

# **Avoiding paralysis in the city: the influence of professional conferences on the theory and practice of urban transport planning in post-war Britain**

## **Introduction**

In this paper I explore the role played by four conferences convened by the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) and the British Road Federation (BRF) between 1956 and 1970, in the development of urban transport policy in Britain. I argue that, although the conferences transmitted the dominant view that mass motorisation required road building and the redevelopment of urban areas, they also had a hitherto overlooked role in providing platforms for the discussion of the alternatives. Voices questioning the car's dominance grew progressively louder in these conferences, reflecting growing disquiet over the negative environmental effects and financial cost of urban road building. I will discuss each conference in turn in chronological order so that this process can be clearly illustrated. First of all, however, I will make some general comments about the impact of mass motorisation on British urban development and planning, and I will also remark on the roles of the BRF and the ICE in this context.

## **Mass motorisation and urban planning in Britain, 1956-1973**

The arrival of mass car ownership in Britain in the 1950s lent a powerful stimulus to urban redevelopment. Urban road traffic plans from the 1940s and early 1950s, which were based on low estimates of car use, were reassessed and, in some cases, replaced with more ambitious plans. As part of this reassessment, town planners often sought to apply the latest ideas relating to traffic planning, which promoted a radical reworking of the urban fabric. In Britain, these ideas were most coherently and influentially expressed in the report entitled *Traffic in Towns*, which was the product of a study by Professor Colin Buchanan sponsored by the British Government's Ministry of Transport (MOT). The report, published in 1963, warned that the price of inaction would be that either 'the utility of vehicles in towns will decline rapidly' or that 'the pleasantness and safety of surroundings will deteriorate catastrophically'. It went on to recommend the creation of new urban road systems, featuring a hierarchy of roads, at the top of which stood urban motorways, and also other forms of redevelopment designed to separate heavy traffic from pedestrians.

Such interventions had the support of the BRF, which was a key body within Britain's motor lobby. It counted the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the Cement and Concrete Association, the Automobile Association, the Royal Automobile Club, Shell, British Petroleum, and the Road Hauliers Association amongst its member organisations. Its stated objectives included the promotion of the interests of its members and the pursuit of a 'constructive transport policy in the national interest'. The ICE, meanwhile, was a professional body representing the interests of members working in rail and road transport and many other fields. It did not have the rather narrow interest in road building of the BRF, therefore, but it was not entirely disinterested either, making its convening of conferences on urban transport an interesting counterpoint to the efforts of the BRF.

### **The Urban Motorways Conference, 1956**

The Urban Motorways Conference took place in September 1956 at Friends House in London. It was the opening event of a BRF campaign to, in its own words, 'secure public acceptance of the principle of carrying ... motorways into and through the cities they are designed to serve'. The event was attended by around 500 delegates from over thirty countries, including representatives of local and national government, academia and industry. The conference was impressively staged, from the influential list of contributors to the glossily printed conference proceedings. The list of those invited to speak or to chair the debates, included the Minister of Transport, Harold Watkinson, leading American city planner, Robert Moses, and one of Britain's most famous city planners, Patrick Abercrombie. Also present were Dr W. H. Glanville and J. F. A. Baker, from the British Government's Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the MOT respectively, who delivered the first paper. They addressed the question of whether British cities needed urban motorways and concluded that they were necessary, which meant that their paper almost amounted to an unofficial endorsement from the Government of the conference's aim. However, the speakers acknowledged that new roads should form part of a 'comprehensive solution' that would also include public transport. Indeed, it was a common view amongst the speakers that public transport should play an important complementary role to the car in urban transport. For example, Arthur Ling, Coventry's City Architect, spoke of the need for public transport to counter-

balance the traffic-generating potential of new roads. There was also evidence that planners were starting to think creatively about public transport provision and its integration with private transport. Herbert Manzoni, the City Engineer and Surveyor of Birmingham, for example, advocated the building of car parks on the fringes of cities to encourage drivers to switch to alternative modes of transport in busy urban centres.

The necessity of urban motorways was not seriously questioned. Even the General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen spoke in favour. Furthermore, mass car ownership was taken as inevitable and private motoring was presented as a consumer choice that it was impolitic to deny. Lord Derwent, Chair of the BRF, took this position and stated in his written preface to the proceedings that: '[t]he motor vehicle has become part of our lives, a hallmark of our prosperity'. Glanville and Baker concurred and also argued that urban road building was economically beneficial, due to the resulting shorter journey times. The conference did not pass, however, without the expression of a number of doubts and anxieties relating to urban motorways. Ling, for example, spoke of the need to avoid the disruption to communities that might occur through road-building. In doing so, he alluded to a 'difficult set of conditions' in Britain that would make this a considerable challenge. Councillor Henry T. Hough, meanwhile, warned that motorways in American cities had not solved the problem of congestion. However, none of the delegates spoke unequivocally against urban motorways and, significantly, a resolution calling for a national policy of urban motorway construction was passed unanimously.

### **The Conference on the Highway Needs of Great Britain, 1957**

In November 1957, the ICE attracted a similarly wide range of delegates to its own gathering: the Conference on the Highway Needs of Great Britain. The conference also took place in London over three days and featured some of the same speakers. The conference proved to be similar in the conclusions that the speakers reached, but it also introduced new themes, such as motor vehicle design and the sociological aspects of transport planning, which would be developed at subsequent gatherings. The first paper was delivered by Glanville, who was joined by another colleague, R. J. Smeed, from the Government's Road Research Laboratory (RRL). It presented the latest findings of the Laboratory, which, according to the speakers, 'reinforce[d] the

conclusion' reached in the review Glanville presented at the previous conference.

The third paper concerned the design and routing of urban roads and was delivered by Rowland Nicholas, Manchester's City Surveyor and Engineer, in which he described Manchester's existing road pattern and its conventional streets as being rendered obsolete by the car. His paper also dealt with many of the arguments rehearsed in the previous conference, including the notion that the era of mass motorisation was imminent and that catering for it was economically justified. Nicholas saw an expansion of the road network as a way to support domestic demand for British cars, thereby giving manufacturers a firm base from which to expand into the export market. Glanville returned to the podium to deliver the fourth paper, which dealt with research relating to the assessment of highway needs. He spoke of the difficulty in determining future patterns of traffic and, therefore, of creating road networks to match such movements. To overcome the difficulties, he called for more research into 'the basic factors governing the use of the roads'. Glanville also remarked on the design of motor vehicles, which he felt should invite more research. He noted that the trend towards smaller vehicles was interesting, given their suitability for urban motoring.

### **The People and Cities conference, 1963**

In December 1963, the BRF organised another conference, entitled People and Cities, in association with the Town Planning Institute. It was staged in an effort to maintain interest in the issues of urban transport planning which had been raised by the publication of the Buchanan Report earlier in the same year. It took place in London over three days and, like its predecessor, attracted important figures. The speakers included the Minister of Transport, Ernest Marples, the chief planners of Liverpool and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Walter Bor and Wilfred Burns, H. G. de Franclieu, Secretary General of the *Union Routière de France*, and the Belgian Inspector-General of Roads and Bridges, André Saccasyn. The organisers also invited Buchanan to speak at the event.

In terms of its content, the conference had much to commend itself to the BRF as a forum for the promotion of greater freedom for motor vehicles. Naturally Buchanan spoke in favour, whilst support for redevelopment of the kind he advocated was

found amongst speakers like Councillor R. C. Brown of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He drew a parallel between the plans for Newcastle, which included extensive road building around the city's central core, and Buchanan's prescriptions. The speakers from Belgium and France, meanwhile, gave the audience an impression of urban transport planning in Britain's near neighbours, which bore many similarities to Buchanan's vision. Redevelopment of this type was presented as the only way to accommodate motor vehicles successfully. A. C. Durie, the Vice-Chair of the BRF, stated that 'conventional streets will have to give way to entirely new designs' and that the 'physical form of the town' was responsible for traffic problems. As a complement to the planning case, the economic arguments for greater accommodation of the car were deployed once more by several speakers; this time with greater force, tapping into fears that Britain was falling behind its industrial competitors by failing to modernise fast enough. The Earl of Gosford, the new Chairman of the BRF, stated that Britain's future 'as a trading and industrial nation' depended on 'large-scale urban improvements ... [and] the sensible accommodation of the motor vehicle'.

There was, however, a lack of agreement over the exact nature of the redevelopment that was required. Some speakers spoke only of redevelopment in terms similar to Buchanan, whilst others wanted to combine such changes with more radical measures. Rowland Nicholas, for example, advocated the decentralisation of urban functions that attracted road traffic, thereby spreading traffic more evenly across the road network. Other speakers favoured a more radical policy of dispersing a large share of the population and functions of Britain's larger urban centres to new settlements, because they felt that the accommodation of full motorisation was much harder to achieve in the conurbations.

The delegates' interest in the potential of new technology to improve urban transport had grown to match their enthusiasm for redevelopment. Many of them spoke positively of the prospect of technologically improved public transport, which continued to be held up as having an important complementary role in Britain's urban transport. For example, Peter Mason, a property developer, stated that technological progress made the development of such modes as moving pavements and monorails a realistic proposition. Burns, meanwhile, mused on the possibility of replacing conventional buses, which he saw as noisy and fume-generating, with

smaller automatically guided buses.

There were, however, some discordant voices that expressed anxieties about Buchanan's motor age vision. There was criticism from some quarters that public transport was not being given enough consideration. Walter Bor felt that this was the case in the plans for Paris, as presented by de Francieu, whilst another speaker felt that the Buchanan Report 'did not delve deeply enough into the alternative methods of transporting people'. Some disquiet was also expressed about the consequences of redevelopment to accommodate the car. The developer, L. S. Marler, despite insisting that planners 'cannot leave things as they are', warned against creating 'a desert of concrete ramps, causeways, and tiers of flyovers'.

### **The Transportation Engineering Conference, 1968**

The People and Cities conference was followed by the Transportation Engineering Conference, which was convened by the ICE in 1968 and boasted influential speakers such as Richard Marsh, the Minister of Transport, and G. T. Fowler, the Joint Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Technology. There was a large measure of continuity with previous conferences in terms of support for greater accommodation of urban motoring, but the tone was more hesitant and defensive. A Goldstein, a property developer, used his summing-up speech to warn that the difficulty of providing 'adequate' roads might mean that transport studies would 'underplay the need and importance of radical development of road systems'. Marsh, meanwhile, said that there were compelling economic reasons why the car should be given as much freedom as possible, but that this should happen without 'sacrificing our environment and living standards'.

Neville Borg, of the City of Birmingham, gave a paper on the development of new traffic survey techniques, such as the use of sociological data to make predictions about future traffic patterns. He noted that 'some sense of unreality' had emerged from 'the process of justifying individual highway schemes by [older] origin and destination and cost-benefit techniques'. His remarks reflected the growing realisation amongst planners that transport was not only a question of providing infrastructure, but also a complex area of policy with its own social questions. This realisation was shared by A. E. T. Griffiths, of the British Railways Board, who

asserted that traffic surveys were themselves far from being politically neutral and were being used to promote private transport at the expense of public transport.

Naturally for a conference of transport engineers, the conference featured a paper on the design of urban roads, which was delivered by J. S. Moulder of the Department of Highways and Transportation at the Greater London Council. In a contrast to speakers at previous conferences, Moulder took a less confident and more defensive tone when speaking of the relationship between urban roads and their environment, which reflected growing public anxiety over the negative environmental impact of urban road building. By the late 1960s many road projects, both completed and proposed, had attracted either protests or negative publicity as the potential for new roads to bring pollution, noise, disruption and severance was brought into sharper focus by new road building. Whilst critics like Griffiths were emboldened, Moulder had to acknowledge that it was 'not desirable' to create new lines of severance. He noted that urban motorways needed to be sited carefully to minimise their effect on the community, using all the engineering tools available, but conceded that there were 'no set rules or theory' on how to achieve this. In a further sign of the times, the confident calls for sweeping redevelopment were replaced by a warning from Marsh that better traffic management was as important as new infrastructure, because Britain would be left with a 'yawning gap of years' in which to manage transportation whilst the huge task of reconstruction was undertaken. He also hinted that redevelopment would take longer than expected, due to a tightening of the Government's finances.

Whilst the enthusiasm for road building had waned somewhat, the interest in new transport technology remained undiminished. This was exemplified by a paper by A. Hitchcock of the RRL, in which he described research on new urban transport systems and on new car designs. These included Switzerland's Bouladon, an underground moving pavement for pedestrians, and the buses of Throughways Ltd, which could run either automatically at high speed on a special track, from which they derived power, or on normal roads under their own power. He also spoke of the Auto-Taxi, a tracked and automatically guided vehicle, which was under development by a private company in association with the RRL. Hitchcock also talked about the Cars for Cities study, carried out by the RRL, of the benefits and feasibility of designing smaller, quieter, less polluting motor vehicles for use in urban areas. The

study identified a number of short- and long-term technological developments that could help soften the impact of cars on the environment, including the development of the non-polluting electric fuel cell as an alternative power source.

## CONCLUSION

The four conferences that were convened by the BRF and the ICE between 1956 and 1968 were considered to be of significance to their participants, many of whom were important decision-makers in British society. From the point of view of advocates of greater freedom for the car, the conduct of the conferences proceeded largely as they would have wished. The majority of speakers expressed the view that British cities needed to be redeveloped to accommodate mass motorisation and that restrictions on the use of the car should be avoided wherever possible. Public transport was seen as important, but its improvement was seen as a subsidiary process rather than as one that could give rise to alternatives to mass private transport. In addition, this message was given the stamp of approval by central government officers, who spoke in its favour alongside influential figures from the planning profession.

The high level of national press attention given to the conferences demonstrated that their messages were reaching the wider public. All four received generous coverage, most of it positive, in *The Observer*, *The Times*, and *The Manchester Guardian*. After the Urban Motorways Conference, *The Manchester Guardian* noted happily that '[w]e are at last beginning in this country to realise the urgency of building new roads'. The same paper concluded that the ICE conference of 1957 would begin to shake the 'strange paralysis of national will' relating to road building. However, any sense that the coverage might translate into increased support for urban road building is diminished by press commentary on the latter two conferences. This tended to concentrate on alternative strategies, such as the raising of population densities in cities, the curbing of suburban development, and the development of new forms of public transport.

In the final analysis, it is very hard to judge the influence of these conferences on transport policy or planning. If we accept the view of writer and civil servant, William Plowden, that the British Government tended to follow its own priorities in road transport, rather than be swayed by outside agencies, then the answer would be very little in terms of national policy. Furthermore, as public disquiet over road building grew, as the British economy faltered, and as the discussions of urban transport planning grew in complexity, the relatively simple call for energetic

redevelopment and road building was replaced by one that was less clear and more hesitant. Critical voices grew more confident and numerous as time went on, and their criticisms featured strongly in the press reports. In addition, the challenge of accommodating the car became more urgent as usage grew, stimulating the development of new transport ideas, which were aired in the later conferences. Such developments point to perhaps the most significant contribution of the conferences in providing a forum for the exchange and dissemination of ideas at a time when views on urban transport were evolving rapidly. At the same time as promoting large-scale redevelopment in favour of mass motorisation, they also allowed new transport concepts to be discussed and publicised, which were not widely adopted at the time, but have since proven to be more durable.