

## The anti-car imperative

For Traffic Engineering and Control, 20.12.99  
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The Government has now abandoned the pretence that it wishes to reduce the nation's dependence on the car. It was never convincing. Gus Macdonald, the new Transport Minister is now openly in favour of increasing it: "If cars become more affordable and more people want to own them, that," he says, "is not a problem."

What would be the principal feature of a policy that sought to **increase** dependence on the car? It would be a package of measures designed to encourage people to move out of town and spread themselves about at densities that were too low to be serviced by public transport. This policy under the previous government met with impressive success; a new study by the Town and Country Planning Association (*The People: where will they work?*) reports the loss of 500,000 urban jobs and an increase of 1.7 million low-density jobs between 1981 and 1996.

A policy that sought to **reduce** dependence on the car would seek to restrict traffic in the areas where its growth is fastest – not in congested urban areas, where it has already stopped, but in the suburbs and beyond. Private sector consultants are now appearing, offering advice on relocation from city centres. This free-enterprise equivalent to the old Location of Offices Bureau is a completely unsurprising market response to the additional centrifugal incentives now being devised by the Labour government in the form of urban road pricing and work place parking charges.

John Prescott insists that he is not anti-car – and has two Jags to prove it. He, like his Minister, is happy for more people to own cars; but he does, from time-to-time express the wish that they would leave them in the garage more of the time. He should perhaps replace his road-building programme with a garage-building programme; new car sales in Britain in 1999 are estimated at 2.2 million; parked end to end they would form a queue over 8000 miles long – a London to Edinburgh car park 25 lanes wide.

When people acquire cars they look for somewhere to drive them and park them, and they rarely find either in Britain's cities. If the nation's car population continues to increase, and the Government's forecasters predict that it will grow substantially, the urban exodus will continue and dependence on the car will increase. Can we afford the environmentally sustainable alternative? Of course. There is no shortage of money for sane transport projects. The average car in this year's new-car queue costs £12,500, making the total queue worth £27.5 billion – money spent making the problem worse and more intractable. In the past 5 years over 10 million new cars have been sold.

The car is in direct conflict with the Government's proclaimed environmental objectives. The roads and public parking places are the nation's transport commons. They can barely support the existing motor vehicle population, let alone the much larger one that is forecast. The Government continues to turn a blind eye to the tragedy of the transport commons that its policy is fostering. Only a policy that is **anti-car** can give the positive, sustainable, alternatives a chance of success.

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