

**URBAN**

**TRANSPORT**

**WITHOUT  
THE  
HOT AIR**

**VOLUME 1**

**SUSTAINABLE  
SOLUTIONS  
FOR UK CITIES**

**STEVE MELIA**

# Contents

Preface .....	vi
Foreword by Prof Phil Goodwin .....	vii
<b>1</b> The myths of urban transport.....	9
<b>PART I: Myths and problems.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2</b> The problem .....	<b>13</b>
<b>3</b> “There as been a war on the motorist” .....	<b>19</b>
<b>4</b> “Roads and airports benefit the economy” .....	<b>29</b>
<b>5</b> “All we need is better public transport” .....	<b>38</b>
<b>6</b> “Car ownership isn’t a problem – only car use” .....	<b>49</b>
<b>7</b> “You’ll never get people over here cycling like the dutch” .....	<b>60</b>
<b>8</b> “The car can be a guest in our streets” .....	<b>79</b>
<b>9</b> “We are building too many flats” .....	<b>92</b>
<b>10</b> Summary: myths, values and challenges .....	<b>110</b>
<b>PART II: Sustainable solutions .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>11</b> Four options for traffic in towns .....	<b>112</b>
<b>12</b> European cities: inspiration and similarities .....	<b>123</b>
<b>13</b> Carfree developments.....	<b>149</b>
<b>14</b> London: the politics of bucking the trend.....	<b>163</b>
<b>15</b> Progress in other British cities.....	<b>184</b>
<b>16</b> What sort of cities do we want? .....	<b>211</b>
<b>17</b> What can I do? .....	<b>231</b>
Endnotes .....	240
Index .....	257

# The myths of urban transport

Transport is part of the identity of every country, every town and city. How people travel tells you much about who they are, just as their buildings, their history and their politics do. And like all of these things, transport generates stories, which people tell to explain why things are as they are, or why they are not as people would like them to be. Some stories are told among transport specialists and others are told more widely, in the media, in politics and by ordinary people. Some stories contain important elements of the truth and others are more like urban myths, spread because they suit a prejudice, a legitimate desire or a vested interest. Several years of listening to these myths persuaded me to write this book.

To work out whether any of these myths have influenced you, here are a few questions drawn from the chapters in the first part of this book. If you don't already know the answers, take a guess:

1. **What happened** to the UK duty on petrol between 2000 and 2012?
2. **What happened** to the total UK tax on petrol (including VAT) over the same period?
3. **What percentage** of households in Britain have a car?
4. **What percentage** of international flights from UK airports are for business purposes?
5. **What percentage** of Manchester's commuters travel by tram?
6. **Do Germans** own more or fewer cars than Britons?
7. **Do Germans** drive more or less than Britons?
8. **What percentage** of journeys are for commuting in Britain?
9. **What percentage** of households are families with a couple and one or more children?
10. **What percentage** of dwellings in England are flats?

(Answers on the next page)

**Answers****Chapter**

1. Petrol duty fell by 16 per cent after allowing for inflation between 2000 and 2012.....	3
2. The total tax on petrol fell by 5 per cent between 2000 and 2012, allowing for inflation .....	3
3. 75 per cent of households in Britain have one or more cars.....	3
4. 19 per cent of international flights from UK airports are for business purposes .....	4
5. 1.4 per cent of Manchester's commuters travel by tram <sup>1</sup> .....	5
6. Germans own more cars than Britons .....	6
7. They also drive more than Britons.....	6
8. 16 per cent of trips are for commuting .....	9
9. 19 per cent of households in England and Wales are families with a couple and one or more children.....	9
10. 20 per cent of dwellings in England are flats.....	9

If any of the answers surprised you, if you overestimated any of the numbers or thought Germans drove less than Britons, you have probably heard or read something influenced by these myths, and this book is especially for you. And if you are wondering why a book on transport is asking about families and flats, read on.

Chapters 3 to 9 in Part I begin with a list of myths commonly heard in the transport world, followed by 'observations', which cast doubt on some of them. I chose 'observations' rather than 'the facts' or 'the truth' because the truth is rarely straightforward and 'facts' may be interpreted in different ways. Most of the myths, like most issues in transport, involve numbers. People in the transport world like numbers: they suggest a degree of precision – hard facts instead of woolly opinions. Some of these people, including many politicians and transport economists, go further, falling for the 'calculation fallacy'.

### **The calculation fallacy**

The belief that a calculation can demonstrate what ought to be done, with no need for value judgments.

A calculation may help to estimate the consequences of an action but the level of desirability we attach to those consequences will always depend on value judgments. Some relatively simple value judgments on technical questions may seem fairly obvious. For example, if an engineering study shows that a bridge needs reinforcement to avoid a significant risk of failure, reasonable people would all agree that it must be reinforced if it is to remain open. But how much money should be spent on strengthening bridges against the risk of freak floods? Should the bridge or the road leading to it have been built in the first place? These questions can be informed but never answered by a calculation. People – including the economists at the Department for Transport (DfT) – who pretend that a calculation can show the *right* or the *wrong* decision are often trying to disguise the value judgments behind their calculations – values which might shock many people if they knew how the system worked. Chapter 4 will look at some specific examples of this.

This book does not pretend to be value free. My starting point is a belief that maintaining the conditions for life on Earth is more important than increasing consumption or maximizing individual freedom. At a more immediate level, I have observed how life in many European cities has improved as motor traffic has been removed from streets and neighbourhoods. If you support those aspirations, you will find useful evidence in this book, but whatever your own starting point, the analysis should interest and may surprise you.

# London: the politics of bucking the trend

**“No one’s interested in transport itself, apart from engineers and enthusiasts. Transport is the means by which a major city works. People look at this as a transport question without recognizing the political conditions you need...”**

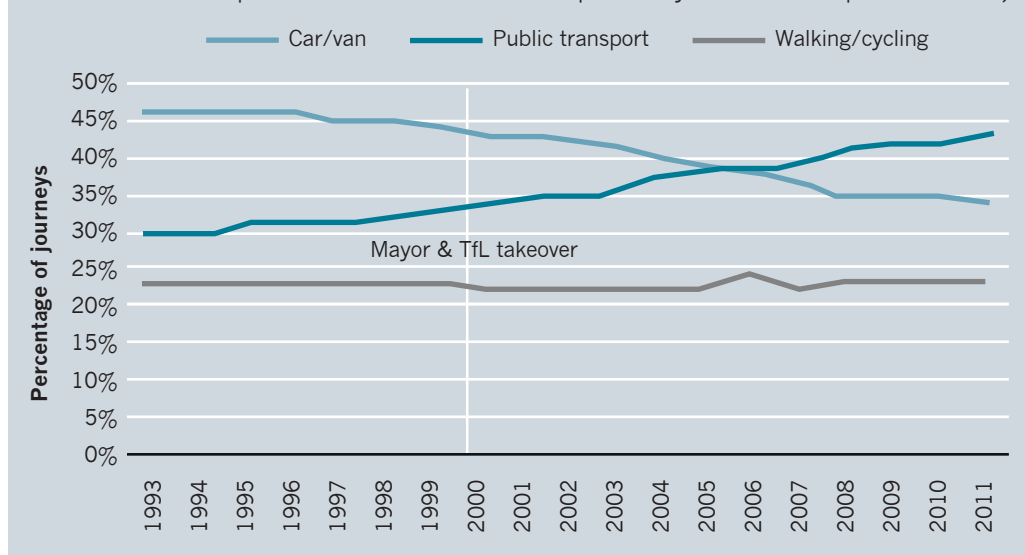
**Peter Hendy**

Peter Hendy, commissioner for Transport for London under mayors Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson, explains why London succeeded where most British cities have failed. Figure 5.4 (page 44) showed how bus use in London has bucked the UK national trend, doubling since the mid-1990s. With walking as a principal mode of travel remaining stable, the main story told by Figure 14.1 is a progressive switch from driving to public transport. Cycling in London has also nearly doubled in recent years, though starting from a very low base. Cycling is important in parts of inner London but across the city as a whole just 2 per cent of journeys are cycled. Total traffic *volumes* (as opposed to percentage shares) reached a peak in 1999 after which they began to decline, slowly at first, but more rapidly from the start of the recession in 2008 despite a strongly rising population.

Transport has always been highly politicized in London. It is “an embarrassment to central government”, says Hendy, “because it costs a lot of money” and because parliament and government ministries are surrounded by it. Conflict between central government and London’s leaders came to a head over transport issues in the early 1980s.

In 1981, a leftwing Labour group under Ken Livingstone took control of the Greater London Council (GLC). Dave Wetzel (a firebrand councillor judged “too leftwing” to look after Hounslow’s burial committee “in case I went round the gravestones with Karl Marx, raising the dead”) was put in charge of transport. The group was young, lacked experience and many people doubted their ability to implement the big changes they were promising. Years later, one of the officers (the council’s employees) told Wetzel, “I

**Figure 14.1** Modal share by number of journeys in London<sup>335</sup> (in 2000, the mayor & Transport for London<sup>336</sup> took over responsibility for most transport in London)



said to my lads: give 'em six months and everything'll be back to normal, and here we are five years later... Things never did go quiet or go back to normal."

Conflict with Margaret Thatcher's government was one of many problems they faced. Though planned overspill to new towns had come to an end, London was still haemorrhaging people. People who don't remember those times may find it difficult to imagine how attitudes to urban living have changed, particularly among young adults.<sup>337</sup> I moved to work in outer London at the age of 22, determined like many of my peers to buy a cottage in the country as soon as I could afford one. (Being able to afford one might be difficult to imagine nowadays!)

Opposition from the public and the Treasury had killed the big plans for urban motorways in London but the first of Buchanan's options, to knock down and spread out, was still influential. A big programme of road building was still part of GLC policy when Wetzel took over. "We consulted on all the Tory [Conservatives'] road schemes and scrapped the vast majority of them", apart from three big schemes in Hayes, Tottenham and along the A2, "because Ken [Livingstone] had been to those areas promising to build bypasses." He adds, "Without them, we might not have won the election."

At the same time the GLC's political leaders stopped the officers from working up new schemes for any future administration:

**“We said, ‘These are the schemes you’re gonna build. These are their reference numbers and if you’re working on any scheme which hasn’t got that reference number you’re out the door.’”**

Officers pursuing a different agenda would remain a problem for Wetzel at the GLC and also when he returned years later to work for the mayor. The previous administration had tried to address the decline in public transport with plans for a zonal travel card, but the plans were opposed by London Transport.<sup>336</sup>

**“The officers kowtowed too easily to external forces... Now we know London Transport was totally wrong. Luckily the leadership had changed when we took over. A zonal system with integrated ticketing was part of our manifesto. London Transport was ready for that, but not in one go.”**

A fares system based on zones was introduced in 1981; the ‘Travelcard’, a season ticket covering buses and the underground, followed in 1983 and a one-day Travelcard was introduced in 1984. In between came one of the fiercest conflicts between central and local government over a transport issue. Wetzel recalls:

**“In 1981, David Bayliss, chief transport planner [an employee of the GLC], presented me with [a report which] said ‘there is a secular decline in the use of public transport’. I said: ‘I don’t care if it’s secular or religious. We are going to get more bums on seats.’ We immediately took off an overtime ban (imposed by the management to save money), started operating better services and started consulting on lower fares.”**

Wetzel argued for free public transport, but settled for a cut of a third in average fares. The subsidy required to cover the cost of the cut was mainly financed by an increase in domestic and business rates (which were still set locally in 1981).<sup>338</sup> ‘Fares Fair’, as the policy was named, proved popular with most of the public, but the Conservative-controlled borough of Bromley objected to subsidizing the underground, which did not run through their borough.

Legal arguments followed (and went all the way to the House of Lords) about the interpretation of ‘fiduciary duty’ ie the duty to avoid wasting public money. Was the subsidy consistent with this duty in the Greater London Act (which specified the powers and duties of the GLC)? The “vandals in ermine”, as Wetzel dubbed the law lords, decided it was not.

The leftwing Labour councillors, including Livingstone and Wetzel, voted to ignore the court ruling, but in March 1982 a majority of the councillors voted to double fares.





**Figure 14.2** Dave Wetzel in court in 1982 (drawn by the court policeman)

Wetzel and a few of his colleagues organized a campaign, 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay', which landed him in court for non-payment of fares. "I borrowed a ventriloquist's gorilla from the National Theatre," he says with a smile, "cos the magistrate at the committal hearing said I was behaving like an animal." (Figure 14.2)

The lower fares had lasted for six months, just long enough to reverse the decline in public transport and start reducing traffic flows. That all changed when the fares went up: public transport of all forms hit a long-term low in 1982. Then something quite unexpected happened.

Several times in my interviews with them, Wetzel or Hendy would say "you ought to ask Ken Livingstone that". A few weeks later I meet Livingstone in the modest terraced house in north-west London where he still lives. ("Pensioner, house husband" is how he describes his occupation now.) His wife's Toyota Prius sits outside, but Livingstone himself never learned to drive. "I was born in 1945... it was too expensive back then," he says, adding that he prefers to read while travelling and thinks of all the time he would have wasted sitting in traffic jams if he had been driving a car. With ambition behind him, he reflects on the past with the cynical wisdom of an idealist who has tested the limits of what he can change. I ask if I can record and he says: "Why not? This place has probably been bugged for years."

From 1983 onwards, all public transport, but particularly the buses and underground, began to recover (Figure 14.3). Why was that? The Travelcard introduced in 1983 brought some of the simplicity observed in Freiburg (though in London the daily version, introduced in 1984, could only be used off-peak). It also reduced the fare level. How were the GLC able to get away with this so soon after the law lords' ruling?

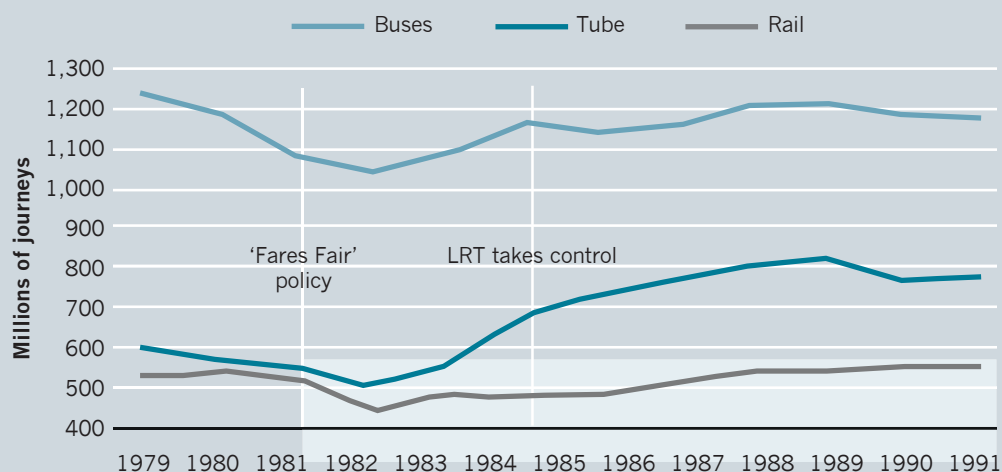
**“I received informal word from the law lords [via the GLC’s lawyers] that if we cut fares again they wouldn’t overturn it...”**

The original decision, he and Wetzel believe, was political:

**“They wanted to constrain this dangerous radical – the enemy within. Normally when the law lords make a reactionary decision it only affects a handful of people, but this time... I think they realized they’d made a catastrophic mistake.”**

By 1983, the Thatcher government had had enough of ‘the enemy within’: it announced plans to abolish the GLC. Eager to wrest control of transport away from Livingstone, as a first step to abolition, it created London Regional Transport (LRT) with a board which it appointed in 1984. Transport in London was, as Wetzel points out with some irony, “nationalized”.

**Figure 14.3** Journeys by public transport in London 1979-1991 (millions)<sup>339</sup>



As shown in Figure 14.3, from the mid-1980s, all forms of public transport in London began to stagnate, with buses and the underground declining after 1988. Would it have made any difference if the GLC had never been abolished? “Not much,” according to Livingstone.

**“One of the first laws of the Thatcher government was to take control of capital spending. So even if we had a Labour-controlled GLC, we couldn’t have borrowed money to carry on expanding the transport network... Mind you, you would have at least had a voice making the case for it, and we would have been ready to start stuff in ’97 when Blair got in – but not dramatically different.”**

London Regional Transport sold off its bus operations, to management buyouts that were soon bought up by the big bus companies. But full deregulation was postponed. (I remember an eager young radio journalist at the time asking an official when Londoners could also enjoy the benefits of deregulation. With some of my family enjoying these ‘benefits’ in other cities I had a quiet chuckle. I wonder what the journalist would think of his question today.)

One of the sticking points with deregulation was the Travelcard, which had become very popular. John Major’s Conservative government set up a committee to work towards deregulation. The private operators told the committee that the Travelcard would have to go, unless its price was substantially increased, or the taxpayer subsidized the difference. The committee’s report was then leaked to Christian Wolmar, transport correspondent of *The Independent*, who asked the ‘Save the Travelcard’ campaigners, for their views on it. Their spokesman summed up the attitude of many people:

**“This report is a catalogue of disasters for London. If this is to be the result of privatisation and deregulation, then these changes will have failed completely to meet the needs of Londoners.”<sup>340</sup>**

The Travelcard issue was about more than just finance. Buses used to have a conductor who collected the fares. During the 1960s and 1970s, most buses in London and elsewhere gradually switched over to ‘one-man operation’, where drivers had to collect the fares. The queuing to pay the driver increases journey times and surges of passengers boarding at particular stops can reduce the reliability of timetables (still a problem on buses outside London today). The prepaid Travelcard significantly reduced these delays. As the Major government struggled through scandals and national economic problems, the plans were quietly dropped.

## The mayor of London and Transport for London

The question of London's governance would not go away. In 1997, the Labour party won the national election with a manifesto which included a commitment to create an elected mayor and city-wide authority for London. This was about more than party politics. According to Hendy:

**“Business got fed up with the incoherence of a major city run without a strategy. It was London First [a business lobby group] and the CBI who said: ‘We can’t live with this anymore. We’ve got to have a strategic authority.’”**

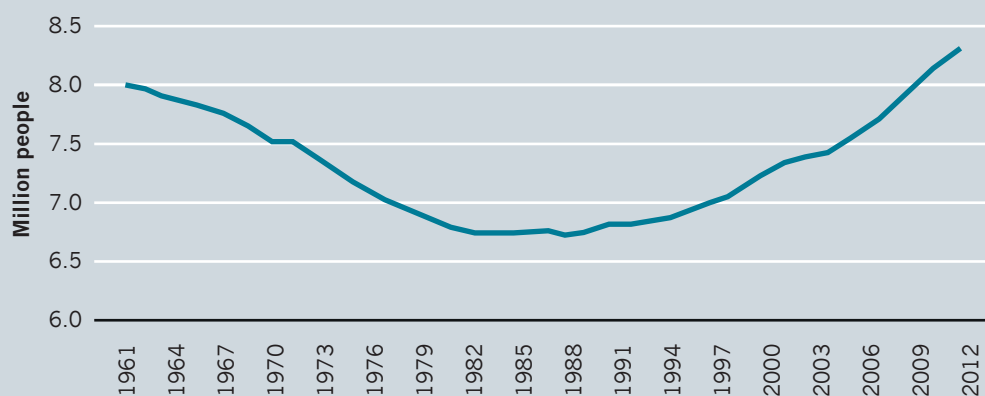
The national leadership of the Labour party did not want a radical like Livingstone returned to power, so he stood as an independent and was elected as the first mayor in 2000. Though the business community might have preferred someone else, even a return of their old enemy was a price worth paying for London-wide coherence. The Corporation of London, “a front for the Tory party” in the 1980s, had changed its views and lost some of its influence to groups like London First, who worked more with Livingstone. Ken was a “good socialist politician,” says Hendy, but he and the business community were “almost wholly aligned” on transport issues “as was Boris”.

The new mayoral structure was smaller than the old GLC and less concerned with directly running services, but it did take over London Regional Transport – renamed Transport for London (TfL) – with responsibility for buses and major highways in London. The underground remained under national government control until it too was transferred to TfL in 2003. I asked Livingstone whether he had any political battles over transport issues and he said:

**“There weren’t any battles because the decision was solely mine. That’s the weakness of the mayoral system – far too much concentration of power... I achieved just as much as the leader of a slightly dysfunctional Labour group on the GLC...”**

Two of the challenges for the new mayor were to produce a London Plan and a London Transport Strategy. The London Plan set the context for the Transport Strategy and everything else that the mayor and the other authorities in London would have to deal with. The key issue was how to accommodate the growing population. As shown in Figure 14.4, the post-Second world war decline in London's population went into reverse from 1988, with the increase accelerating in more recent years.

Overspill or encroaching on the greenbelt were never serious options: London would have to live within its existing boundaries. For Livingstone this was no real issue.

**Figure 14.4** Greater London population (millions)<sup>341</sup>

Paris and New York are both much denser than London, he claims. Comparisons of this type depend on boundaries. The greenbelt has moulded London into a single, almost circular conurbation. The city of Paris, which is denser than London, is tiny by comparison. It is surrounded by suburbs that are irregular in shape, as they are around New York. The City Mayors Foundation, which attempted to measure boundaries on a like-for-like basis, showed London in 2007 as the fourth densest large city in Europe, much denser than Paris and two-and-a-half times denser than New York.<sup>342</sup> How do you plan for the transport of a growing population in such a city?

On this issue, all the people I interviewed agreed: accommodating the increasing population by increasing road capacity would be impossible. As Livingstone put it:

**“In great world cities like London and New York with eight million people, people have to use public transport...It was quite obvious by the Second World War in New York, whatever road capacity you put in, it would fill up with cars. It was particularly stupid that post-war Labour and Tory governments came up with the three ringways for London...the cost of building motorways through London was absolutely horrendous, even back then. Nowadays with [much higher] land values, it just couldn’t be done.”**

Livingstone published his Mayor’s Transport Strategy in 2001. This was restrained in its language but clear in its ambitions:<sup>343</sup>

- Reducing traffic congestion through a congestion charge.
- Overcoming the backlog of investment on the underground, increasing capacity by 50 per cent over 15 years.
- Making radical improvements to bus services.
- Better integration of National Rail with London's other transport systems.
- Increasing the overall capacity of London's transport system (mainly rail, but also an east London road bridge).
- Improving journey time reliability for car users, while reducing car dependency by increasing travel choice.

Although local transport schemes, walking and cycling get a mention, the emphasis was clearly on public transport investment. Apart from the congestion charge in the city centre (see page 174), there was no declared aim to restrain travel by car and there would also be no repetition of Fares Fair. In 1981, the underground had empty seats waiting for bums; by 2000, the problem was overcrowding. Increasing capacity would take time and money. In the meantime, buses were the first priority.

### Improvements to London's bus services

When Livingstone took over, London's buses were almost breaking even, apart from concessionary fares. However, the poor quality of service was beginning to affect a labour market recovering from the recession of the early 1990s, particularly in inner London where lower-paid staff were becoming difficult to recruit and retain. This was one of several issues where the new team was determined to change the culture of the organization it inherited. "The bureaucracy had solidified," says Livingstone. The day before TfL took over, and again when it gained responsibility for the underground in 2003, senior people took early retirement. Wetzel remembers a letter he received from the managing director of London Buses urging him to:

**"look at the tendering system because it was an oligopoly in decline and we should bring in some fresh new tenderers who would compete on price. I went and saw Ken and said: 'This bloke don't get it. We want to improve the quality. We want to pay more, not less, for our bus services.' As a result of that letter, that man took early retirement. Some people at London Buses never forgave me for that."**

The managing director's eventual replacement was Peter Hendy, who had led one of London Buses' management buyouts before joining First Group. With more money available, Hendy increased routes and frequencies among many other improvements.

**“There’s a common misconception that [the cost of subsidizing a good service is] about evenings and weekends. It’s not. What you’re paying for is a peak bus service that carries the last set of people at a bus stop to work.”**

Lianne De Mello, a council officer in Brighton and Hove, whom I was interviewing for the next chapter, was brought up in Harrow in outer London. She recalled:

**“I remember pre-Ken, about the time I was becoming a teenager, looking to get out and about without my mum and dad, I remember it being difficult to get around. Then suddenly there were buses everywhere... I think there’s a psychological difference between having to look up the time of a bus, or just turning up at the stop...nowadays, unless it’s a Sunday or a bank holiday you never have to wait more than 10 minutes for a bus.”**

Passenger bus miles increased by three-quarters during the eight years Livingstone was in charge.<sup>344</sup> The introduction of the ‘Oyster card’, the ‘contactless’ smartcard which replaced cash for most passengers, in 2003 was another important element. Today, the Oyster card can be used for season tickets, or it can be used on a pay-as-you-go basis, in which case, you will never be charged more than a daily maximum rate. Thus it gives customers either single fares or the daily rate (lower than the printed Travelcard), whichever is cheapest. It is valid on almost all forms of public transport in London, including river boats and national rail services. It wasn’t like this at the beginning.

The original Oyster card contract had been let by London Regional Transport before the mayor took over. The Oyster card was to cover buses and the underground, but not the Docklands Light Rail (DLR), the Croydon Tramlink or national rail services in London. The contractors also wanted to restrict it to monthly and annual passes. The Board of TfL was frustrated by this attitude. Livingstone’s advisers called on their connections in Moscow, to line up an alternative provider if the contractors refused to cooperate.<sup>345</sup> The pay-as-you-go and Travelcard elements were incorporated at its launch in 2003. Then, Wetzel explains:

**“When the private company failed on some of its targets, instead of giving them a cash penalty, we said: ‘You have to include the Croydon tram and the DLR.’ When London Transport let the contract there were ongoing, ongoing, ongoing talks about a national smartcard. They felt it was going nowhere and they would still be talking about it in 25 years’ time. So they pulled the rug under the discussions and went their own road...”**



In 2010, the Oyster card was extended to national rail and river services; then in 2014, with operators in the rest of the UK still struggling to implement any smart ticketing, TfL introduced another innovation. The ordinary contactless credit and debit cards issued by most banks can now be used in the same way, benefiting from the same fares as the Oyster card. Cash handling on London's buses has now been withdrawn altogether.

## The London underground

After many years of under-investment, the underground badly needed renovation and more capacity, which was going to be expensive. The government had decided to transfer ownership of the track, stations and auxiliary services to a public-private partnership (PPP) before the mayor took over. TfL would only operate the trains and employ the station staff. The PPP idea emerged as a compromise between Chancellor Gordon Brown, who wanted full privatization, and Deputy Prime Minister Prescott, who disagreed.<sup>346</sup> Livingstone recruited Bob Kiley as transport commissioner. Kiley had transformed the public transport systems of Boston and New York, and brought his own team of seven or eight Americans with him. With the 'dead bureaucracy' removed, Livingstone and his team believed TfL could do a better job in-house. Wetzel recognized that the past management of the underground had not been good, though the Treasury, with its 'on-off' investment funding, had been part of the problem:

**"From what I heard, the old underground management team supported PPP not because it was the cheapest, most efficient way of renewing the underground, but they knew, once they had contracts signed for 25 or 30 years, the Treasury was bound to that contract – they couldn't switch it off..."**

PricewaterhouseCoopers produced a report showing that PPP would be a cheaper option but there were good reasons for treating this idea with scepticism. The consortia that won the two contracts would have to borrow at higher interest rates than TfL could obtain. Instead of letting the contracts on a 'job-by-job' basis as TfL would do, the consortia would sub-contract to their member companies, often at higher costs and with no penalties for any underperformance. Other problems, according to Wetzel, were due to the inherent limitations of contracts:

**"We knew that once a contract had been signed it would be inefficient because everything that was not in the contract would be charged over the odds. How do you define in a contract what is acceptable or unacceptable litter on a station?"**



Attempts to negotiate with central government foundered on the opposition of Chancellor Gordon Brown so eventually TfL took over the underground with the PPP in place. TfL found itself paying ‘over the odds’ for changes not specified in the contract, like re-siting signals for safety reasons. Four years later its worst fears were realized as the Metronet consortium ran into financial difficulties. Livingstone told everyone to avoid any hint of ‘I told you so’ while he negotiated with the Treasury to take the contract back in-house. The National Audit Office concluded:

**“The Metronet PPP contracts to upgrade the Tube left the DfT without effective means of protecting the taxpayer. Metronet’s failure led to a direct loss to the taxpayer of between £170 million and £410 million.”<sup>347</sup>**

A few years later, under Boris Johnson, the remaining PPP consortium went the same way. After serious problems with contracts let by central government for extensions to the Jubilee underground line and the DLR, the Treasury finally allowed the mayor and TfL the freedom which most European mayors would take for granted – to borrow money and manage the contract for building Crossrail, the next big transport infrastructure project. Crossrail would provide London with an east–west suburban rail line in a tunnel, similar to the RER line A, which opened in 1977 in Paris. It was one of many transport projects at different stages of planning or implementation when Johnson took over from Livingstone in 2008.

## The London congestion charge

The most controversial transport policy initiated by Livingstone was the congestion charge, a daily charge for vehicles entering central London. As he points out in his autobiography, the idea came from the political right. For neoliberal economists the logic is straightforward: a scarce resource should be allocated to those who pay for it. For Livingstone, who made it a manifesto commitment, it was the only way to reverse growing congestion and pollution in central London.

The run-up to its introduction was accompanied by a barrage of opposition from the media, celebrities and ministers in the government which had created the power to introduce congestion charging, in the Transport Act three years earlier. Much of this opposition was personally directed at Livingstone. “Ken’s off his rocker,” said Michael Winner to *The News of the World*. *The Guardian* said ministers planned to “accuse Livingstone of incompetence” if it went wrong.<sup>348</sup> Even Livingstone’s advisers at City Hall had second thoughts, urging him to delay until after the next mayoral election. Wetzel recalls:

**“Ken came over to TfL and discussed this with Kiley, who had reviewed the plans and was sure we were on the right track. He said to Ken: ‘I promise you, if for any reason you’re not satisfied, I can switch it off six weeks after you give me the instruction...’ and it was like a safety blanket for Ken.”**

Livingstone says his personal commitment never wavered, but that of many around him clearly did.

The technology used to charge drivers for entering the charging zone (based on number plate recognition) was not the most up to date, nor the cheapest to run – it was chosen to minimize the risk of a spectacular failure, but administration costs absorbed much of the revenue. On the day, the media predictions of mayhem were proved wrong and other cities such as Stockholm and Milan later followed London’s example by introducing their own congestion charging.

## Cycling in London

One indirect impact of the congestion charge was a boost to cycling in central London. Cycle counts on TfL’s roads doubled in the seven years following its introduction. This increase was from a very low base and concentrated in central areas. One borough, Hackney, stands out: the 2011 census shows 15 per cent of commuters normally cycle to work, twice as many as inner London as a whole, and the gap has widened since 1991. Why was this? Trevor Parsons of the London Cycling Campaign ascribes it partly to demographic change, though similar changes were happening in some other boroughs. Councillor Vincent Stopps, who took charge of transport there in the early 2000s, said that “restraining the private car is key”. Many of the measures they took – widening the area where parking is controlled, the car-free developments – were common to most inner-London boroughs, but the difference, he argues is:

**“We know what we’re doing here. In some of the neighbouring boroughs the engineers take a design out of the design manual and mess up the details... We don’t do ‘cycling schemes’: we do public realm schemes that benefit cyclists, walkers and the bus.”**

Hundreds of mainly small-scale changes were central to their success. Parsons, whose local group of the London Cycling Campaign is influential in Hackney, took me on a ride around many of them. From the 1990s onwards, the Campaign took a strong stance against low-quality infrastructure. Instead of paint on roads, stop-start cycle lanes and shared pavements, they have pressed for, and obtained, traffic calming, junction redesigns, and filtered permeability. Many residential and side roads were



**Figure 14.5** Trevor Parsons at filtering point in Hackney.



**Figure 14.6** Cycle contraflow in Hackney.

closed to through traffic some time ago; they needed only minor changes to create cycle-friendly filtering points like the one in Figure 14.5. Elsewhere, new filtering points were installed or contraflows introduced on one-way streets (Figure 14.6). The cumulative effect of all these changes is to criss-cross the borough with quiet roads (and some paths) which favour cycling and walking.

The demographics and behaviour of London's cyclists are very different from the cities described in Chapters 7 and 12. Nearly three-quarters of journeys taken by bicycle are made by men.<sup>349</sup> On the Barclays Cycle Superhighways, which are mainly painted lanes on roads, including many main roads, just over three-quarters of cyclists are male. A study of the Barclays Bike Hire scheme showed that women tend to avoid main roads and to use the bikes more for recreational riding in areas like Hyde Park.<sup>350</sup> In *The mayor's vision for cycling* (mentioned in Chapter 7, page 77) Boris Johnson declares an aim to get more women cycling, through the construction of safer cycle routes.

## London transport policy under Boris Johnson

Livingstone is scathing about his Conservative successor Boris Johnson, on cycling policy among other issues:

**“We were working on the next stage of this and our cycle routes were going to get as much physical separation as possible. Boris just dumped all that and painted blue lines on the road, because Boris never wants to offend the car lobby... That would have been the biggest transport part of my third term if I'd had a third term... We were**

going to close the north side of the Embankment between Westminster and Waterloo Bridge every summer, replicating what the mayor of Paris did. **We were going to do in Parliament Square what we did in Trafalgar Square, close one side.** There would have been many more real shifts towards pedestrians and cycling.”

Hendy agrees that, “Ken was more keen on segregation than Boris”, but in most respects he believes there has been more continuity than radical change in transport policy:

**“Look at the names on our board prior to and after Boris’s election. Some of the names are the same. He was bound to get rid of Ken’s political lieutenants [including Wetzel] but interestingly, he didn’t sack the two trade unionists on the board... Boris, to his credit, has not changed the bus network... [Conservative Board member] Stephen Norris came back with a vengeance in 2008, saying it was inefficient, cost too much money; we ought to cut things, change things. We got a report written by KPMG who said it was well planned; it did what was asked of it and Boris buried it.”**<sup>351</sup>

Livingstone criticizes Johnson for abandoning many of his investment projects. Although London fared better than most of the country it was not immune to the financial downturn. Hendy’s view is:

**“If Ken had won in 2012, he wouldn’t have been able to put the fares up so much and I suspect we wouldn’t have done so much investment.”**

Many of the largest investment projects under way will increase capacity on the underground. Even as bus use was soaring, the underground increased its passenger miles by 14 per cent during Livingstone’s tenure.<sup>352</sup> By the late 2000s, many stations and some sections of the network had reached their capacity, with entry to stations sometimes closing at peak times.

Towards the end of Livingstone’s time, TfL took over several poorly used rail lines in north London, creating the London Overground. The policy of upgrading and expansion has continued under Johnson, with substantial increases in patronage – the original north London lines more than doubled passenger numbers in the first four years of TfL operation.<sup>353</sup> Hendy would like TfL to take over more of the suburban rail lines, particularly in south-east London, which is not served by the tube. Resistance from Kent county council has prevented this so far.

## Explaining the changes in London's travel patterns

Ben Plowden, TfL's Director of Strategy and Planning, is one of the new generation of senior managers at TfL. He has been promoted since I last met him and talks with conviction about the "world class" organization he represents. How does he explain the modal shift achieved in London since TfL took over? His answer is carefully phrased:

**"There is a helpful mix of politics, provision and attitude...the first mayor of London had a very explicit agenda to encourage and enable people to use their car less...the second mayor has sought to differentiate himself in being more balanced between modes but has not engaged in a major programme of road building. There has been a clear political commitment to supporting sustainable travel, in Boris's case particularly (though not exclusively) the bike. Secondly, the physical and transport choice environment makes it easier for people who could afford a car not to do so..."**

He speculates about demographic changes in the capital – a young population, people moving from countries with less of a car culture – and adds that institutional arrangements are fundamental. TfL has control or influence over all forms of transport in London, and the mayor also controls strategic planning. So what difference does that make in practice?

**"If the tube goes down [we can] tell people in real time about their alternative options. How is Crossrail going to connect along its route? What cycle parking should we put at Euston if HS2 goes there? How do you connect buses at local town centres to the increasingly used Overground network? Those are questions which most transport authorities can't even ask because they don't own the answer [but TfL can, because of the breadth of its powers]."**

Like Hendy, Plowden stresses the positive work of TfL in changing London's travel patterns. But how much of the change is due to deliberate policy, and how much of it would have happened anyway? A key issue is capacity, in terms of roads to carry vehicles and in terms of parking space. As with many other transport issues, indirect or unintended effects may be at least as important as intentions. London is Britain's second densest city, after Portsmouth. Its population, and density, rose by a quarter between 1988 and 2013 (see Figure 14.4). The rise was gradual at first but began to accelerate from the late 1990s. At the same time, the capacity of London's roads was

declining. TfL estimates the capacity of its road network by looking at the volume and speed of traffic. For any given volume, falling speeds indicate a fall in capacity. It is a rough and ready method but gives a clear picture of the direction of change. In central London, road capacity fell by a third between 1992 and 2009. The falls for inner and outer London were 15 per cent and 5 per cent respectively.<sup>354</sup> Plowden explains:

**“Over the past 20 years, many local incremental changes have been made to the network, almost all improving the value of places and giving priority to modes other than the private car, so pedestrian crossings outside schools, bus lanes, cycle lanes, road safety improvements, public spaces... Local communities have got these small-scale, sometimes large-scale improvements to the highway environment.”**

All of which has reduced the capacity of the network to carry traffic. Parking has been another area of major change. London was the first British city to introduce parking controls from the late 1950s. The process accelerated during the late 1990s, with the spread of controlled parking zones, which now cover most of inner London. Estimates of total parking capacity are difficult to obtain, but one study estimated that uncontrolled on-street parking fell by 5 per cent between 2001 and 2010 across London, with the decline in inner-London boroughs ranging up to 44 per cent (in Islington).<sup>355</sup> As the controlled parking zones spread, several inner-London boroughs have introduced car-free housing policies. The impact of these policies was limited at first, but has been growing over time.

The trends in car ownership (Figure 14.7) have been dramatic. At the time of the 2001 census, car ownership in London had, surprisingly, risen to around the national average. Over the next decade it fell by 27 per cent – more in inner London, where only 39 per cent of households had access to a car by 2011.

Apart from population density, demographic changes offer no clear explanation for these trends. The proportion of people in employment and people with children, both of whom tend to own more cars, increased over those 20 years. On the other hand, there were more young people, who own fewer cars, and fewer homeowners, who own more. There are some interesting differences in the travel patterns of ethnic groups: the ‘white British’ group own more cars and drive the most, partly because more of them live in the suburbs.<sup>356</sup> Whether the changing ethnic composition of London has contributed to falling traffic levels is an interesting question which remains to be studied.

A few years ago, I did some research into households without cars in Bloomsbury and King’s Cross – two areas with particularly low car ownership. When asked why

**Figure 14.7** Cars per 1,000 population in London – from the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses<sup>357</sup>



they did not own a car, cost was not the main reason: most could afford one if necessary. The most common reason, cited by just under half, was “I have no need for a car”. Lack of parking was rarely the main reason, but was a secondary reason for just over a third of them.<sup>358</sup>

How much difference the congestion charge made is difficult to assess. The last monitoring report showed traffic volumes 16 per cent lower than 2002. The composition of this traffic had changed: cars had fallen by 36 per cent, vans by 13 per cent and lorries by 5 per cent, partly replaced by more buses, taxis, bicycles and motorcycles.<sup>359</sup> Although traffic volumes have fallen, initial reductions in congestion were not maintained. One study estimated that road capacity fell by 20 per cent between 2004 and 2008.<sup>360</sup> The pedestrian improvements mentioned by Plowden are a big part of the reason for this.

Another study argued that the congestion had little impact on modal shift, most of which came from improvements to bus services. It also pointed out that Birmingham achieved similar traffic reductions in its city centre without a congestion charge (though the increase in Birmingham’s population has not been so rapid).<sup>361</sup> Traffic in London’s congestion charge zone is a very small proportion of the total, so its direct impact on London as a whole was never going to be very great.



## The cost of transport in London

The ‘tried and tested’ technology chosen for the London congestion charge was expensive to operate. In the early years the net revenue made very little contribution to the expensive subsidized buses, but that has gradually changed, as costs have been controlled, and bus fares raised. By 2012-13, the congestion charge was contributing over half the cost of subsidizing London’s buses.<sup>362</sup> As in Freiburg, increasing subsidies from 2002 onwards helped to stimulate bus use, which continued to rise as the subsidies were reduced. Between 2007-8 and 2012-13, the cost of subsidizing London’s buses fell by nearly a half.<sup>363</sup>

Notwithstanding those economies, in 2012, London was still spending over twice as much per person as the other English regions on both capital transport projects and subsidies to running costs. In response to critics in the north, a parliamentary scrutiny committee pointed out that most of this money is spent by local authorities or other public bodies – not central government.<sup>364</sup> This is not a particularly convincing rebuttal. The difference in local authority spending reflects a more generous central government settlement for TfL than for local authorities or transport authorities in other cities. London’s unified political structure is clearly a major advantage. The moves towards combined authorities (controlling highways and some other powers as well as public transport) in some of the northern conurbations is a step in the right direction, although they will still lack the regional planning powers available to the mayor of London.

Regulation of buses and control over suburban rail networks are other key advantages that London has. Livingstone believes deregulation would be impossible in London: apart from the effects of “a crap service” on the functioning of the city “there isn’t the room on our roads for competing buses”. Hendy put it rather ironically as follows:

**“Any city in Britain can have the system in London, if it’ll pay for it... I’ve run bus services in provincial Britain; I can run them very successfully. You put the peak fares up, price people off so you haven’t got a big vehicle requirement. It’s economical to run, works a treat. What it doesn’t do is take everybody to work at cheaper fares. Now if that matters to you as a city, you can do something about it.”**

All of this presupposes the ability to raise money and overcome the opposition of vested interests like those described in Chapter 5. Central government has devolved more power to raise money for capital projects, but has tightened its grip on current spending. Hendy cites Manchester as a city which has used the system to its advantage to build a large and growing tram network. This has undoubtedly benefited



Manchester, but as we saw in Chapter 5, has made little difference to overall patterns of travel in Manchester.

Both Hendy and Livingstone emphasize the importance of business attitudes. Unlike many other cities, business leaders in London understand that accommodating everyone who wants to drive is impossible, and supporting alternatives is essential.

## Observations and conclusions

As in Lyon, the big investments in public transport in London have been relatively expensive. Although the early investment in buses is now allowing subsidies to be reduced, in the future a more determined strategy to promote cycling could prove more cost-effective. It is sometimes argued that cycling can only make a big contribution in smaller cities. The cities with the highest rates of cycling are all much smaller than London, but this may be at least partly coincidental: the European countries with the highest proportion of cycling don't have any cities as big as London. Cycling in Tokyo accounts for 14 per cent of journeys compared to 2 per cent in London.<sup>365</sup> Hackney, the London borough with the highest rate of cycling, has made filtered permeability a guiding principle, providing separation by closing minor roads to through traffic.<sup>366</sup> The 2013 policy document, *The mayor's vision for cycling* promises a break with the past. Plowden says the funding for implementation is secure and they are serious about making it happen. Will the difficult decisions that are necessary to deliver this vision be taken or fudged? Time will tell.

Time will also tell whether a new roads strategy will deliver improvements to the public realm or consolidate the grip of motor traffic on the city. The aim of the Roads Task Force was to reconcile essential movements with pressure to improve the pedestrian and cycling environment. The approach of its report seems to hark towards Buchanan, with some roads designed to move vehicles as easily as possible, and others, like Covent Garden or the City of London, to create "a world class public realm".<sup>367</sup>

Despite the incremental pedestrian improvements, walking around London still doesn't feel as pleasant as in many continental cities (and some areas still suffer from dangerously bad air quality<sup>368</sup>). Hendy says that's inevitable in a larger city, and there may be some truth in that. But strolling along the newly pedestrianized bank of the Seine in Paris a few months later (Figure 14.8) reminded me of Livingstone's unfulfilled plans for Westminster Embankment (Figure 14.9).

In the years since Christian Wolmar wrote about the threat to the Travelcard, he has become one of the UK's leading transport writers. His books lift the lid on the failings of privatized rail and deregulated buses. In 2013, he joined the competition



**Figure 14.8** Pedestrianized bank of the Seine in Paris



**Figure 14.9** Westminster Embankment

to be selected as the Labour candidate for the 2016 mayoral election. If elected, he explained, he would set out a long-term vision for transport and planning. For inner London, the strategy would reduce vehicle movements, “reclaim road space in order to create a better environment” and encourage walking and cycling. In outer London, he would intensify around suburban centres and flatten public transport fares “so those who are forced to live further out aren’t penalized”. It sounded like a programme to continue where Livingstone left off.

Most politicians fall foul of the media at some point, but those who buck the political trend can expect no mercy. Livingstone’s autobiography recounts a litany of persecution by sections of the media. He has been accused of everything from insanity to supporting terrorism. Allegations of corruption against one of his political advisers, which proved unfounded, contributed to Livingstone’s downfall in 2008. Unlike the other interviewees, he doesn’t want to see a draft of this chapter: nothing I would write about him could be any worse. I ask him if the attacks ever “get to him” and he smiles: “Not really – in many other countries I would have been killed.”