



A REALISTIC VISION

Roads fit for people. Fit for children. Not a traffic sign, signal or camera in sight. Drivers watching the road, giving way to pedestrians, filtering in turn. No fear of danger or reprisal. Roads and streets a safe, convivial public realm where all road-users co-exist in peace. What is this – a dream?

No. A world of civilised shared space could become reality if policymakers harnessed human nature instead of hampering it. We complain about the traffic, but could it be traffic *controls* that are the problem?

"One thing we know for sure," says the US Best Highway Practices Safety Institute, "is that when given a choice, the vast majority act in a co-operative manner." The trouble with our traffic control system is that in dictating our behaviour, it *deprives* us of choice. It squanders our *greatest* resource - human intelligence - which is supremely equipped to negotiate safe and efficient movement.

A body of evidence shows that when we are free of controls and free to use our own judgement, congestion dissolves and courtesy thrives. There is even a study which shows that roads are safer without speed limits.

SPANNER IN THE WORKS

Inefficient, unsafe and *unfit*, the current system has helped kill more people than died in two world wars. Where did it all go wrong?

In other walks of life, we take our turn in the sequence in which we arrive; we don't jump the queue at a shop counter or bus stop. But on streets and roads we must obey rights-of-way that negate civilised interaction. The fatal flaw at the heart of the system is the distinction between major and minor roads, and the concept of *priority*. Priority licenses main road traffic to plough on, regardless who was there first.

RECIPE FOR DANGER

Abandoning common law principles of equal rights and responsibilities, priority makes side road traffic and pedestrians wait indefinitely, or risk getting hit.

Outside cities, priority represents a permanent finger up to the local farmer or district nurse, in Devon, for example, trying to cross the A358 to get from one field or village to another. They have to wait interminably, or run the gauntlet of fast-moving traffic. If the law is an ass, nowhere is it more asinine – and lethal – than in the traffic arena.

In cities, to break the priority traffic streams so that other road-users can cross in relative (but not guaranteed) safety, lights are "needed".

As Kenneth Todd says, "lights make us *stop* so we avoid the inconvenience of slowing down". Virtually every control measure that followed the introduction of priority in 1929 is a doomed attempt to cure problems of the experts' own making.

Traffic lights take our eyes off the road and demand our attention – a recipe for danger. Many "accidents" are not accidents at all, but events arising from conflicts contrived by the rules of the road.

What do you do if you are approaching a green light at a legal 30 when a child runs into your path, but an unsighted vehicle is on your tail? It hardly bears thinking about.

By interfering with the job of watching the road, the rules flout basic safety principles. They put us at odds with our surroundings, forcing us to act against our better nature and better judgement.

The current system of priority puts the onus on *children* to beware of *cars*. Is that reasonable? We think it's barbaric.

LOOK - NO LIGHTS

When lights are out of action, we watch the road: a recipe for safety. The onus shifts: now drivers beware pedestrians. A new hierarchy emerges with vulnerable road-users at the top.

It is assumed that without lights, drivers will speed up. The opposite is true. Wherever priority and lights have been abolished, as in some European towns, accidents and congestion have *disappeared*.

FILTER IN TURN

In the US, this self-regulating system is known as the all-way yield. In the Channel Islands it is known as filter-in-turn. With the possible exception of major intersections at peak times, it is the civilised answer to conflict and congestion on city streets *and* country roads. It restores equal rights and responsibilities, enabling all road-users to take their turn more or less in the sequence in which they arrive. It makes life on the roads congenial. It cuts accidents, journey times, fuel use and emissions. In allowing traffic to manage itself, it's also the cheap and most cheerful of solutions.

"What about the maniacs?" - You can't legislate for them, and research shows they are a tiny minority, so why straitjacket the vast majority?

WE ARE SHEEP

Incredibly, the current system has never been properly tested. Based on conjecture, it grew up piecemeal. The very language used by traffic engineers reveals how they view us. The pedestrian islands between streams of traffic are called "pens". Yes, to the traffic control industry *we are sheep*.

The traffic rulebook, *The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions*, is known in the profession as "the bible" - the language of religion.

MAXIMISING EMISSIONS

Traffic is like liquid. Dam up a river and it will flood. Block traffic flow and traffic will congest. If volume can be a drama, volume + controls = crisis. By making us stop when we could go, lights minimise filtering opportunities and maximise congestion.

The stop-start drive cycle required by lights boosts fuel use and emissions to the hilt. With filter-in-turn, by contrast, drivers can often glide through on minimal power, producing minimal emissions.

NO ACCIDENTS, NO CONGESTION

At a busy junction in the Dutch town of Drachten, there used to be five fatalities a year. Now, since the lights have been removed and the streets re-designed, even collisions are rare. Any collision that might occur is minor, because approach speeds are low.

At rush-hour, buses equipped with priority transponders used to take 58 seconds to cross the junction. Now, with no lights or transponders, they take 28 seconds.

Drachten (pop 45,000), where they get it so right, is a mirror image of Pontefract (pop 32,000), where we get it so wrong.

Transport researcher (and £250,000 winner on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), Steve Kidd: "New lights in Pontefract have produced accidents and congestion where there were none before."

BURDEN OF PROOF

It's not up to us to prove traffic lights are unnecessary, but for the authorities to prove otherwise - something they have never done. They pursue high-cost systems of control and enforcement, and resist monitored trials in sensible deregulation. Could it be because such trials would prove a success and threaten their *raison d'être*?

At major junctions at peak times, part-time controls might be needed. But how do we know until we've tried it? If FiT works on a micro scale, who's to say it won't work on a macro? What is London if not a collection of towns and villages? During recent power cuts across London's West End, did roads seize up or fights break out? Far from it. In the absence of lights that conjure congestion out of thin air, the traffic *vanished* into thin air.

These ideas are not expensive. With minimal investment in road-building, we can eliminate bottlenecks. And we can transform life on the existing network by shifting the obsession with controlling human nature to a trust its unique potential for civilised interaction.

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

By all means introduce a programme of education to raise standards and help drivers meet the challenge. Make cycling proficiency part of a phased-in advanced driving test, which will sensitise drivers to the cycling experience and improve their road sense. Make it law to display insurance discs on windscreens (these could show green when valid and red when out of date - not a bad way to get uninsured drivers off the road). Teach people to use the inside lane except when overtaking, which would liberate much of our road and motorway capacity.

But *scrap priority, and stop detaining us unnecessarily at lights!* At the very least, major junctions off-peak should have flashing lights that allow filtering on opportunity rather than mandatory lights that forbid it.

The single queueing system, imported from the US, solved the nightmare of multiple queues in banks and post-offices. If we made roads FiT, soon we would wonder how we ever lived by priority rules and traffic lights, and how anyone could ever dream of imposing them.

We're not claiming filter-in-turn will always work under all circumstances. But it maximises traffic flow and road capacity. It requires minimal re-engineering, frees us from distracting regulation, harnesses the power of the brain, and maximises our power to cope under pressure.

In the interests of long-term survival, we need to find other ways of getting about, work more from home, develop new energy sources. But something can be done NOW to make an impact on climate change.

Abolishing priority would remove the "need" for lights. Then we'd be free to do what comes naturally: approach slowly and filter. Congestion and conflict will melt away, and emissions from traffic, which currently account for 25% of our CO2 production, will see a dramatic fall, as will journey times, heart rates, and fuel consumption.

Above all, children and other tender road-users will be free of the danger that lurks on every road and every street *because of the dangerous rules of the road* as currently misconceived.

We need rescuing from decades of negative conditioning so we can watch the road and act on context, compassion and commonsense.

Happy filtering - on FiT Roads - Roads FiT for People.

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