sustainable mobility can offer a more direct threat to the
dominance of the car regime, through such means as undermining the public
expectation of expanding personal mobility, the promotion and development
of alternative modes of transport, and the use of demand management policy
tools, such as congestion charging. In these instances, the car regime is
likely to be considerably more resistant to change, and indeed may adopt an
openly adversarial approach. The dynamics of sustainable mobility are
therefore diverse and unpredictable, with complex interrelationships
between niches, regimes, and landscapes, to use the conceptual language
discussed in Chapter Three.
In the UK, historically, the car regime was a relatively late developer, so that it experienced a rapid development from being a relatively weak niche in the early 1950s, to a position of almost total dominance by the early 1960s. With the aid of the government itself becoming an integral member of the car regime, it retained this dominance for the next thirty years, before the advent of the sustainable development concept, with its transport offshoot of sustainable mobility, led to an alliance of environmental interests that provided a significant challenge in the 1990s. The most significant tangible outcome of this period was the decision by the government to abandon its large scale road building strategy, changing from predict-and-provide to demand management (as discussed further in Chapter Six). Even more profoundly, some parts of the government defected from the car regime, and launched a strategy based on sustainable mobility, including higher fuel taxes, promotion of alternative transport modes, and plans for the introduction of congestion charging in large urban areas.

In the event, a protest against fuel prices in 2000 briefly threatened to bring the country to a standstill, leaving the government badly shaken by the experience, and reluctant to carry through measures that might provoke another revolt by the car regime. Niche developments such as the London Congestion Charge Scheme, introduced in 2003, have offered alternatives in sustainable mobility, but the concept of congestion charging has failed to win public support in other areas, including Edinburgh and Manchester,
where proposals were defeated in referendums. Nevertheless, there is some significant landscape evidence that personal mobility is no longer growing, in terms of individual miles travelled per year and number of trips made (see Figure 1), while there have also been significant increases in rail use, and in bus use in certain areas, such as London.

A longitudinal study of the fortunes of the car regime in the UK, and of the impact on it of sustainable mobility, allows an opportunity to analyse how a powerful regime is constructed, the roots of its strength, but also how it might be susceptible to change over time. The next section will therefore outline briefly the importance for regime stability and survival of the interrelationship between stability and change, together with the significance of the emergence of new ideas, such as sustainable mobility. The following seven sections then describe and analyse the dynamics of these processes, while the Conclusion examines the implications of the case study for assessing regime strengths and instabilities.
2. Ideas and Transitions

New ideas can act as powerful agents of change, in altering the ways in which technologies and regimes are framed. These shifts in framing can take a variety of forms, including the acquisition of knowledge; gaining fresh perspectives on new and old problems; and changing the terms of debate on key issues. As Geels and Kemp illustrate in Chapter Three (quoting Rosenberg, 1986) the fit-stretch pattern means that when radical new technologies appear, their impact can be severely handicapped by the tendency to think about them in terms of the old technology, such as in the case of the early cars being described as ‘horseless carriages.’ Alongside
technological developments, therefore, car development involved a mental process of a leap in imagination, that created new ideas about their potential. In doing so, their use was framed in a fresh way.

In more recent times, environmental ideas such as sustainable mobility can, like technologies, be developed within specialised niches, and over time invade regimes and landscapes. In this context, ideas can be likened to viruses, and have an ability to disrupt existing policy systems, power relationships and policies. A key issue for the entrenched interests (such as may be found in long-standing regimes) is the degree to which the new ideas and knowledge can be accommodated in existing and agreed policy frames, or whether completely new frames emerge (Richardson, 2000, 1017-18). Ideas can therefore have important but unpredictable effects on regimes, and result in complex interrelationships with both niches and wider landscapes.

Geels and Schot (2007) distinguish four transition pathways with different relations between niches and regimes. These are transformation; de-alignment and re-alignment; technological substitution; and reconfiguration. It could be said that the transformation path best describes the direction of sustainable mobility with regard to the car regime. This occurs when there is moderate landscape pressure at a moment when niche-innovations have not yet been sufficiently developed, leading regime actors to respond by
modifying the direction of development paths and innovation activities. In addition, Geels (2007) suggests that external pressure on regimes may also come from outsiders, such as social movements and scientists. Existing regimes may respond by adjusting some regime rules, which will then influence the direction of activities and trajectories.

As the UK case study of sustainable mobility and the car regime will illustrate, although ideas emerging from niches can be powerful agents of potentially major change, this type of change is not easily brought about, and can take a considerable amount of time to pervade both regimes and landscapes. As a consequence of the discontinuities within the multi-level perspective, the forces of stability are likely to have the upper hand for much of the time, and under the majority of conditions. It is only on the relatively rare occasions when ‘the idea whose time has come’ (Kingdon, 1995, 1) is able to breach the walls of both regimes and landscapes, that radical change takes place.

In terms of major change processes, therefore, the ability of an idea to pervade niches, regimes and landscapes is crucial. For example, the idea of sustainable mobility may have significant impacts at regime level, but if it has only a tenuous hold at landscape level, then activity in those arenas may limit its progress within the regime. In addition, opponents of the idea may themselves find new niches in which to mount a challenge. Thus sustainable
mobility made significant progress from niches to regimes in the 1990s, only for its progress to be halted by a backlash from motoring interests that employed its own distinctive niche. In turn, this revolt appeared to win wide public sympathy.

After describing and analysing these processes, the Conclusion will assess the implications for regime stability and change.

3. A Longitudinal Case Study of the British Motor Car Regime (1900-2010)

This section examines how, from, relatively weak origins, by the late 1950s the car regime had established a position of enormous strength. It was only in the 1990s that this dominance was significantly challenged. Since that time, government has attempted to introduce sustainable mobility transport policies, but with only limited success.

3.1 The Late Development of the Motor Car Regime (1900-1970)

It is significant to note that regimes themselves can often emerge from relatively long periods as niches in terms of their economic and political influence. Thus a structural niche may possess the potential to develop into something much more powerful that can supersede and eclipse established regimes and their associated interests, but is hindered through a failure to project itself into a favourable situation. As such, they remain restricted in
terms of their ability to ‘stretch’ into a strategic position that fulfils their apparent potential. For the first half of the twentieth century, this was the situation in the case of the motor car in the UK. At the heart of the potential strength of the car regime was the economic strength of its constituent parts (including the motor industry, motoring organisations, the road construction industry and the oil industry), combined with the ability of the car to provide the individual with a high level of personal mobility, that fulfils aspirations of economic and social well-being. Given this formidable potential, it is surprising that for many years the car interests failed to impact significantly upon the prevailing regime.

The failure of the niche to break through was set in the early years of the twentieth century, when a Road Board was founded by the government in order to aid local authority road improvement and maintenance, and also initiate new motor roads, but in the event hardly any new roads were built (see Barker and Savage, 1974, Dyos and Aldcroft, 1974, Dudley, 1983, Hamer, 1987). When the Road Board was wound up in 1920, its powers were transferred to the newly created Ministry of Transport (MoT). However, during the 1920s and 1930s, the MoT was generally preoccupied with the state of the economically ailing railway companies, with the result that the motor industry remained largely a peripheral niche in terms of political attention. Nevertheless, one potentially significant shift in MoT responsibilities arrived in 1937, when the Ministry took direct control over
some 4,500 miles of the most important national through roads, which were now legally defined as ‘trunk roads’. Consequently, the MoT now assumed direct responsibility for constructing major roads, and so provided the scope for a much closer relationship with the motor and road construction industries, and this now presented a context with the potential to move the industry from a niche to a more central and powerful regime. This potential, however, depended on the government committing itself to a major programme of road building, but instead the Minister of Transport totally rejected the concept of a motorway network (events in the UK could be contrasted with what happened in countries such as Germany and Italy, where road building became closely tied to the concept of economic growth and national regeneration) (Charlesworth, 1984).

The motor interests remained in an economic and political backwater well into the 1950s. The austerity of the early post-war years led to a slow growth in the number of vehicles on the UK’s roads, while industry became increasingly frustrated at its lack of progress. As Finer commented, writing in the late 1950s: ‘organisations with a special interest in roads form a vast complex of great social and industrial importance. Yet, for all this, the sums spent on roads since 1945 had been by any standard quite negligible’ (Finer, 1958, 470).
This long-standing state of stagnation, however, was about to change radically and decisively. What had been lacking was crucial political leadership and an idea that could galvanise the government into action. From the late 1950s, therefore, road building became a key plank in the government’s strategy of rebuilding post-war Britain, and this was shortly followed by the even more potent concept that increasing car ownership, and providing the roads for these vehicles to run on, could create a feel-good factor amongst the population that would reap political rewards. Thus the Conservative government was re-elected in 1959 using the slogan of ‘you never had it so good.’ As part of this strategy, the government made it a priority to complete the first major UK motorway, the M1 from London to Birmingham, by the time of the election. Hitherto, the growth in motor vehicles and the building of roads had been seen in terms of economic growth, but to this concept was now added the idea of cars and roads as a key element in a popular consumerist revolution (Dudley and Richardson, 2000, 97-110). As Kingdon comments, the greatest changes are likely to occur when the policy streams of problems, policies and politics converge and combine, particularly through the form of ‘an idea whose time has come’ (Kingdon, 1995,1) and linking construction of the M1 to popular consumerism heralded the movement of the motor car from niche to enormously powerful regime.
From the late 1950s, the rapid rise of the car regime was also mirrored by the equally steep fall in the fortunes of the formerly powerful rail regime. This decline in rail was epitomised by the 1963 Report by British Railways Board Chairman Dr Richard Beeching on the *Reshaping of British Railways* (BRB, 1963). In particular, the Report recommended the closure of 2,000 stations that were considered to be uneconomic for the future running of the railway. The large majority of these closures were implemented over the following few years. Perhaps even more than the closures themselves, the Beeching Report indicated that the government now perceived rail as an industry in long term decline. Instead, it was the car regime that was seen as representing the future of transport, and every effort was to be made in promoting its rapid progress.

Continuing the trend towards popular consumerism, car ownership became closely identified with the phenomenon of the ‘swinging sixties’ in the UK. Thus while there had been a significant growth in the numbers of registered cars in Britain during the 1950s, from 2.0 million in 1950 to 4.9 million in 1960, this figure was dwarfed by the growth in the 1960s, from 4.9 million cars in 1960 to 10.0 million in 1970. These aggregate statistics do not tell the whole story, for while prior to the 1960s motoring was basically restricted to a (mainly male) social and economic elite, the 1960s saw car use become available across gender, age and social groups. Figure 2 illustrates how households with a car were a minority in 1955 (20%), but a
majority by 1975 (56%). As motoring became a more classless activity, so cars became more diverse in size and design, and also came to reflect, or even symbolise, the changing times. Perhaps nothing became more synonymous with the ‘Swinging Sixties’ than the Mini, the stylish car that was equally popular with Royalty, nouveau riche pop stars, and young men and women owning their first vehicle (SMMT, 2007). Thus although the Mini in itself represented a technological niche, it was influential in the ‘fit and stretch’ movement of the motor car to transcend social barriers, and assume a place at the forefront of the consumer revolution. Thus the car regime was in almost perfect harmony with the social and economic landscape. As Geels comments, transitions come about through alignments between processes at the different levels (Geels, 2007, 126).

Figure 2: Households with regular use of a car (source: DfT (2008))
It was also significant that the UK government rejected the idea of road tolls to pay for the motorways. Instead, they were free at the point of use by means of the Exchequer paying for their construction. This decision therefore encouraged the association of the motor car with a revolution in personal mobility, a concept that was embedded by the rapid growth in motorways during the 1960s, so that a ten year target of one thousand miles of motorway by 1972 was achieved. The strength of the motor car regime was enormously enhanced by the fact that the motorways were being built by the MoT itself, with the consequence that a powerful reciprocal relationship developed between the government and the other members of the motor regime. By the early 1970s, this regime had achieved almost hegemonic power over UK transport policy (Dudley and Richardson, 2000, 82-110), with apparently little threat to its dominance (see Chapter Six, however, for an account of the persistent challenge to the concept of urban road development, as opposed to the largely uncontested inter-urban development of motorways).

3.2 Early Environmentalism and Spasmodic Success (1970-1990)

The emergence and then domination of the car regime in the 1960s to the 1980s can be classified as a transition in terms of a major shift in a socio-technical system, with co-evolutionary and multi-actor processes. In terms
of the multi-level perspective, the car regime had clear functional goals; a variety of elements, including powerful economic, political and cultural factors; long-term stability; no single leader (although the central role of the government was clearly crucial); and a variety of dimensions within its component parts. The dominance of the car meant it was assumed that alternatives such as public transport were in inevitable secular long-term decline, so that a ‘predict and provide’ strategy was adopted with regard to road building, whereby road capacity would be expanded to accommodate the ever expanding number of vehicles. This meant that alternative regimes, such as that for public transport, were placed in a deeply subordinate position to that of the car regime, while few new technologies or ideas emerged from niches to challenge significantly the latter’s almost unquestioned hegemonic supremacy.

In the wider landscape, the car embedded its position as a key element in the inexorable rise of popular consumerism. The percentage of households with a car increased from 56% in 1975 to 70% in 1995 (see Figure 2) with households having more than one car increasing from 11% to 25% over the same period. The proportion of household expenditure devoted to transport rose from 8 per cent in 1957 to 16 per cent in 2006, while expenditure on food and drink decreased from 33 per cent to 15 per cent. In addition, most of transport expenditure is associated with private motoring (at least 87 percent) (ONS, 2007).
The social and environmental impacts of the car were generally overlooked, with the adverse effects framed in terms of solving traffic congestion problems through better accommodating the car. This policy solution was particularly evident in the highly influential 1963 Buchanan report on *Traffic in Towns*, that emphasised the need to adapt the urban environment to the growth of motor traffic through large-scale planning and design (although the report also advocated significant restraint on car use in large urban areas) (Buchanan, 1963). It was only in the early 1970s that the environmental effects of the car were first given serious consideration, chiefly through the growth of environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth (FoE) and Transport 2000. The latter campaigned for a multi-modal transport strategy, with particular emphasis on rail. These environmental groups for the first time challenged the assumptions framed in ‘predict and provide,’ a process aided by the government being compelled in the mid 1970s to severely cut the road building programme as part of the response to the economic crisis of the time.

The most effective challenge to the car regime during this period, however, came from a single individual, John Tyme, who travelled around the country organising local residents to disrupt public inquiries held to consider a planned new road. In many cases this strategy proved highly effective, and it could be said that Tyme had discovered a procedural niche he could
exploit in order to undermine the car regime (Tyme, 1978). In the late 1970s, the government abandoned the ‘predict and provide’ road building strategy in favour of a more flexible approach (Cmnd. 6836, 1978).

However, the environmental groups did not constitute a regime that could challenge the car regime on a consistent long-term basis, and over the years that followed the car regime reasserted its power. This culminated in the 1989 White Paper *Roads for Prosperity* (CM 693, 1989), which effectively revived the concept of a strategic trunk roads plan, and envisaged a doubling of expenditure.

### 3.3. Sustainable Development as an Effective Niche Idea (1990-1997)

In addition to its limited resources when compared with the car regime, it could be said that the environmental lobby had lacked a potent idea that could carry an effective public and political message, and bring together the widest range of groups. This gap was filled through the medium of the 1987 report produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. Crucially, the report put forward the potent concept of sustainable development, defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ (Brundtland, 1987).
For both environmental groups and governments, the adoption of policies that encompassed ‘sustainable development’ apparently combined a responsible attitude towards environmental issues with the virtues to be gained from economic growth. It therefore allowed the environmental coalition to maximise the spectrum of interests under its umbrella of ‘sustainable development.’ Thus the concept of a sustainable transport policy could bring together government and a wide range of environmental groups, while the discourse on ‘sustainable development’ gave environmental groups an effective means of undermining the car regime (Dudley and Richardson, 2000, 141-62). Sustainable development therefore emerged from the niche of a specialised committee, and by being mutated into the concept of sustainable mobility could become an active ‘virus’ in transport arenas.

The quest for sustainable mobility had particular resonance in the policy area of vehicle emissions, where the toxic substances involved were related to a variety of public health issues, including learning difficulties in children, the increasing incidence of respiratory diseases such as asthma, and a potentially catastrophic warming of the earth’s atmosphere through the production of carbon dioxide. Consequently, EU directives set limits for lead in air and in petrol, and in 1993 the requirement that all new cars be fitted with three-way catalytic converters. In the 1990s, therefore, new knowledge about the harmful effects of vehicle emissions provided a
serious challenge to the values that produced the *Roads for Prosperity* strategy (Dudley, 1995). This was particularly evident in a 1994 report on transport by the influential Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, which recommended a halving of expenditure on roads (Cm 2674, 1994).

For their part, environmental groups came together to form a multi-arena strategy designed to undermine the credibility of the roads strategy. This included a large number of direct action protests, whereby radical green activists and local residents united to occupy road construction sites. The widespread media attention provided to these protests further promoted the concept of sustainable mobility. Meanwhile, a report by the government sponsored Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment suggested that building new roads tended to have the effect of generating traffic, with the effect that this prevented them from solving congestion problems (SACTRA, 1994).

By permeating transport arenas, the concept of sustainable mobility had transcended its niche origins, and became a powerful agent of policy change. In particular, by the late 1990s, the government had dismantled the *Roads for Prosperity* strategy, while for the first time in nearly half a century increasing car use was perceived as a serious policy ‘problem,’ rather than the chief ‘solution.’
3.4. Optimistic Plans and High Ambitions for Sustainable Mobility

(1997-2000)

The 1990s had seen a huge shift in the framing of transport policy, and by the end of the decade the concept of sustainable mobility had moved from its niche origins into the policy mainstream. Consequently, the policy makers perceived their chief task as translating this concept into practical policies. In this context, an early notable attempt was the 1991 Report, *Transport: The New Realism* (Goodwin et al, 1991). The authors believed that, instead of the *Roads for Prosperity* agenda, a new realism was called for involving a policy mix which would include a substantial improvement in public transport, traffic calming, advanced traffic management systems, and road pricing (see Chapter Six for a detailed account of the construction and impact of *The New Realism*). In this new climate, road construction ‘to meet demand’ would no longer be the core of a transport strategy. For over forty years, the enormously powerful motor car regime had become synonymous with the framing of UK transport policy, but now parts of government had separated itself from the core automobile interests, through deserting the ‘predict and provide’ paradigm, and instead aligning policies with concepts of demand management. Consequently, the government was ready to implement the policy ideas expressed by *The New Realism*. 
The Labour government elected in 1997 was particularly well placed to carry out this task, as the Transport and Environment Departments were merged to form the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), with Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott appointed Secretary of State for the new Department. Unusually for transport, therefore, the Minister in charge was a powerful figure at the centre of government, while Prescott himself had a personal commitment to place sustainable transport policies at the top of the policy agenda.

The first tangible product of this new era was the 1998 White Paper *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone* (Cm 3950, 1998). In his Foreword to the White Paper, Prescott stressed that the main aim was to increase personal choice by improving the alternatives to car travel, and so to secure mobility that would be sustainable in the long term. Consequently, the priority would be maintaining existing roads rather than building new ones, and better management of the road network to improve reliability (Cm 3950, 3). Echoing the agenda set out in *The New Realism*, the White Paper saw the way forward as being through an integrated transport policy, that included integration within and between different forms of transport, integration with the environment, integration with land use planning, and integration with policies for education, health and wealth creation (Cm 3950, para. 1.22).
The White Paper set out its hopes and recommendations for improving the quality of public transport, as well as promoting walking and cycling, while particular emphasis in delivering these policies was placed on action at the local level, so that local authorities outside London would be required to produce Local Transport Plans that would set out their proposals for delivering integrated transport over a five year period (Cm 3950, para. 4.73). The implication therefore was that, although sustainable ideas had entered the policy mainstream, to a large degree their implementation would entail their returning to niches at the local level, whereby it would be hoped that over time they would spread through the country. This strategy had the political advantage for the government of passing responsibility for the implementation of sustainable mobility to the local authorities. At the same time, it also made the ambitious assumption that these same local authorities would have the resources and will to carry out these policies, and that they would be successfully implemented to the degree that would be widely taken up. However, the local authorities were not given many of the devolved powers to manage transport systems, particularly public transport, that would have matched the new onus of responsibility that was being placed on them.

These assumptions were particularly true in the case of controversial policies such as road user charging and workplace parking levies. Thus a credible integrated transport policy required more than just the ‘carrot’ of
promotion of alternative modes to the car. It also required the ‘stick’ element in reducing car use, by means of such measures as fuel taxes and road pricing. In fact, the previous Conservative government had already made a significant move on fuel taxes, when in 1993 it introduced the fuel tax escalator, whereby fuel duty would increase by 5 per cent each year above the rate of inflation, while in 1997 the new Labour government increased this figure to 6 per cent. The 1998 White Paper potentially strengthened the scope of these regulatory policies by announcing that legislation would be introduced to allow road user charging pilot schemes to be introduced, which might be implemented locally or on trunk roads and motorways (Cm 3950, para. 4.100). Similarly, legislation would enable local authorities to levy a new charge on workplace parking (Cm 3950, para. 4.107). Crucially, John Prescott won a concession from the Treasury that revenues from these schemes could be hypothecated to transport expenditure, so that they could help in providing the resources needed to implement an effective integrated transport policy. However, it was unclear if and when the inevitably controversial pilot schemes would actually be implemented.

The follow up to the 1998 White Paper was a ten-year plan, *Transport 2010* (DETR, 2000). The plan set out an ambitious £180 billion investment strategy across the decade, but also set a number of significant targets. For example, it was intended that congestion on inter-urban trunk roads would
be reduced by 5 per cent below current levels, compared with forecast growth of 28 per cent, by 2010 (DETR, 2000, 55). The target was also set that there would be a 10 per cent increase in bus passenger journeys by 2010 (DETR, 2000, 66).

With regard to larger urban areas, the target was set that congestion should be reduced from a forecast growth of 15 per cent by 2010, to an 8 per cent reduction. In other urban areas, congestion growth should be reduced from 15 per cent to 7 per cent (DETR, 2000, 66). However, in addition to the problematic matter of the financial resources being available to meet the ambitious targets, the Ten Year Plan also made it clear that major assumptions were being made about the likelihood of the introduction of charging schemes. Thus the Plan assumed that London and a number of local authorities would introduce local congestion charging or workplace parking levy schemes from 2004-5 onwards. Net revenues would therefore include £1.5 billion in London and £1.2 billion to local authorities in the rest of England. In turn, it was assumed that eight of the largest towns and cities would introduce congestion charging schemes, and a further twelve would bring in workplace parking levies (DETR, 2000, 104-5). It was expected also that up to 25 new light rail lines would be constructed by 2010 (although in the event only a handful of these lines have been implemented, with in many cases the escalating cost of financing them being given by government as the chief reason for withdrawal of support). The targets set
out in the Ten Year Plan were therefore highly contingent on events running smoothly at niche level.

3.5. Problematic Implementation and a Severe Backlash from Motor Vehicle Interests (2000)

The difficulties in implementing sustainable mobility were great enough, even in the presence of a compliant motor regime. In the event, shortly after publication of the Ten Year Plan, there was a backlash from the grassroots of the motor regime that for a period threatened to bring the country to a standstill, and to severely undermine the credibility of the government (Lyons and Chatterjee, 2002). Consequently, just as there was a bottom up process in the emergence of sustainable ideas, so the backlash also arose from vested interests. The trigger for the protests was the rise in fuel prices during the Summer of 2000. Ironically, the government had scrapped the fuel tax escalator for that year in the Budget of 2000, but the general rise in fuel prices highlighted the amounts taken in fuel duty by the government. To a significant extent, events in the UK took their lead from what was happening in France, where road hauliers blockaded oil refineries and fuel depots in an attempt to win concessions on fuel prices from the French government.
In September 2000, groups of farmers and hauliers embarked on similar action in the UK. Although it was estimated that at no time did the protesters number more than 2500, the blockades proved highly effective in preventing fuel supplies being moved, so that, when asked if Britain was facing a national crisis, Prime Minister Tony Blair conceded: “There’s no point beating about the bush. Of course it is.” (Financial Times, 14:09:00).

The breakdown in the fuel supplies threatened not only transport systems, but also food supplies, health services, and businesses generally. Nevertheless, the protesters won a high degree of public support, and only called off their protests when they feared a breakdown in food supplies and health services would undermine that public goodwill.

From the perspective of implementing sustainable mobility policies, the fuel protests illustrated the continued strong hold on society of the motor car regime. As one commentator commented in the aftermath of the protests, the politicians simply underestimated the public’s love affair with the motor car (Financial Times, 29:09:00). The protests clearly rattled the government to its core, to the extent it became clear there were severe difficulties inherent in enforcing sustainable mobility policies within niches and also winning acceptance within the wider landscapes of society.

3.6 Central-Local Tensions and Achievements (2000-2008)
The separation of the government from the motor vehicle regime in the 1990s had the effect of placing it in a more exposed and vulnerable position. Ideas concerning sustainable mobility successfully permeated the policy making centre, but the ‘viruses’ have not been so effective in inhabiting either the societal landscape or more local niches. The outcome in terms of implementing any kind of publicly controversial policies has resulted in something of a stand-off, with government periodically expressing its good intentions on sustainable mobility, but lacking either the resources or the political will to carry them through. Instead, the onus has tended to be placed on local authorities to carry things forward, but here both public and political attitudes can be highly problematic, with little chance of achieving any kind of consensus.

This stand-off has developed despite the fact that, at one point in the past decade, it briefly appeared that success in a significant niche would herald a major transition in terms of an idea cascading across niches. This was at the time of the successful implementation of the London Congestion Charge Scheme (LCCS) in February 2003. As we described above, the Ten Year Plan envisaged that eight of the largest towns and cities would introduce congestion charging, with the revenues being used to make significant local improvements in public transport and other sustainable mobility measures. The concept of congestion charging, in itself, represented an example of a fit-stretch process. Hitherto, urban road pricing schemes, for example those
introduced in Norway, had been principally perceived as revenue raisers, rather than being used to reduce congestion. Thus the introduction of a Congestion Charge in a major city such as London was perceived widely as a landmark event that would cause road user charging to be perceived in a fresh light.

It was the election of Ken Livingstone as London Mayor in 2000 that transformed the LCC into ‘an idea whose time had come.’ (Kingdon, 1995). Livingstone chose to make the LCC one of the principal ideas of his manifesto, and pledged to introduce it during his term of office.

Nevertheless, this political gamble required Livingstone to use the arena of the LCC to shift the popular image of urban road pricing from an unwanted tax on the motoring public into a politically acceptable policy ‘solution.’ The political credibility of Livingstone therefore depended crucially on not only the technological and administrative feasibility of the LCC, and that it should achieve its principal policy objectives in terms of reducing congestion, but also in constructing a scenario of policy ‘success’ that would win public acceptability (Dudley, 2004). In the event, he successfully achieved these objectives. For example, the first official study of the LCCS found that 50,000 fewer cars a day were entering the zone, a reduction of 16 per cent. Journeys within the zone were 14 per cent quicker and traffic delays reduced by 30 per cent, while accidents had fallen by 20 per cent (TfL, 2003). The LCCS had attracted widespread opposition from business
and motoring interests prior to its implementation, but surveys of Londoners’ attitudes towards congestion charging undertaken before and after the scheme was introduced showed an overall shift of opinion towards favouring the scheme and its effects, with four-fifths of those who expressed an opinion considering that the scheme had been effective in achieving its objectives (TfL, 2004). In 2007, a western extension was added to the zone.

Despite its apparent commitment to congestion charging in the Ten Year Plan, the government refused to endorse the LCCS prior to its implementation, and preferred to let Livingstone take the full political risk. However, once it became clear that the LCCS had been deemed a policy success, then the government was prepared to explore the possibilities of building on this niche. Perhaps surprisingly, a 2004 feasibility study of road pricing found that it would ultimately be more effective to introduce a nationwide scheme than rely on a series of local ones (DfT, 2004).

However, the government has continued to be highly reluctant to commit to a national scheme, as illustrated by the abandonment in 2005 of a planned national lorry road pricing scheme.

Instead, the focus has continued to be on local niches, but progress here has also stalled. Firstly, a proposal for dual cordon charging zones in Edinburgh was defeated in a referendum in 2005. Nevertheless, in 2004 the government brought forward a Transport Innovation Fund, where local
authorities were able to bid for infrastructure investment funds from a budget of £1.4 billion for packages of schemes that overall would have a significant impact on road congestion or economic productivity. In most cases, TIF funding was dependent on the authorities introducing some type of congestion charging scheme. In the event, only the Greater Manchester local authorities proceeded with a concrete charging proposal, but this was defeated heavily in a referendum of December 2008. With 78.8 per cent of voters rejecting the proposal, it is considered that the public had a major concern that many motorists would have no viable alternative than paying road charges for essential journeys (such as journeys to work or the supermarket) that were well outside the most congested parts of Manchester. It also appeared that those in favour of the proposal were unable to convey the long-term advantages of the scheme. Thus a ‘yes’ vote could have led to a government grant of £1.5bn from the TIF, and £1.2bn of local funding taken out as a 30-year loan, and partly paid for by future revenues from the congestion charge. However, ‘yes’ campaigners conceded that people generally failed to grasp what the planned investment would mean for local transport, and were more swayed by arguments that the congestion charge represented just one more tax on motorists (The Guardian, 12:12:2008).

In a similar manner to the impact of the fuel protests of 2000, the government’s commitment to road pricing appears to have been weakened by a 2007 petition against charging placed on the Downing Street website,
and signed by 1.7 million citizens. At the time of the successful implementation of the LCCS, much weight was placed on the importance of political leadership, which makes it particularly surprising that so little attention has been paid to this factor by national government, or in the case of the Edinburgh and Manchester proposals. Simply waiting for public opinion to move is unlikely to be effective; the public’s understanding of the technology remains limited, and suspicions about the the non-transport implications, such as the consequences for privacy and social justice, are easy to exploit in a context of uncertainty (Parkhurst and Dudley, 2008, 68-9) (see Chapter Six for a further analysis of the feasibility of road pricing).

The Ten Year Plan also assumed that twelve towns and cities would introduce workplace parking levies, but here progress has been equally slow as in the case of congestion charging. Only the city of Nottingham has carried forward a significant proposal, where a workplace parking levy is due to be introduced in 2012, with the revenues used to pay for extensions to the light rail system. This proposal currently remains in place, despite fierce opposition from local business interests.

To a significant degree, the emphasis of government targets has switched to reducing carbon dioxide emissions through improving vehicle technology, rather than reducing congestion through reducing growth in car traffic. This is partly explained by reduced growth in car traffic in recent years (only
10.5% percentage growth between 1997 and 2007 compared to 28.5 growth between 1987 and 1997). However, the government sponsored Eddington Report, published in 2006, forecasted that congestion would increase by 30 per cent over 2003 levels by 2025 (Eddington, 2006), so congestion is expected to remain a central issue.

The 2008 Climate Change Act sets a demanding target for the UK that the net carbon account for all greenhouse gases in the year 2050 is at least 80 per cent lower than the 1990 baseline. Greenhouse gas emissions from transport represent 21 per cent of total domestic emissions with 58% of transport emissions attributable to cars. The government’s analysis (DfT, 2009a) suggests that the main contribution to carbon reduction for road transport up to 2020 will be from working with the motor industry on technological improvements (especially engine efficiencies). The effect is therefore a tendency to work with the established car regime, rather than to fundamentally challenge its basic strengths.

### 3.7 Landscape and Local Trends (2000-2010)

Although major transport policy initiatives (such as congestion charging) have not been implemented in many towns and cities, it was noted earlier that average car travel per person in Great Britain has stabilised, and there has even been a slight decrease in recent years. Apart from London, there have been decreases in traffic in a number of towns and cities, such as
Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham (where trends preceded the recent economic recession) (DfT, 2009c). Manchester and Nottingham are notable as two of few cities in Great Britain where major investment has taken place in urban rapid transit. What is evident from examining these places is that other modes than the car are experiencing increases in use.

National investment is supporting local initiatives in some instances. The Cycle Demonstration Towns programme between 2005 and 2009 involved six medium-sized towns in England, and investment in cycling of about £10 per resident per year (ten times the average for England) (Sloman et al, 2009). Results indicate an average 27 per cent growth in cycling trips across the six towns, and 14 per cent more adults cycling. The programme has been extended now to a further twelve towns and cities. Cycling levels have also doubled between 2000 and 2006 in London. It is conceivable that cycling is emerging as more than a niche in some areas in the UK, and perhaps has at least the potential to become an emerging regime.

Evidence is also emerging that the mix of mobility options being used by the public is increasing, and that the car is reducing its dominance as a mode of transport in some areas (especially within large urban areas and for inter-urban travel where rail is increasing in popularity), so that some sub-groups of the population are increasingly managing without a car. For example, young adults under 30 years old have experienced a reduction in driving
licence holding. For 17-20 year olds, the proportion of trips as car driver decreased from 26 per cent in 1998-2000 to 25 per cent in 2008, and for 21-29 year olds it decreased from 45 per cent to 40 per cent (DfT, 2009b). Various explanations for this have been put forward, such as greater participation in higher education, more stringent driving tests, and higher car ownership and use costs, but whatever the underlying causes, there is a changing landscape of mobility for this population group.

The above evidence points to the prospect of the landscape developing, encouraged by policy actions, in such a way that the sustainable transport idea permeates the social landscape, and that niches such as long-distance rail, urban rapid transit and cycling will apply pressure on the dominant motor car regime at a local level in some places, and potentially transform the regime into something new.

4. Conclusion

Although the car regime in the UK has been significantly challenged by sustainable mobility in the past two decades, two factors in particular have been crucial in it retaining a significant amount of its strength. Firstly, there remains no true sustainable mobility regime that can match the car regime’s assets. Thus the coalition of motor interests, including motor manufacturers, oil companies and motoring organizations, although less dominant than in
previous decades, remains a highly influential political, economic and social force. In contrast, there is no equivalent identification of interests between environmental groups, bus and rail operators, and cycling and walking groups. Instead, each tends to have its own agenda and priorities. Secondly, ‘the popular consumerism’ idea, that underpinned the rise of the car regime in the late 1950s, retains a significant degree of its strength, in that the motor industry is still perceived as an important barometer of industrial and commercial prosperity in the UK (although there are no longer any domestically owned volume car makers), while for many consumers individual mobility through car ownership remains an important element in personal identity, and as an indicator of social status and prosperity.

At the same time, there are several means by which the car regime has become less dominant over the past two decades, compared with the trends that underpinned its ascendancy from the 1950s to the 1980s. We can therefore identify a number of cracks in the strength and stability of the car regime.

First, an important political factor was the defection of government in the 1990s from its hitherto unquestioned adherence to the ‘predict and provide’ paradigm. However, the fuel protests of 2000, which formed a backlash from vested regime interests, illustrated that sustainable mobility had yet to truly permeate the societal landscape, with the result that government
retreated from its commitment to sustainable mobility and an integrated transport policy. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that government has rejoined the car regime. Consequently, the subsequent outcome has been something of a stalemate, with niche successes for sustainable mobility such as the LCCS, countered by the fear of the government to precipitate another major rebellion by the car regime. At the same time, the long-term defection of government from its ranks does mean that the car regime can no longer assume that the trend of policy framing will be in its favour.

Second, perhaps even more significantly, we have seen that, over the past decade, there is evidence within the societal landscape that a limit has been reached in personal mobility through motor vehicle use (at least as regards intra-national personal mobility). Figure 1 showed that average distance travelled by car per person has not increased since 1995/97. There are a variety of possible explanations for these changes, many of them not connected directly to transport causes, including changes in working patterns, technological developments, shifts in locations of home and work, demographic factors, and changing attitudes and behaviour within sections of society. Over time, however, when these factors are added to more direct transport factors, such as congestion and a rise in the real cost of fuel, then the strength and stability of the car regime can appear less secure.
Third, public transport niches, including bus, rail, light rail, and bicycle, have become relatively stronger and more influential since the early 1990s. We saw how rail in particular was perceived as being in steep and probably terminal decline in the 1960s and 1970s, but in recent years rail patronage has risen sharply (an increase from 42 billion passenger kilometres in 1994 to 59 billion passenger kilometres in 2007 (DfT, 2008)), while bus use and cycling have also experienced significant growth, at least in some areas. As we noted above, there is still no unified passenger transport and cycling regime that could significantly challenge the car regime. Nevertheless, these alternative modes to the car are now generally accepted as significant elements that are likely to grow in significance, in representing at least part of the ‘solution’ to problems posed by road congestion, air quality, and climate change. This is exemplified by the recent emergence of a wide political consensus that a high speed rail link is required between London and Scotland. However, it should also be noted that politically it is much easier to offer the ‘carrot’ of infrastructure investment than wield the ‘stick’ of demand management policies, such as road pricing. It is perhaps only with the widespread implementation of the latter that the car regime will be challenged more fundamentally.

Fourth, over the past two decades there has been a major re-evaluation of the role of the car in urban areas. Consequently, the concept that town and city centres must be remodelled to accommodate the car has been widely
replaced by the introduction of large pedestrianised, and generally car-free, areas. This cascading trend also has the effect of framing urban planning and transport issues in a fresh way, so that access to these urban areas is perceived by society much more in multi-modal terms. These largely local and incremental changes may not attract sensational headlines, but over time have the potential to shift significantly perceptions in society about the status of ubiquitous car use.

In examining the car regime, therefore, perhaps more can be learned from assessing its conditions for continued stability, rather than those of change itself, for it is in the dynamics of stability that change may find opportunities to break through. Consequently, in order to maintain its strength and stability, a regime must not only seek to construct a unity of purpose amongst its components parts, but must also adjust to, and absorb, changes and challenges emerging from not only niches, but also the wider social and economic landscape. It could be said that, for a regime, the dynamics of stability can have many gradations, from at one extreme being the equivalent of an individual strolling down a wide and firm road to, at the other extreme, being that of a tightrope walker progressing along a wire, whilst being buffeted by varying air currents from different directions.

For the car regime in the UK, it was the ‘wide road’ experience of stability that pervaded the 1960s to the 1990s. Since that time, the advent of
sustainable mobility has meant that the road has become somewhat narrower, and the ground a little more unstable, but still a basic stability has been retained. In the late 1990s, the government set ambitious targets in an attempt to introduce sustainable mobility policies, but the achievements have been limited. The fuel protests of 2000 acted as a deterrent in carrying these policies forward, with implementation of controversial demand management policies delegated to the local level, but here the necessary economic and political resources were generally lacking. In this context, political leadership was required at both national and local levels, but with one or two exceptions has been conspicuous by its absence.

At the same time, the ‘tightrope’ type of stabilty for the car regime would arrive if societal landscape changes meant that the link to ‘popular consumerism’ were to be broken, so that a significant number of individuals no longer identified personal mobility (associated with status and identity) with car ownership. At the moment, there are some small, but significant, signs of a weakening of that link. The great challenge for the car regime is to ensure that it progresses no further. The challenge for niches is to see if they can transform or substitute the car regime.
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