

Transport Planning Society

One Great George Street, London, SW1P 3AA Tel: 020 7665 2238 Fax: 020 7799 1325 tps@ice.org.uk

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 2nd March 2017

Chair's Report

One of the most challenging experiences I have had during this last year was, in taking my son to start a degree course at Leeds University, to be shaken by the realisation that 37 years had passed since my Dad did the same for me! With this in mind, you'd think I wouldn't be too shocked that my two years as Chair of the TPS have seemed to flash by – but I am.

Yet the shock is not really occasioned by the way time seems to speed up as I get older: that's a well-known phenomenon. What really strikes me is how little I fear I have been able to achieve with the 24 months I've had in the role. Good ideas, I hope; and good intentions, I'm sure. But to what end? On my watch, experts seem to have become disparaged, assertions seem to have become more valued than evidence, and the popular view seems to have become that machines, not people (and least of all planners), will determine the future of transport. As a man who's recently *started* his term of office would end one of his tweets: Bad.

Also on my watch, however, Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature; and although I've never been a particular fan, and despite the vogue for high speed rail, I've always liked the idea behind the title of his 1979 album, *Slow Train Coming*. Put into the jargon of our profession, what Bob was plainly extolling was the supremacy of journey time reliability over sheer speed; and, in the same way, I believe that wise transport planning is about the long game, not the latest thing.

It was ever thus, I think. We've never been fashionable; our advice is more often received with grudging respect than open arms; and, in my 30+ years as a practitioner, I've never felt it likely that anyone would be favourably impressed were I to say, 'Trust me – I'm a transport planner!' But I nevertheless consider that what we do is, and will remain, enormously important to our cities and their citizens, to our country, and – yes, I do dare say it – to our world. Other views are available, of course, and that's why we're following this AGM with a debate on the question 'Why are Transport Planners still here?'

In many ways, the work of the Society is – and should be – focused on answering this question in an affirmative manner. I believe we're still here because the role of Transport Planning to Society (you see what I did there?) is and will continue to be of real and lasting value, whatever the popular or political perceptions may be. That said, in so far as the role of the TPS is to promote Transport Planning and support Transport Planners (which it is) I do not share the view of some contemporary leaders that simply asserting a fact (whether 'alternative' or not) is the best way of getting the message across.

I'm a great believer in the need for us to make our case; and this is a focus that the TPS should increasingly have. As an organisation powered almost entirely by volunteer effort, the Society needs to ensure that what it spends that effort on is both worthy in itself and, because of that worth, more likely to inspire greater effort from more of us.

The challenge here is that Transport Planning is what I have come to call a 'selfless profession'. The shared understanding that transport is a derived demand – the means, not the end – is still strong in this profession, I'm glad to say. But that tends to mean that there's little obvious glory to be had in planning transport. Indeed, when people do seek fame from transport interventions of the '*grands projets*' variety, wise planning is often the first thing to be jettisoned. The output triumphs over the outcome and the means over the end. Like how we did transport to our cities in the 60s and 70s: solving 'traffic problems' rather than meeting the cities' needs.

Transport Planning Society

One Great George Street, London, SW1P 3AA Tel: 020 7665 2238 Fax: 020 7799 1325 tps@ice.org.uk

Yet, while we may not be first in line for gongs, there's still plenty to motivate and enthuse transport planners in this day and age; and I'm not talking about the buzz that many people feel at the prospect of 'autonomous vehicles'. As we always have done, we need to work with the opportunities and challenges presented by new technologies or other initiatives. But we should seek to harness them, not be in thrall to them.

The motivation to plan transport that I am talking about is simply this: the opportunity to change the world for the better! Economic health, public health, environmental health and social health are all matters on which transport planning can have a genuine, significant and positive effect. Transport Planning is about how we live life, how business works and how the world changes.

But to have the best effect we can, we need to move beyond the relatively passive offering of a service we know to be of value; and to be more pro-active in explaining and promoting the value of that service to the public, to politicians, and to other decision-makers and budget-holders.

The task of enabling future transport provision to be planned wisely is daunting; we do not have, yet need to develop, a more receptive audience – not just one that seeks our advice, but one that accepts that short term pain may need to be borne while long term gain is worked on. An audience, in short, that understands the need to plan, not just react.

Suppose, for example, that there is immediate clamour about congestion, a pervading 'common sense' that increasing traffic capacity is the 'obvious' solution, and a range of associated pressures from 'business leaders', letter-writers, social media voices, and old media editors. How can we enable those in power to pursue and hold to a course of action that will yield benefits over time (beyond the next electoral cycle), rather than succumb to the cries that 'something must be done', now, even when it is clear that a quick-fix is more likely to exacerbate the root cause than deal with it?

It is to help answer such questions, enable effective action, and make best use of limited resources that my two years as Chair have confirmed as the Transport Planning Society's core role. This is not a gauntlet I throw before the new Chair prior to running away; it's one that I'm happy to help pick up. To change metaphors, raising the role of transport planners in shaping the future of the country is a ball I'm very keen to assist the new Chair, the Board, and the Society's members in running with. The prize is well worth pursuing, and I trust that no longer having the responsibilities of Chair will enable me more effectively to turn ideas into action.

In signing off, I want to acknowledge my debt to the wisdom, enthusiasm, insight and hard work of all my Board colleagues, both those elected and those from our sponsoring institutions: ICE; CIHT, CILT and RTPI. Just as the Society as a whole is nothing without its members, so the Board. I say a fond, formal farewell to those whose term on the Board is now up, and I look forward to meeting, and working with, those who will take their place.

I am also, of course, very grateful for the active support of our many individual, Corporate and Stakeholder members; and I close by encouraging you all with the news that, since our new Chair is an OBE, glory and gongs don't seem to be out of a transport planner's reach, after all!

John Dales
2nd March 2017