

Road Sickness

“The typical American male devotes more than 1,600 hours a year to his car. He sits in it while it goes and while it stands idling. He parks it and searches for it. He earns the money to put down on it and to meet the monthly instalments. He works to pay for gasoline, tolls, insurance, taxes, and tickets. He spends four of his sixteen waking hours on the road or gathering his resources for it. And this figure does not take into account the time consumed by other activities dictated by transport: time spent in hospitals, traffic courts, and garages; or time spent watching automobile commercials. The model American puts in 1600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles per hour.”

So wrote Ivan Illich in 1973. In 2007, Lynn Sloman did similar calculations for the UK and concluded that the average British car-owner put in 1300 hours a year to keeping a car on the road. At a typical annual mileage of 16,000 km, this gives an average speed in real terms of about 13km per hour, the same as a gentle cycling speed.

Irish road transport in its current configuration has little future. In Ireland it accounts for around one-quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, and swallows up about 5 million tonnes of imported oil per annum – equivalent to 27 percent of Ireland’s total energy requirements.

There is little to suggest that the massive expenditure on roads in recent years has achieved the stated aim of reducing journey times. Any increase in average speeds on long distances is more than offset by the extra time spent grid locked in town centres and their approaches.

Part of the problem of course is that there are more of us using the road system, and we use it more frequently and to travel greater distances. So traffic density has continued to increase. Unfortunately, this has impacted in a negative way on public transport systems too. The bus from Westport to Dublin takes longer than it did 20 years ago, and it is not exceptional for the last hour of the journey to be spent almost stationary in Dublin traffic.

The location of the capital’s main bus station on a traffic island eternally surrounded by congestion does not help.

The penalties that road congestion imposes on public transport are by no means limited to buses, as to catch a train one must somehow reach a railway station.

Also, it is important to recognise that the poor public transport infrastructure in Ireland is no accident but the result of poor policy and management decisions spanning many decades.

Car Culture

Some of the reasons for the popularity of the car are cultural too. Witness the high proportion of young men fresh out of school who simply must have a car. The fact that insurance alone might cost the equivalent of several months disposal income, is little deterrent. There is an implied coolness about car ownership, more so if the vehicle in question has a customised exhaust, spoilers, flashing LEDs, go-faster stripes and a high-decibel sound system.

Vehicle fashion accessories are no means confined to the boy racers. SUV owners can choose from a range of optional extras ranging from bull bars to deal with real or imaginary urban steers, blackened windows for *attitude*, multiple headlights to burn other road users off the highway and even fake spray-on mud to give the impression the vehicle might be used for something other than the weekly shopping trip and taxiing the children to school.

Among the unstated ‘benefits’ of car ownership is the avoidance of other members of the travelling public. There is an apparent appeal in the prospect of

sitting stationary in traffic in one’s own personal vehicle compared to waiting at a bus station for the next onward connection home.

In fairness however, Ireland doesn’t have a bus system, just buses. The increasing number of people using buses in Dublin is an indicator of how bad things must be on the streets, at a time when car ownership per capita has never been higher.

Bus Blues

For bus culture to appeal to Irish the car owner, it must offer something more. It must be clean, efficient and reliable and the service must be regular. It must be safe too, so that passengers alighting from nighttime services do not have to worry whether they will make it home without being mugged or sexually assaulted.

Bus stops should be a place where one can shelter from the weather and where the older passenger can sit down if necessary. Main bus terminuses need to have toilets, a shop, a decent food outlet and a safe place to leave luggage. Most importantly of all, bus stations should be comfortable places to spend time. This is not a pipe dream: most towns in continental Europe boast comfortable, safe, and well-serviced bus stations.

Heading out of Dublin, the bus network soon peters out. By the time one gets



to the peripheral parts of Ireland, the service may be reduced to a few buses a week to the nearest town, and from there a three-times-a-day service to a larger town or the capital.

The service is not intended to get people to work, and even if by some miracle it did, it would certainly not get them home.

In Mayo, for example, it is not possible for workers commute between any of the three principle towns by bus, nor from any of them to nearby Galway city. Either the first bus leaves too late, or the last one too early. The so called 'express' service to Dublin does a magical mystery tour round parts of Mayo yet to be discovered by Ordnance Survey, and on a good day might make the capital in about five-and-a-half hours. We might laugh at the complete inadequacy of it all, but it is no surprise that most people prefer to use a car.

Freight Futures

According to SEI data, road freight has more than tripled in the last 15 years, while rail freight has diminished almost to nothing. However, the fact that it takes far more energy to move goods by road than by rail raises serious questions about the sustainability of road freight.

Moving goods by road also clogs up the road network even more and contributes disproportionately to road wear and tear. Ultimately, transporting goods by road really only makes sense for local deliveries.

In spite of the tiny rail network – just 2000 km north and south compared to a primary road network three and a half times greater and a total road network of almost 200,000 km – the fact remains that over half of Ireland's total population live in or close to a town or city with an existing rail connection.

Further, the development of containerisation and a multi-tier system of delivery is perfect for the movement of goods by rail. At present a pallet of goods coming from England to the west of Ireland might be relayed through as many as three or four different road depots, with the last leg of the journey usually being undertaken by a local haulage company. All the other stages could be done by rail.



Unfortunately, few of Ireland's modern ports are designed or configured for the transportation of freight by rail. Some – Warrenpoint in Co. Down for example – are many miles from the nearest line, never mind a rail freight depot. Clearly, moving goods by rail is not going to happen unless there are some major infrastructural changes first.



Cycle mural Netherlands

Civilised Cycling

Cyclists are in many ways the invisible road users. They rarely feature in any official documents on sustainable transport and are typically excluded from future road infrastructure plans. This can partly be explained by the fact that unlike the multi-billion-euro car industry with its powerful lobby groups and slick publicity machinery, cyclists are just ordinary people with few resources to devote to fighting their corner.

Estimates indicate that the motor industry accounts for 15-20 percent of the €2 billion that was spent on advertising in Ireland in 2007. Even taking the lower figure, this amounts to some €300 million – enough to buy bicycles for most of the able bodied adult population and even throw in a few puncture-repair kits. However, the problem is not a shortage of bicycles, but a lack of infrastructure to support their use.

High up on the list of priorities are safe cycling routes. Cyclists should not have to share their personal space with fast-moving, heavy metal objects. In Holland, cyclists enjoy their own separate highway infrastructure between towns, and in most urban areas there are clear cycle routes that are not compromised by having to share with taxis, vans or buses. Even where this is not possible, cyclists enjoy much greater protection under law, and in accidents with motorists, the burden of guilt is on the latter unless proven otherwise.

Although the much lower per capita level of cycling in Ireland compared to countries like Holland and Denmark is sometimes blamed on Irish weather, the truth is that both Amsterdam and Rotterdam experience more rainfall per annum than Dublin, and Copenhagen isn't far behind. Both Germany and Switzerland have a vibrant cycling culture too.



Civilised cycling, the Netherlands

In all four countries, the falling popularity of cycling in the postwar decades was dramatically turned around. Freiburg, a German city the size of Cork, has a city centre bicycle station with parking for 1,000 bikes. It contains a shop, a cafe and a travel information centre. One quarter of all journeys made in Freiburg are by bike.

The success of these countries in reinventing the bicycle has much to do with its integration into everyday life. Cycling enjoys a positive image as a genteel leisurely activity that doesn't require fluorescent clothing, helmets and aggressive survival techniques.

Even in cities, people in their 70s still use bicycles. Careful thought is given to road junctions, and some streets give priority to cyclists. In Holland, this concept has been taken one step further with the *woonerf*, which literally translates as 'living yard' but may be visualised better as *neighbourhood space*. *Woonerven* (pl) are residential streets in which car speeds have been reduced to walking speeds and which contain a generous scattering of benches, flower beds and trees.

Pedestrian Power

Even further down the food chain in Ireland are the pedestrians, who sometimes have the ignominy of having *their* personal turf invaded by renegade cyclists, skateboarders and rollerbladers. Walking is barely classed as a means of transportation, though obviously it is.

When all else fails however, there is nothing to beat the power of the foot. Only one generation ago it was the norm to walk to school. Two generations ago, it was the only way to get there. In many rural areas, walking would still be a popular means of transportation were it not for the unpleasantness of sharing narrow roads with fast-moving vehicles.

Curing Car Sickness

In her classic book *Car Sick*, Lynn Sloman carefully charts the rise to dominance of the car in the UK over the last few decades. She points out that rather like smoking, there is massive collateral damage for the passive user. Among the less-obvious negative consequences of the increasing popularity of the car she lists the demise of local shops, produce and businesses once out-of-town supermarkets (accessible only by car) are built.

The increasing car ownership and apparent greater mobility gives the authorities the excuse to remove or downgrade local services such as hospitals, post offices and primary schools.

This is a terrible loss for car and non-car owners alike. When fossil fuel depletion finally reins in car use, it will be a double whammy: local infrastructures will no longer exist, and there will be no resources to reinstate them.

A study carried out by Werner Brög and his company Socialdata in three towns in England discovered that about 40 percent of car journeys didn't need to be done by car at all.

If all this seems very negative, Sloman documents some very imaginative and successful approaches to reducing car use in favour of more sustainable alternatives.

Within parts of the corporate sector, there have been some notable innovations. The pharmaceutical company Pfizer offered employees a small financial bonus for not driving to work, and with the money saved from not having to build a larger car park its workforce, was able to run a free shuttle bus. The company also helped set up a car-sharing data base and put money towards the building of new cycle paths between nearby towns.

The mobile phone company Orange achieved a truly remarkable two-thirds reduction in the rate of car use among its employees in Bristol thanks to a series of good incentives which included

CAR SICK

Solutions for our Car-addicted Culture



Car Sick (pub. Green Books) is available from the Sustainability Institute price €16.50 including postage.

the provision of showers and lockers for those cycling to work and a regular shuttle bus.

As car-parking space was limited, they introduced a system of points for employees based on their need to use a car to get to work, factoring in things like child care responsibilities and the availability of transport alternatives. Those who did not qualify for a parking space received an extra travel allowance.

This type of 'carrot-based' strategy should be employed by local and national authorities in tandem with the more conventional 'stick' approach of vehicle taxes and congestion charges. Ultimately, the message that car use at current levels is both unsustainable and socially undesirable needs to be supported by an alternative transport infrastructure that is rewarding to use.

- by *Andy Wilson*

Suggested Carrots and Sticks

Carrots

Generous tax incentives for businesses that encourage employees not to use cars

Financial rewards for public employees who do not travel to work by car

An expanded and efficient rail network

Car- and bus-free lanes for cyclists

Pavements along all roads linking out-of-town housing developments with town shops and services

Bicycle bays on all trains and long-distance buses and adequate parking facilities for bicycles at stations

Woonerf-like areas in town centres

Weather-proof waiting areas at bus stops

Clean, safe, well-serviced bus stations with supporting infrastructure

Daytime shuttle-bus services along busy national roads

Sticks

Car-parking permits allocated on the basis of need.

Substantially increased town parking charges for non permit holders

Increased taxes on vehicle fuel (penalises car use over car ownership – an important distinction)

Not awarding travel expenses for work-related journeys that are taken by car when a viable alternative exists.