

## Fresh perspectives

# Is transport really decarbonising?

Having spoken to senior figures at councils and governmental organisations about their net zero strategies, **Steve Melia** fears their good intentions will fall well short of the urgent changes needed

Do you believe that there is an emerging plan to decarbonise transport in line with the Paris Agreement and UK law? Since the revolution in attitudes that followed the protest actions of 2019, I have wanted to believe that was true.

Thousands of people across many different professions (in transport and many others) have been working towards this aim. Surely they can't all be deluding themselves? Over the past few weeks, I have spoken to people close to power in local authorities and governmental organisations who confirmed my growing suspicions that what they believe in private is rather different from what their organisations are saying in public. This article will consider some of their reasons and where this leaves us, as the IPCC declares 'code red for humanity' and the UK Government is pressing other countries to commit to global decarbonisation.

In the months after Covid-19 struck I kept asking the same awkward question at conferences and webinars: what is Plan B if public transport does not fully recover from the pandemic? The only coherent answers I have ever heard are appeals for more government money, which was never going to be a long-term solution. Bus patronage has now stabilised at around 80% of pre-pandemic levels and rail at around 60%.

Local authorities have begun cutting bus services, whilst national governments are planning cuts to rail services. Doesn't that contradict both local and national decarbonisation plans? I am now starting to hear that the people who make the big decisions no longer believe those reductions to be temporary. A permanent shift has occurred; some of those passengers will probably never return. Local government cannot afford to continue subsidising near-empty buses and national governments are not prepared to continue subsidising poorly-used rail services. If that threatens the decarbonisation strategies, well it's not our fault.

This is not just a UK issue; other countries are also grappling with the same problem – and planning cuts to public transport services.

In private, people in national and local government are both sceptical about the pace of electrification assumed by the Climate Change Committee when projecting the future path of carbon reductions. One



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little-reported aspect of the current supply chain constraints is the growing waiting lists for new electric cars, which still only represent around 5% of all new sales. Some local authorities are wondering whether rapid expansion of on-street charging is really a good use of their limited funds. The Sixth Carbon Budget requires the UK to cut its carbon emissions by 63% by the early 2030s. As aviation is being treated with greater lenience, the Climate Change Committee assumes that surface transport must cut by 70% to achieve that. If electrification does not match their assumptions then we need deeper, more rapid cuts in traffic volumes, which are now higher than they were before the pandemic, according to the DfT's traffic counts.

The people I spoke to understand all that, but neither local nor national government has any intention of implementing unpopular measures to achieve such cuts. A local political leader told me the main barrier was lack of money: statutory functions devour the discretionary budgets of local authorities so anything else depends on national funding, which never seems to match the government's declared intentions.

But do you really need a lot of money to implement traffic reduction measures? A local congestion charge could raise money, for example. Possibly, but no local leader is going to commit political suicide by attacking the pockets or the freedom of

motorists unless the money is available to offer seriously attractive alternatives. As I explained in my book *Roads, Runways and Resistance*, offers of big improvements to public transport made little impact on the voters of Edinburgh and Manchester, who comprehensively rejected plans for congestion charging, so the perceived connection between money and political support may be exaggerated.

During several of these conversations, other bodies and other people were often mentioned as barriers to decarbonisation: national government, opposition parties, private companies, trades unions and reluctant or hypocritical voters. There is some truth in many of those claims, but assigning blame is not going to help.

So where does that leave us? During one of these conversations, I said, "so, you have explained very well why we must continue breaking the law". I was arrested again recently and am waiting to hear whether I will be charged; but the protest movements are also struggling to maintain the momentum that began in 2019. Insulate Britain are right that we need to ratchet up disruptive action, but blocking roads is now starting to produce diminishing returns – we need new tactics. Prince Charles is right about that, but wrong to suggest that "constructive" methods are likely to work on their own. Thousands of clever, motivated, professional people – including many of you reading this article – are already working constructively towards decarbonisation.

It is customary to finish articles like this by saying: so, this is the solution, but for the first time in 15 years of writing about these issues, I am struggling to find a convincing answer. For transport professionals, all I would say is: carry on your good work but please make it clear to everyone outside the transport world, that demonstration projects, decarbonisation strategies, declarations of carbon neutrality and universal agreement that climate change is the biggest threat, needing urgent action, do not mean that we are solving the problem.

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As a synonym for  
**Tom Cohen**

Active travel can take many forms including handcycling, e-biking, rollerblading, scootering and skateboarding