

## **Darling, meet the 800 pound gorilla!**

Published in *Local Transport Today*, 26 August 2004)

The 800 pound gorilla, for those who have not met him, is the large beast squatting in the corner of the fashionable cocktail party. Everyone can see him. He makes everyone nervous. He has a voracious appetite and disgusting excretory habits. He smashes furniture and crockery every time he moves. But no one has the nerve to ask him to leave. So everyone witters on distractedly about matters of little consequence, hoping not to antagonize him. He is geriatric; he has been attending transport policy-maker's cocktail parties for the 35 years in which I have been observing such events - and he was middle-aged when I first met him. His name is TRAFFIC GROWTH.

Much thought has gone into his diet. Fears about an impending shortage of his favourite tipple, oil, are provoking an anxious hunt for alternatives, thus far with little success. Vets and genetic scientists have been summoned to tinker with his metabolism in hopes of making it more efficient, thereby permitting him to continue to grow at a rate faster than the growth of his consumption, and nappies (catalytic converters) have been devised to capture some of his more unpleasant excretions. Forecasters are employed to predict how much space he will need, and engineers to provide it. Because of his growing demand for space the party has been forced out of its urban salon and become a suburban garden party. Ecological advisers have been employed to devise ways to prevent him trampling "environmentally sensitive" parts of the garden, but they have failed to find sufficient insensitive areas to satisfy his growing demands.

In 1997 New Labour broke with the longstanding bi-partisan tradition of dealing with the beast by a policy of studied indifference. On 6 June, shortly after coming into government, John Prescott, Labour's biggest, most pugnacious beast, suddenly noticed him and announced that he was going to take him on. "I will have failed", he proclaimed, "if in five years' time there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car. It's a tall order, but I urge you to hold me to it."

For four years he squared up to the Gorilla and made faces at him, during which time the nation's motor vehicle population increased by 2.8 million. 2001, the year in which Prescott backed away from the confrontation, set a record for new motor vehicle sales in Britain - 3,137,700 were sold. The following year surpassed this record with 3,229,400. 2003 produced yet another record - 3,231,900. The forecast for 2004, at the time of writing, is a number of a similar size - another record or nearly so.

Allowing for the scrapping of old vehicles, the annual increase over these last four years in Britain's motor vehicle population has been over 800,000. Allowing 20 feet for each of these vehicles (the distance between parking meters) we can estimate the size of the parking space they demand - each year the equivalent of a new car park stretching from London to Edinburgh more than nine lanes wide was required to provide one parking space for each of these extra vehicles. Of course the owners of these vehicles hope to use them to go somewhere, and hope to find parking places at their destinations. And they also hope to travel on roads relatively free of congestion.

So the annual growth in “demand” for more road and parking space considerably exceeds what would be provided by a nine-lane London to Edinburgh motorway.

Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, new in the job and desperate to placate the Gorilla aroused by Prescott, has run up a White Flag – sorry, White Paper. In it he notes that as “people become better off they can afford to travel further and more often.” He adds “the long term trends in travel are evident to all. We cannot build our way out of the problems we face on our road networks. And doing nothing is not an option.” And so? ..... “Government will lead the debate on road pricing.”

He kicks off this debate with a *Feasibility Study of Road Pricing in the UK*, published on the same day as his White Paper. The study concludes that most of the costs associated with TRAFFIC GROWTH “are caused by congestion.” Hence “road pricing” becomes “congestion charging” – the objective of which is to price traffic off the most congested parts of the nation’s road network at the busiest times of day. There is no mention in either the White Paper or the road pricing study of measures to stem the growth in the number of motor vehicles. Indeed Prescott has frequently advocated an *increase* in car ownership, while hoping piously that their owners will leave them in the garage more often. While the nation waited in vain for news of his garage building programme, the annual number of vehicle-kilometers traveled on Britain’s roads increased by more than 20 billion.

So Darling’s big idea – but, of course, not for his term of office – is a high-tech congestion charging scheme to push TRAFFIC GROWTH off the most congested parts of the road network *and on to the less congested parts*. In other words business as usual – yet more dispersal into low density land-use patterns that have never had public transport, are never likely to have it, and in which pedestrians, cyclists and those dependent on public transport are second class citizens.

When last seen the Gorilla was smacking his lips, looking well-fed and content, and remarkably sprightly for his age.

John Adams is emeritus professor of geography at UCL. Extended versions of his argument can be found at <http://www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/~jadams/publish.htm>.

## **Letters in reply published 9 September 2004**

### **Congestion charging may not encourage more traffic**

John Adams may be too pessimistic concerning the effect of congestion charging on overall traffic levels (‘Area-wide congestion charging will encourage low density development – and more traffic, LTT 26 Aug). If we believe that roads generate traffic then it is as least possible that the effective removal of roads might degenerate traffic. But whether time can really be reversed is an interesting question. Should our models take account of previous history because of a hysteresis effect in transport? Research is needed!

**Jill Beardwood**

Bishop’s Stortford CM23

### **Road traffic growth can be contained by road charging options**

John Adams is right to call traffic growth the '800 pound gorilla' that the Government has not had the nerve to tackle – at least not directly. The fuel duty escalator did, however put the gorilla on a diet. It was introduced under the Tories and continued under New Labour but then abandoned after a few protests. Higher fuel prices have certainly helped to slow traffic growth and increase public transport usage, especially of rail.

Adams is wrong, however, to shoot down proposals for congestion charging or to suggest that it will push traffic onto less congested parts of the network and encourage further dispersal of land use. London's £5 per day charge is only a small part of the cost of driving and parking in central London. By making London a better place to work, the congestion charge may actually reduce dispersal of land use. The congestion charge does not appear to have caused any reduction in central London rents or land prices. Companies are not moving out to remote parts of the country so their staff can drive hundreds of miles on empty roads. Adams has forgotten that transport is a 'derived demand'. People do not set out to drive a set number of miles each year, then look for the cheapest and least crowded place to do it. With road charging leading to more rational use of the available road space, people will consider different modes and different locational opportunities. With national road charging, people will consider substitutes including public transport and maybe traveling less.

**Michael Schabas**

London N10

### **Reply to the replies published 14 September, 2004**

The letters from Beardwood and Schabas (LTT 9 Sept) complaining about my pessimism exemplify the blindness to the central problem – traffic growth – of which I complained.

We can test Beardwood's hypothesis, that the reduction of road capacity will "degenerate" traffic, with an ongoing "natural" experiment. Congestion is a way of reducing road capacity. It is worst, and increasing, in urban areas. But traffic is still growing in urban areas – by 10% in the last 10 years. In the less congested rural areas it is growing more than twice as fast.

Over this period there has been, as Schabas enthuses, an increase in the use of public transport – by 13 billion passenger kilometers – but over the same period car travel increased by 51 billion passenger kilometers. Schabas knocks down a straw man – one does not anticipate an overnight departure of companies so that their staff can drive hundreds of miles on empty roads. But so long as the number of cars continues to increase, with government support, and the ability of urban areas to accommodate more of them is severely limited, they are bound to seek parking places, and driving space, out of town.

If one seeks to reduce dependence on the car, nationwide, one should seek to discourage it most in the areas where growth is fastest. But the Government accepts the inevitability of further growth and contemplates restraint only in the congested areas where it is already slowest – a recipe for further dispersal. Worse, outside the

areas targeted for congestion charging, policy aspires to accommodate more growth. In the foreword to the July White Paper the Prime Minister promises “road widening and bypasses to tackle the worst areas of congestion”. And as Darren Johnson notes on the same page as Schabas’s letter, Ken Livingstone, the arch proponent of congestion charging, is promoting a new six lane “strategic road” in East London.

Schabas calls our attention to the only credible traffic-growth-limiting policy any British government has ever had, the fuel duty escalator. But it was never set at a level sufficient to reduce traffic and, as soon as the 800 pound gorilla showed signs of irritation, it was abandoned.

John Adams