



Stop dithering – we have to fix London’s big jam

Article by Baroness Jo Valentine, a version of which appeared in the Evening Standard on 25 April 2008

An all-too-familiar dilemma. My office is in Haymarket and I had a meeting by St Paul's: should I allow an hour and risk wasting 20 minutes outside in the rain, having arrived too early? Or allow half an hour and risk being an embarrassing 20 minutes late? I settled for leaving early. Or then there was my bus journey along Oxford Street, from Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch the other day: less than two miles, but more than 25 tedious minutes. Our city is in gridlock - and it exasperates me.

Many of us feel the same way. An Ipsos MORI survey recently asked Londoners what descriptions best characterised London in 2008. Those whose glass is half full said modern (37 per cent), tolerant (35 per cent) or thriving (34 per cent); some of the more pessimistic said dangerous (39 per cent) or deteriorating (29 per cent). But fully 60 per cent of those surveyed chose "congested": when they think of their home city, they envisage clutch-burning queues of near-stationary traffic.

Back in the 1950s when impenetrable, sulphur-laden smog was a regular feature of our parents' autumns and winters, London was known as the 'Big Smoke'. The Mori survey points to a potential new moniker for the capital - the 'Big Jam'. So Londoners might expect their leaders - national government, the Mayor, TfL, the boroughs - to be working night and day to un-jam the capital's streets. They're not.

And we might have expected it to be the top item in the race between Ken and Boris to be Mayor. But it isn't.

It's not that the front-runners don't know about the problem. Boris says he'll "reform" congestion charging and let Kensington voters choose whether to abolish the Western extension. He'll stop the £25 charge for gas guzzlers too, and let drivers pay the charge 'on account' rather than risking a fine. But that isn't going to fix congestion.

Ken says he'll let smaller band A and B cars into the zone for nothing. That isn't going to fix the problem either.

They are both fiddling at the edges. They could start by showing us that they understand just how bad congestion is for London.

Congestion is bad for business - an hour in the car, in the back of a black cab or on the bus is an hour not at the desk, and not as productive. It's bad for our wallets - the time our clothes, fresh food and even newspapers spend crawling through the traffic to the shops is reflected in the prices we pay for them. And it's bad for our health - aside from the stress of never knowing whether we'll get to the office or the school gates on time, exhaust gases from slow moving traffic don't exactly promote eternal youth.

It doesn't serve our international competitiveness. Firms who make hundreds of Londoners redundant when they ship out of London to Zurich or Dublin aren't going for the yodelling or the Guinness. They may be going for the favourable tax environment. Or they may just be trying to escape London's congested streets.

Congestion's bad for the environment too. Despite cars and lorries becoming more economical and less polluting, even the latest vehicles emit three or four times more CO₂ and other emissions at stop-start speeds of four miles an hour than they do at 12 or 15 miles per hour.

Don't get me wrong – it's a busy city and we are not looking for six-lane highways, or 30 miles per hour average speeds. Instantaneous travel in a global city is the stuff of science-fiction. But we can do so much better than the current jams.

The first step has to be a Mayor who knows he needs to get a grip to prevent gridlock. It is not clear that any of the major candidates do realise that.

Step two should be a target for TfL, to reduce congestion on London's main routes, year on year. It's crazy that there isn't one now.

And step three should be a new anti-congestion supremo in TfL who has the Mayor's authority to knock heads together to secure improvement.

The central policy the candidates are quibbling over is the congestion charge. The c-charge seems to be the only tool in TfL's kit, and it seems to have limited the candidates' thinking. At best, it only tackles congestion on a fraction of London routes. And while traffic speeds in the central zone are slower now than in 2003, before the c-charge was introduced, that's despite there being 20 per cent fewer vehicles entering the zone. Even if we don't change the way the c-charge works, we urgently need to look at other parts of the puzzle.

In 2008 there are more roadworks, more buses and longer pedestrian phases at the lights. But Transport for London manages the buses - and can determine traffic light phasing and junction design on most of London's main roads.

We are told that public transport is part of the solution to congested streets. But even at the busiest times, a bus on Oxford Street has an average of 13 on board. And yet 330 buses per hour travel along Oxford Street. Pedestrians attempting to cross from River Island to John Lewis resemble the Israelites waiting for a Moses to part the Red Sea. That many near-empty buses are adding to congestion, not solving it.

Traffic lights are another obvious focus. What sort of traffic planning requires five changes of traffic lights on the 300 yards from the ICA on the Mall through Trafalgar Square? My black cab driver had a few choice words to say about that recently.

And am I the only cyclist who sits at red lights while nothing crosses in any direction? It's hard to see why pedestrian phases at traffic lights have to be so long between every change.

Encouraging cycling is a means to reduce congestion, promote healthier living, and reduce emissions - so why doesn't TfL insist that vans, buses and parked cars keep out of cycle lanes with the same vigour it fines those who forget to pay congestion charge?

Some solutions will require sophisticated planning from technically qualified people. We could pilot road pricing schemes at selected hotspots.

We could have breakdown vehicles on standby on critical routes. But other solutions are simple. A couple of months ago TfL finally ordered some bolt-on covers to go on holes in the road when there's no-one working in the hole, letting traffic drive over the top. The idea arose in a London First business brainstorm, over a year ago.

So whoever is in the job next month can give me a call about congestion. Working with the best business minds, we have already identified some good ideas for him to look at. Together we can find solutions. And surely there must be plenty of votes in that.

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