

Bottom of the league

By John Whitelegg

Well it finally happened. All the rhetoric and all the promised Government cash for transport has foundered on a heavy dose of truth.

The then transport minister Gus MacDonald – when presented with the appalling record of Virgin trains in April this year and its inflation-busting 10% fares increase – advised Virgin customers to travel by car and by plane.

This might sound like a bit of jovial frivolity but every now and then the time is right for a bit of seriousness. It is after all a very serious matter that we have one of the worst public transport systems in Europe, the highest fares and a dreadful environment for pedestrians and cyclists on the majority of urban streets.

If anything, our rural areas are worse still with minimal provision for bikes and pedestrians. This is a serious health problem, a serious climate change problem and a serious matter for all those trying to go about their everyday business in an intelligent way and then being forced back into the car.

Gus made a big mistake, but we should be grateful for this glimpse into the reality of the high-level thinking that goes into this Government's transport policy.

A brief round-up is instructive:

The abandonment of road traffic reduction targets

Government was effusive in opposition on the need for traffic reduction targets. I still treasure the bulging files of Prescott/Meacher promises. These silly ideas were soon abandoned.

Railway privatisation

Even before railways started killing people it was obvious we were in trouble. High fares, poor services from the start and a fragmented industry united only in its determination to reward shareholders. Promises to sort this out came to nothing.

Larger lorries

Maximum lorry weights have gone up from 40 to 44 tonnes. This disadvantages rail freight and gives a huge free gift to road haulage which causes daily havoc and misery to rural and urban residents alike

Speed limits and enforcement

The number of speed offences in the UK is at an all-time high. Speeding is the norm. Enforcement is minimal. The police are not interested in dealing with speeding offences. Zero tolerance is reserved for other things. Speed kills, maims and generates a steady stream of people who are confined to wheelchairs for the rest of their lives.

Driver behaviour

Driver behaviour is usually poor. There is red-light jumping, cutting across pedestrians who have already started to cross a minor road at a junction and parking on pavements and in bus lanes. The police aren't interested in this kind of offence.

Integration

Make your own list. Buses don't meet buses, trains don't meet trains (even when they run on time), buses don't meet trains, carrying bikes on buses and trams is a rarity. Carrying bikes on the 09.35 Lancaster-

Liverpool Virgin service is banned. Try finding your way from Lancaster or Preston bus station to the railway station on foot, with luggage or young children. Integration is a very bad joke played out at our expense.

Cycling

The Government has a cycling strategy which aims to double cycle trips on a 1996 base by 2002. This has failed miserably. It now intends to quadruple cycle trips on a 1996 base by 2012. We will see. Cycling on most roads is dreadful. Even so-called bike routes are often grotty bits of road in the gutter with a white line painted nearby. Doing the tango with a 44 tonne lorry is not for the majority of people and ought not to be part of a "safe routes to school" strategy.

Walking

Pavements are in a mess, drains are blocked. The drain outside my house has been blocked for 10 years. There is a main crossing in Liverpool controlled by traffic lights but with no pedestrian phase. It is heavily used by people walking to and from the different buildings of Liverpool John Moores University. Every crossing is fraught with difficulty. Everyone says someone will be killed and they will. The response of engineers in these circumstances is to build lots of railings so that pedestrians can walk even longer distances and be delayed by traffic even more. What is so very wrong with every light-controlled junction having an all red phase (i.e. traffic in all directions is stopped)?

Lack of staff on public transport and lack of police in town centres

Walking and using public transport requires feelings of safety and security. The majority of our city centres are wild places at night time, stations have no staff and you won't see a guard on many trains. Bus drivers are trapped in their secure cages and we don't walk or use buses and trains very much.

So what has Government been doing?

All the real things that matter in the above list could have been solved in the first two years of this Government's life. It just does not care very much about solving problems. It likes the idea of setting up useless advisory bodies like the Commission for Integrated Transport. It likes the idea of lots of policy documents and consultations none of which ever amount to a jot of difference in the quality of life for those (unlike Government ministers) who spend their time outside cars, and it likes the idea of spending big money on big projects (those things that are irrelevant to 90% of our journeys) and certainly irrelevant to the needs of the elderly, children and the poor.

The Government is committed in various combinations of public and private finance to lots of new roads like the Lancaster Western Bypass (£55million) which will destroy the Lune Estuary, create a shedscape landscape and reduce congestion in the city of Lancaster by 10% if it is very lucky.

It has approved the Birmingham Northern Relief Road which trashes the best bits of the green areas to the north and east of Birmingham and will not reduce congestion on the M6 around Birmingham, and it likes the idea of the Carlisle Northern Development Route (a bypass even though

Carlisle already has a bypass called the M6). The Carlisle road really does deserve the prize for brainless, destructive stupidity. It wipes out an otter colony, goes straight across the River Eden SSSI, smashes its way through a Roman fort and then through Hadrian's Wall. The fort and the wall are part of a World Heritage Site (like Westminster Abbey, the pyramids, Taj Mahal and Stonehenge).

Not even a World Heritage Site can stand in the way of the tarmac and concrete brigade. This road will reduce traffic in Carlisle by 3% (that really is three cars in 100 less). If one school bus started taking pupils to school rather than their parents taking them in a car the reduction would be greater.

And so it goes on. The Government will shortly approve Terminal Five at Heathrow Airport bringing far more noise, traffic, pollution and health problems to this crowded part of south east England. Once again all reason is suspended when entering the world of Gus MacDonald. We will of course have a few more high-speed trains running around the country. No one asked me whether or not a 30-minute reduction on my journey time to London from Lancaster (240 miles) is worth £10billion. It isn't.

I would be quite content with a longer journey time (after all this is what I am now used to with Virgin trains anyway) as long as the train was punctual, clean, with reasonably priced fares and was not overcrowded. Currently I have dirty trains, overcrowded trains and a return fare (standard class) of £155 on the first two trains of the day (the ones I need).

I would spend the £10billion on seriously better walking and cycling conditions and on integration. If the Government wants me to define integration and provide a targeted, focused delivery plan I will do it. It will take six months and I estimate the total cost of me doing the plan will be less than one mile of the Lancaster western bypass. The total cost of producing total integration in the UK (better than Denmark and Switzerland) and the best pedestrian and cycling facilities in the world will cost:

■ The £60billion set aside in the 10 year spending plan for roads

■ The Government cash set aside for high speed railways (say £10billion in the next 10 years)

■ The £5billion a year subsidising aviation because there is no tax on fuel (£50billion in 10 years)

This produces £120billion for a radical transformation of UK urban and rural life. It's the bargain of the century and no more than the Victorians shelled out to produce a radical transformation of drinking water and sewerage systems. The only problem today is the lack of vision, lack of commitment, love of waffle and lack of interest.

If this Government had been responsible for British cities in the 1840s onwards, we would not have had clean drinking water and mains sewage disposal in Manchester and Liverpool.

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