

Road pricing. Really? After the French riots, policy-makers need to think again

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The ‘Gilets Jaunes’ who rioted on the streets of Paris and forced the French Government to abandon its fuel tax increases have a message for transport planners, one that we – as well as politicians – ignore at our peril. Britain may not have suffered violence on that scale (three dead so far) but we have been there before. The fuel tax protests of 2000 and the successful campaigns against road pricing from 2004 to 2007 should remind us of how rising transport costs can trigger popular unrest. Further back in our history, at least one person did die in the Rebecca Riots against road tolls in 19th Century Wales.

Over the past year I have been interviewing some of the leaders of protest movements as well as ministers and civil servants for a new book. In recent decades transport policy in this country has swung between rising traffic, rapid road building and resistance to it, followed by ineffective attempts at demand management and protests against taxes or charges. The thinking that created these problems is unlikely to solve them. Transport planning emerged from engineering and mainstream ‘neoclassical’ economics, which have imbued it with two strong preferences: for expanding infrastructure and ‘managing’ (i.e. constraining and redistributing) demand through pricing. From this perspective there is an optimum price for everything and a more or less efficient ways of imposing that price. Many cogent rational articles and reports have argued that if fuel taxes are seen as unfair, then comprehensive road pricing is the answer.

But if people revolt against rising fuel taxes – and politicians respond by cutting them (every year since 2000 in Britain), then why would the same people accept, and the same politicians implement, a rational pricing system, that charges people most when they most want to travel? Pricing may have a role to play in some contexts, in London for example, but to rely on it to constrain rising demand and prevent environmental damage ignores political reality.

So where does that leave us? Firstly, as I argued in my last book, we should be honest: if people don’t want to pay variable prices for driving at different times then nothing else will make much difference to road congestion. Road building, junction widening, switching off traffic lights, etc. – these all cause environmental and social damage but there’s no evidence (beyond bar room chat and ex-ante traffic modelling) that they reduce overall congestion; nor will any of the technological solutions under development, if individuals still own and control their own vehicles. Better public transport, cycling infrastructure and pedestrian spaces are all highly desirable but they offer no miracle solution to congestion, either.

We cannot expect politicians to be honest with a public that doesn't want to be honest with itself, so that must be our job. Whenever we are talking in public, or to politicians, we should be clear that congestion will not improve unless there is an effective system to stop drivers from driving at the times and places they choose. If people don't want that, then they must learn to live with congestion. If anyone tries to sell you a solution that will "tackle congestion", don't believe them.

Although tackling congestion is politically unfeasible, there are some more important challenges that can be addressed without relying on pricing. The first two are surface transport's contributions to climate change and local air pollution. On those issues, the Committee on Climate Change is right to focus most of its attention on electrification, as the French Government might now want to consider. Technology offers us a bright future, where people can engage in productive activities in connected, autonomous, electric – and stationary – vehicles. At least they won't pollute the neighbourhoods they are standing in.

The housing crisis poses one of the greatest challenges for towns and cities: how to accommodate rapid growth without the ability to move more vehicles around. This growth creates opportunities for passive demand management without relying on pricing. There are essentially two ways to do this: the smart way, or the business-as-usual way. Business as usual involves some urban intensification, coupled with car-based development and road expansion outside the urban cores. Under that scenario increasing congestion within the urban areas will constrain growth in traffic and movement more generally.

The smarter way would concentrate the vast majority of housing and employment growth at much higher densities in urban centres and along improving public transport corridors. At densities over about 100 dwellings per hectare car ownership for all becomes impossible, whatever the political pressures. In areas redeveloped in that way, parking has to be constrained and controlled; the capacity of public transport has to be expanded. To avoid creating 'concrete jungles' more space must be allocated to pedestrians and the public realm. This is no theoretical utopia; it is already happening in the central areas of many towns and cities. In those places demand management becomes an unintended consequence of accommodating growth and creating better places to live and work.

This approach does, of course, bring political challenges of its own. One of them, which British planners and politicians routinely fail, is the temptation to undermine the whole strategy by building new roads and making it easier to get onto the motorway network. The plans for the Oxford to Cambridge corridor are an extreme example of failure knowingly planned in advance.

No form of restraint is ever politically easy but if urban traffic continues to slow and electrification improves urban air quality the benefits of intensification and creation of pedestrian space will become clearer. It won't solve road congestion but it will create better places to live, and it will enable more people to move around despite traffic congestion. Compared to business as usual the outcome will be less frustrating for travellers and citizens.

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