E. & T.V.R. Response to
Transport Decarbonization Plan: call for ideas

Q11. What do you think government should be doing to reduce the greenhouse gases that are produced from [the different forms of transport?]:

Cars

Out of exasperation with the rising cost of rail electrification, rightly always seen as the apogee of a powered transport system, government has effectively fallen to electrifying road vehicles, as if this were a simple answer. But replacing 30-million oil-powered vehicles with battery-electric equivalents would unleash possibly worse environmental damage overall and would do nothing to relieve traffic congestion and a host of other problems caused by the general over-dependence on motorized road transport. Vastly reducing the number of cars is needed, not just to curb greenhouse gases, but to deal with other environmental degradations, not least of which is the extravagant consumption of materials.

Buses and coaches

If British transport had developed correctly and naturally, buses and coaches would only be used beyond the extent of the rail and tram networks, both of which, disastrously, have been greatly reduced thanks to government pandering to road transport interests, who have had to bear no responsibility for their actions. Existing technology can be used to rebuild the rail and tramway systems, the only forms of transport able to use power directly from the generator, and buses of the type that are already on the road can fill the gaps. Express coaches should run as the stages once did, giving up their routes as the railways were built; they should not compete with trains over long distances.

Vans and lorries

When half of all freight traffic was carried by rail and parcels were delivered by Royal Mail or the railway's "universal service," there were not the heavy lorries and the explosion of frantically-driven vans seen today. In a properly developed transport system, a great many of the lorries and vans on the road now would not be needed. Further reductions could be achieved by the use of carrier cycles, light battery-electric vans, pedestrian floats and even buses and trams. There should be more-local distribution hubs and the bulk of movement between centres should be concentrated on rail. Just as with cars, finding a way to decarbonize the existing establishment of transport is mistaken, when what is needed is a complete restructure.

Passenger rail

What should have commenced, at the latest, in the 1930s and been completed in the 1970s, electrification of the rail network, would have provided a spinal transport system that could have run on any fuel and positioned the country well to face, or perhaps avoid, environmental challenges like the one in view. Nothing represents government failure more than the crackpot "bi-mode" train, which is sure to be used as an excuse to curtail electrifying the network. Ultimately, the least damaging and best form of passenger transport over land is the electric train.

Aviation

Air travel by jet aircraft is by nature an environmental obscenity. It grew rapidly from being the preserve of the wealthy few to being buses in the sky for the masses, made possible only by cheap and abundant oil. Domestic flying overland and flying freight could cease immediately in all but a few areas, with passengers and cargoes transferred to systems that can readily be decarbonized. So-called "long-haul" flying must return to a level that is too small to be of significance.

Freight

Almost all freight should be grounded or afloat. Of that which is taken overland, as much as possible should be carried by the system which can draw electricity straight from the grid. One of the best ways to decarbonize freight transport, without any use of technology, is to reduce the amount of movement. A return to more-local manufacture and distribution would go a long way towards reducing freight miles.

Maritime

Ships use vast quantities of oil but the cost of transporting consumer goods half way around the world is a minimal part of prices in the shops. *Wingsails*, a British invention never properly developed, could reduce ships' fuel consumption a little. What really should be asked is why this country, rich in raw materials and inventiveness, and with a workforce which cries out to be upskilled or reskilled, does not produce so much more for itself, instead of importing Far-Eastern tat in such quantities that the shipping containers are treated as throwaway packaging. As with all of these questions, looking at tinkering with the technology often misses another solution.

Other transport

Other transport instead of other fuels ought to be the focus of attention. Simply changing the way cars are powered, for instance, ignores the well-proven technology of the guided systems and their other strengths. A vehicle which has to carry around a battery—like an electric train that is burdened with diesel engines and fuel—will always be at a disadvantage, and although batteries may get lighter and more efficient, they will probably get dirtier and risk being worse environmentally than carbon emissions are now.

Q12. What, if any changes to reduce the greenhouse gases produced by your local transport would you like to see made?

In a rural area, the worst examples of transport choices will often be seen. With scant public transport, most people are happily wedded to their cars and drive them further and more than town dwellers, often frivolously and nonsensically. Short trips within or between villages are routinely made by car, while walking and cycling are generally perceived to be unsafe, especially for children. Cars have got bigger and there are more of them. One immediate change that could be made to reduce emissions would be the punitive taxation of cars that are larger than are really needed.

Q13. What, if any, examples of good transport initiatives in your local area do you have (with a particular focus on low or zero emission initiatives)?

A cycle rickshaw service started some years ago but fell foul of licensing laws. There is electric bike hire at points around the city.

Q14. What changes would you like to see that will help to reduce the greenhouse gases produced from longer journeys?

The grounding of aircraft and the transfer of passengers and freight from air and road to much more efficient rail transport.

If passengers bound for Phuket were paraded past the swimming pool of kerosene that their jet aircraft needed for its flight, it is doubtful whether many would be put off their journeys because of the sudden realization that a finite resource was being used profligately, so it is hard to imagine others' choices being influenced by "emissions labelling." Nevertheless, it ought to be made generally known which are the most benign and which the most damaging modes of transport, so that people understand the need for a transition.

Purchasing goods

Q15. What action do you think government should take to reduce the greenhouse gases produced from the:

Distribution of goods across the country?

Cheap oil has made possible methods of supply and distribution which are unsustainable in the long run. Modern systems mostly depend on heavy lorries making "just-in-time" deliveries over increasing distances. In future, there must be much more local production and an end to goods and foodstuffs being carted around in great circles, or back and forth between depots. Emissions could be reduced, even in the short term, by making the rail system fit to take up the role it had before as general carrier.

Delivery of goods to shops or residences?

Battery-electric vehicles, from carrier cycles up to compact articulated lorries, are well suited to collecting and delivering, and could radiate from stations and other hubs along city streets and into outlying areas at relatively low speeds with little environmental impact.

Final comments

Q18. What other views do you have on how to decarbonise the UK transport network?

As with electricity generation and food supply, it should first be established what is actually needed. If waste were eliminated and efficiency concentrated upon, the question would remain: Where and how shall they be obtained?

Cheap oil is responsible for setting the whole world in motion, with the result that people and goods move under power far more than is good or necessary.

If there is to be a revolution in transport provision, tackling pollution on its own and attempting to perpetuate at all costs the great car economy is the wrong approach: far more needs to be done to reduce the need to travel and for goods to be moved.

Zonal planning, which has caused excessive movement, or designed-in unnecessary movement, through such abominations as out-of-town shopping centres and sprawling housing estates, should revert to the high-density mix that had evolved before the car made mobility a curse. Homes with space for two cars, and offices and works with enormous car parks, make everywhere bigger and more dependent on road motor transport.

As many people as possible should be absorbed by public—or "shared"—transport, and this should take more forms than it does now and be less regimented.

Q19. Any other comments

The motorist's demands that he drive wherever and whenever he wants, as far and as often as he likes, in this crowded island; that he park his car in narrow streets in ancient towns and cities, and in the most exquisite countryside; that all else get out of his way; that enough road space materialize, as if by magic, to meet his and many million others' needs; these demands, often dictated by his actions, are an absurdity.

Yet it is this demanded "freedom" that government has spent a hundred years facilitating at every turn; bowing slavishly to vested interests; believing it to be the only path to economic growth; being fearful of disregarding the public's childlike clamour; and of course happily milking the tax cow. Even as government sets about decarbonizing transport, the road construction programme does not falter, as if the future can hold only more of the same, but battery powered.

The modes that today are needed are the ones that over the same period were allowed to wither, often as a price to be paid for a motoring utopia. Buses and trams were lost; walking and cycling became less popular and more hazardous. The greatest damage of all was done to the railway system, which, if it had been allowed to make the difficult metamorphosis from the steam age, promised to become a vast, modern network operating in its own reservation, able to move large numbers of passengers and great quantities of goods in all directions, by night and day, under all conditions. It was one of the country's greatest assets—a British birthright—which could have set the whole course of transport development.

Instead of making this possible, the railway was undermined and, in great part, destroyed, by continual acts of sabotage; a quarter-century of chaotic denationalization, spent rediscovering that unified railways work best, is just one example; the advice this year to "use your car, not public transport" could be the latest.

Never with any real vigour were the disbenefits of private motoring and trucking tackled. Those who chose, or had no choice but, to walk or cycle or use public transport have been hugely disadvantaged. Air pollution is reckoned to kill as many per year as the plague has done this year, and with less discrimination; the great health timebomb, obesity, brought on by inactive lifestyles, will probably kill more in time, yet these crises do not cause stoppages.

A pair of boots; a humble bicycle; an omnibus; a lightweight van; a tramcar; a tub on a man-made waterway; a pair of rails to make the energy go further and a wire above to collect juice made from wind and sunshine; they are all staring at the Department for Transport, but the department whose crowning creation is the utterly hellish road system asks the public how to decarbonize transport.