



When a high carbon footprint becomes as socially unacceptable as smoking

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the main man-made contributor to climate change.

Transport – particularly road transport – is a major source of CO₂ emissions. The transport sector accounts for approximately 30 per cent of global CO₂ emissions.

Peter Wilkinson, managing director of First Class Partnerships, considers the issues



There has been a ten-fold increase in road traffic from around 50 billion vehicle kilometers per year in the early 1950s to over 500 billion in 2006. Road traffic now makes up 84 per cent of all passenger travel and 82 per cent of freight in the UK. Some 3500 kilometres of motorway have been built since 1959 (we all know what has happened to rail kilometres) growth in road traffic is forecast to continue, with cars, vans and HGVs projected to grow by a further 30 per cent by 2025

But the mere mention of knocking down houses or buildings to build new rail routes into new city-centre stations, sends shivers down spines.

Airports grow ever larger, accommodating ever-increasing fleets of aircraft – three times more passengers use air travel now than in 1980. Recently this growth has been unconstrained by airport capacity; the demand for air travel has been forecast by the Department for Transport

(DfT) to continue growing at a similar rate until 2030, rising from 228 million passengers per annum in 2005 to 495 million in 2030.

We now need a transport planning framework that takes into account the new realities of climate change and the role that oil prices, societal mobility and transport has to play. Developing such a framework has to be driven hard by operating realities and economic certainties rather than dogma or politics. The lesson from many national networks worldwide is that politically driven answers are rarely the right ones.

Two essential measures need to be integrated into policy and decision-making on transport as soon as possible:

- Firstly, there needs to be a level playing field for modes of transport. The ‘polluter pays principle’ was adopted by the 1992 Rio Declaration, but today’s prices are far from reflecting the external costs of the transport market. According to a 2004 study (IWW/INFRAS 2004), the external

costs (mostly comprising air and noise pollution, accident costs, climate change) amount to just over seven per cent of the GDP of 17 European countries. In total, the road sector is responsible for over 80 per cent of external cost damage, the aviation sector for nearly 15 per cent, and the railways for just under two per cent.

- Secondly, appropriate policies to exploit the railways’ CO₂ reduction potential for society must include investments in infrastructure in both developing and developed countries. A robust rail system will be crucial to cope with the current population growth and urban area expansion, and the resulting increase in travel and mobility demands. By establishing a basic infrastructure, the railways can become a cornerstone, linking urban hubs as well as suburban conglomerations for passengers, for the benefit and mobility of a broader population.

The golden age of travel has gone until we can find a sustainable way to do it again. The terrifying thing is that China and India have currently less than five cars per 100 head of population, the US has around 90 and the UK 50. If they go through fossil-fuelled cars the way the West did, we are all doomed, even if the science is only half right.

As well as being an answer to the problem of climate change, railways offer efficient transport built on social equity, low environmental impact and positive economic growth, resulting in more sustainable mobility and an improved quality of life.

Hard choices are going to have to be made and the science of ‘the business case’ is going to have to include new metrics such as carbon offset and the real cost-benefits of rail’s environmental impact properly compared with all modes. Hopefully we won’t have to wait until a high carbon footprint becomes as socially unacceptable as smoking to bring change to planning policy; because by then, it might all be too late. ■

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