

Roads, Runways and Resistance

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From the Newbury Bypass
to Extinction Rebellion

Steve Melia

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Preface

This book tells a 30-year story of the most controversial issues in transport in the UK and the protest movements they provoked. Between 2017 and 2020 I interviewed over 50 government ministers, civil servants, political advisers, lobbyists, activists and protest leaders. Their stories and thousands of documents, published and unpublished, have unearthed many surprises. I did not expect to be writing a crime or spy story, but fraud, violence, spying, sexual ‘misdemeanours’ and ambivalent actions by the police all feature at different points; so does lobbying by interest groups, but not necessarily in the ways you might expect.

For over 30 years I have observed these events, as a would-be politician, a local campaigner and then an academic. I played a minor role in several of the earlier episodes, but I had no idea when I started researching this book that I would eventually become a direct participant.

The story begins when Margaret Thatcher’s government announced ‘the biggest road-building programme since the Romans’, provoking the biggest protests ever seen against road-building in Britain. Twyford Down, the Newbury Bypass and a human mole nicknamed ‘Swampy’ became part of the history and mythology of a generation, who may have forgotten the politics and the ultimate outcome of that conflict. Chapters 1 and 4 will tell the political story, while Chapters 2 and 3 will tell the story on the ground through the words of the protestors and an under-sheriff tasked with removing them.

Chapter 5 tells the story of a brief interlude when the New Labour government under John Prescott tried, with limited success, to re-orient transport policy away from road-building and car-based travel. Political interests, personal conflicts and bad luck were all hampering Prescott’s strategy when a handful of farmers and hauliers brought the nation to a standstill in protest at rising fuel taxes in 2000. That protest was short-lived but its impact has endured in ways which few would have expected at the time. Chapter 6 tells the inside story

of the protestors and those in government who set out to foil them by all available means.

Chapter 7 explains how a government which gave local authorities powers to introduce congestion charging, then tried to undermine the first local leader planning to use those powers. Despite their efforts, Ken Livingstone, the first Mayor of London, introduced congestion charging in central London in 2003. London was supposed to be the first of many, until motoring campaigners mobilised to prevent charging in other cities and halt the government's plans for national road pricing. Chapter 7 explains how they did it.

Chapters 8 and 9 tell how campaigners and changing political circumstances halted the seemingly inexorable expansion of Heathrow and other airports in southeast England. They reveal for the first time how protestors unmasked a spy and evaded security to climb onto the roof of the House of Commons as the government launched a sham consultation in 2008.

Previous protests against airport expansion were motivated by purely local concerns, such as aircraft noise and traffic generation but by the mid-2000s climate change was becoming a bigger issue for protestors and transport policy. Chapter 8 describes one such campaign, the Big Ask, which led to the UK Climate Change Act and similar legislation in several other countries. It was one of the most successful environmental campaigns of all time, and yet it has been largely forgotten today, for reasons explained in Chapter 15.

By contrast, the long-running campaigns against high-speed rail, described in Chapters 10 and 11, have made some of the biggest impacts on political debate and public consciousness but have been less successful in achieving their aims. Those chapters explain how governments became locked-in to a project plagued by delays, ballooning budgets, whistle-blowing scandals and conflict with local communities.

The decisions to approve and confirm HS2 reflected a change in official ideology after the recession of 2009; big infrastructure was back. In 2013 the Coalition government trebled the national road-building budget despite ongoing austerity for most public spending. Chapter 12 explains the changing political climate that led to those decisions and also claimed the political scalp of a minister who tried to maintain her party's manifesto commitment not to expand Heathrow Airport.

Chapters 1–12 recount these events in the words of the people involved, keeping my own views and analysis to a minimum. That will change in Chapters 13 and 14, which tell a more personal story. By early 2019 I was becoming increasingly worried about the warnings of climate scientists and frustrated at the lack of action by governments, so I decided to join a newly formed movement called Extinction Rebellion (XR). In April 2019 I took part in actions which brought central London to a standstill, landing me in Westminster Magistrates' Court and on the scrupulously accurate pages of the *Daily Mail*. Along the way I met several of the leaders of this 'leaderless movement'. Chapters 13 and 14 tell how a handful of British activists with a history of false starts ignited an international movement and scored some big early successes, despite internal tensions and some tactical mistakes.

How much difference did the protest movements make, and what tactics are more or less likely to work? Chapter 15 will address both of those questions, using road-building as an example. Alongside this book, I wrote a research article which explains why Conservative governments decided to slash the road-building budget in the late 1990s but treble it during a period of austerity after 2013.¹ Protest (or its absence) acting on public opinion was part of the answer. Other factors included a change in economic ideology and a rational response by governments to past failures.

Governments do occasionally act rationally, but civil disobedience may also be necessary to make them take notice of evidence and act on expert advice. That is particularly true of climate change and the threat of wider ecological collapse. XR has made governments notice but their responses remain inadequate. In most of this book I write as an external observer, but in Chapter 15 I am partly addressing my fellow members of XR. Our tactics have worked well so far, but to compel governments to act we now need a change of strategy. The main conclusion of Chapter 15 is that protest movements rarely, if ever, achieve their aims directly. Public opinion makes the difference between their success and failure; XR now needs new tactics to influence public opinion and increase pressure on decision-makers.

I finished the first draft of this book shortly before COVID-19 confounded transport expectations and forced protest movements, along with the rest of the population, into lockdown. I decided not to

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change the main text, but will comment on the uncertainties we now face in an afterword.

Chapters 1–12 are interspersed with quotes from my interviews. Many of them reveal sensitive information; some reveal conflicts and dirty tricks at the heart of government. Some people were happy to speak on the record but I have anonymised others and changed a few details to protect identities.

1

The Biggest Road-Building Programme Since the Romans (1989–92)

In 1992 a small group of protestors formed a chain, trying to stop contractors on the route of a planned new road. One of them locked himself to the axle of a lifting machine, which the contractors started up, threatening the life of the man below. His supporters, held behind a cordon, surged forward, calling on the police to intervene, which they eventually did.

Those few protestors had struck the first blow in a struggle which would initially last for five years, provoke a backlash from other campaigners, and recur in different ways over the following three decades. Conflict is endemic to transport, conflict between humanity's desire for movement and resistance to the damage caused by attempts to satisfy that desire. This book will tell the story of that conflict over those three decades.

To understand what provoked that group of protestors we must go back to May 1989 when Paul Channon, UK Transport Secretary, stood up in the House of Commons to announce that he was 'more than doubling' the national road-building programme. He spoke with the confidence of political support, a booming economy, a national Treasury in surplus for the first time since the 1970s and a widespread consensus that faster road-building was urgently needed. 'Roads for Prosperity', the title of the new transport White Paper, boldly announced the government's top transport objective and the justification for it. One road lobbyist described it as 'a strategic plan that really looked long-term' but there was little sign of strategic thinking in the White Paper itself. The text was only eight pages long. It stated that traffic had increased by a third since 1980 and forecast that it could more than double again by 2025. It talked of the evils

of congestion and explained why expanding the rail network would make little difference to road traffic. Higher taxes on road users might reduce demand but they were already highly taxed; the only solution was a 'step change' in road-building.

A single paragraph mentioned the environment, claiming that bypasses would bring welcome relief to local communities and promising to 'take all reasonable measures to minimise any adverse effects'. An appendix listed 168 proposed road schemes that would create or widen 2,700 miles of motorways or national roads across England (Scotland and Wales would also receive a similar increase in funding for roads). Two of the most controversial schemes, Twyford Down and the Newbury Bypass, had not yet gained ministerial approval and many schemes in London were awaiting the outcome of an assessment study, but several schemes on the list would provoke mass protests and transform the lives of the people I interviewed for Chapters 2 and 3.

All of that lay in a future that would have seemed unimaginable to Paul Channon as he listened to a succession of MPs 'warmly welcoming' the plan that would bring new or wider roads to their constituencies. Channon was fortunate to have as his principal opponent John Prescott, whose response for the Labour opposition was riddled with contradictions. He berated the Conservative government for 'complacency and inactivity' that had caused the growth in congestion, comparing this to European countries that had planned for rising car ownership with 'road improvements', which Labour supported in principle. He claimed that transport users were overtaxed and then posed the following questions:

Does the Secretary of State accept that 10-lane super-highways speeding traffic into the cities are useless if chronic congestion means that it cannot move in the cities when it arrives there? What effect will the White Paper's plans have on the environment, especially in respect of vehicle emissions?¹

'It was rather difficult' Channon replied 'to discover whether the hon. Gentleman was in favour' of the plan or not and added that if Prescott didn't like it, he could cancel the two road schemes proposed for Prescott's Hull constituency. The idea that many people might want to cancel road schemes in their areas did not seem to occur to many in

the House that day. Several MPs, including Prescott, called for more investment in rail but only the maverick Labour member Tony Banks attacked the principles behind the plan. It was ‘motorway madness’, he said, and ‘a great big transfer of cash from the taxpayer to the British Road Federation lobby, as represented here by Conservative Members’.²

A Victory for the British Roads Federation

‘Roads for Prosperity’ was a major victory for the road lobby and the British Road Federation in particular. The BRF was ‘an alliance of interests’; its members were all companies or other organisations. Their board included representatives from the motor industry, motoring organisations, oil companies and aggregate industries that supplied the road-builders. Following cuts to the trunk roads budget in 1987, the BRF’s archives describe a ‘year-long campaign... at national and local level’ to reverse the cuts and achieve a longer-term commitment to road-building and widening. A joint review of roads policy involving the Treasury and the Department for Transport (DTp) offered an opportunity for influence.

Early in 1988 Peter Bottomley, the junior transport minister responsible for roads, invited the Chairman and Director of the BRF for ‘an informal discussion in his office’. Bottomley was ‘at pains to suggest that delays in the bypass programme were entirely procedural and in no way due to lack of funds’, the BRF noted, adding that ‘our response was to politely disagree’. In March 1988 they ‘entertained to lunch’ MPs on the all-party Transport Select Committee, taking the opportunity to ‘raise our concerns’.

The hospitality activities of the BRF provoked much criticism. A researcher for a shadow minister of transport recounted how they took him to lunch at the Waldorf Hotel.³ A Labour Member of Parliament (MP) reported how he was invited to a lunch by Lancashire County Council to discuss the County’s road strategy and then discovered that it was organised and funded by the BRF. Richard Diment, who joined the BRF in 1985 and later became its director, believed these criticisms were unfair:

This used to really annoy me – accusations that we were spending millions on expensive functions. Our budget was in six figures [£360,000 in 1989]; we had six to eight staff most of the time I was there. Other lobby groups, including those who were bitterly opposed to the road-building programme, did this kind of thing. If you can persuade a member of parliament to sponsor a meeting, if you are prepared to pick up the catering bill, it's normally just tea, coffee and a slice of cake or a sandwich.

The size of the BRF's budgets may have been exaggerated but they were considerably larger than those of Transport 2000, their main opponent at the time. Transport 2000 was funded by the subscriptions of individuals and the public transport unions. It campaigned for more investment in public transport and against large-scale road-building. Their director Stephen Joseph recalled: 'We were very much "outside track"; we would have a few low-level meetings with officials but no one important in the Department of Transport would talk to us, back then.'

The BRF, on the other hand, were very much on the inside track. An internal report noted that their lunch for the members of the Transport Committee had 'provoked a number of probing parliamentary questions and, with the BRF's subsequent submission to the Committee, provided the basis for the detailed and persistent grilling of DTp officials at a subsequent Committee hearing.' In July 1988, the Committee produced a report, which the BRF noted 'relied extensively on the BRF submission'. The Committee cited the BRF's analysis of traffic flows to support its conclusion that the Government 'should urgently review the case for providing more trunk road capacity'.

The following month Paul Channon invited the Chairman and Director of the BRF for 'a friendly informal chat'. 'Discussion centred on the need for more resources to accelerate the trunk road programme' and Channon asked the BRF for 'more specific examples from individual companies of the benefits of good roads and/or the cost of inadequate ones'. By this stage the usual relationship between lobbyists and ministers had been reversed; Channon was already convinced; he needed more ammunition from the BRF to persuade the Treasury and the Prime Minister to allocate more funds.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson was sympathetic to the road lobby but he and most of the Conservative cabinet had an ideological preference for private finance. If ways could be found to build new roads without increasing public spending, then there was no problem but any minister seeking a big increase in their budget would meet resistance from the Treasury. The Adam Smith Institute, a think tank with links to the right wing of the Conservative Party, advocated privatisation of roads and road pricing – charging motorists for the use of roads – an idea endorsed by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

The BRF found the CBI's attitude 'particularly disturbing'. The BRF accepted the principle of private finance and even some tolling, of new bridges for example, as long as this was additional to major investment in new public roads, which were free to use. At their private meeting Channon conceded that private finance would make 'only a marginal contribution'. In November 1988 he made a speech to the Adam Smith Institute rejecting the privatisation of existing roads 'tempting as it might seem'. There would be no general policy of tolling new motorways but he would encourage the private sector to look for opportunities where new toll roads or bridges might 'attract road users'.

The success of Channon's negotiations was confirmed a few days before 'Roads for Prosperity' when Treasury Secretary John Major announced that rules restricting private finance for public projects were to be relaxed. Any private schemes would be additional to the publicly funded roads, as the BRF had advocated.

Reactions to 'Roads for Prosperity'

Media reaction to 'Roads for Prosperity' was overwhelmingly positive. Support from the Conservative press was hyperbolic; *The Times* led with Channon's phrase that this would be 'the biggest road-building programme since the Romans'. The *Daily Express* described the White Paper as 'nothing short of a miracle'. More surprising, in retrospect, was the reaction of the non-Conservative papers. The *Independent* described the plans as 'better late than never'. *The Guardian* also attacked the government for its past inaction and asked 'will this increased level of investment be enough?' Several business and

motoring organisations expressed their enthusiastic support. The CBI estimated that congestion was costing the average household £10 a week and said 'two years ago this package would have been beyond our wildest dreams'. The BRF was equally enthusiastic about 'Roads for Prosperity', at first. Its minutes noted that the White Paper included 'virtually every addition to the trunk programme for which the Federation has been campaigning ... either as firm proposals or as part of a study'.

The initial press reports devoted just a few lines to a token statement of dissent from an environmental organisation. Transport 2000 called for more investment in rail instead; Friends of the Earth criticised a 'knee-jerk reaction' and said 'Mr Channon knows that these new roads will be as congested as ever within a few years'. That statement was a rare challenge to the conventional beliefs that building or widening roads would reduce congestion and boost the economy. The White Paper repeated one of those beliefs; it claimed that new roads would 'assist economic growth'; but it was more ambiguous about congestion. It stated that new and wider roads would be 'the main way to deal with' inter-urban congestion; but what did that phrase mean? Would congestion improve, or grow worse more slowly? And what difference would inter-urban road-building make to congestion in towns and cities? The White Paper made no predictions; the reader was left to infer that more roads must be good for congestion. Over the following years both of those beliefs would be more widely challenged.

One future challenge to conventional beliefs about road-building began in 1989 with an offer of funding from an unlikely source. William Rees Jeffreys was a pioneering road engineer, an early advocate of motorways in the UK. In 1950 he set up a charitable trust, the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund (RJRF) to continue his work. The BRF regarded the RJRF as a sympathetic source of research funding. They were alarmed in 1989 when the trustees of the RJRF decided to concentrate their funding on a major research project called 'Transport and Society', to be led by Oxford academic Phil Goodwin. The BRF regarded Goodwin and most of his collaborators as 'anti-road'; the Chairmen of the BRF and the Freight Transport Association met the Chairman of the RJRF to 'express their concern' about this. Whatever they said failed to sway the trustees and Goodwin was allowed to continue his work over the next two years. When the BRF

approached the RJRF again, to fund one of its own ideas, they were told that it would have to come within the 'Transport and Society' project, managed by Goodwin.

After the initial rush of enthusiasm for 'Roads for Prosperity', the BRF began to reserve judgement on the government's progress. The White Paper contained little detail; the junior minister for roads promised a 'full roads report' later that year but it was delayed. Although the government was committed to spending more money on roads, public spending was controlled by the Treasury on a year-by-year basis. The plan would depend on decisions made in future budgets and that would leave opportunities for opponents to delay or frustrate it.

The environmental organisations took a few months to coordinate their response to 'Roads for Prosperity'. Nine of them, including Transport 2000, Friends of the Earth, the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the World-Wide Fund for Nature issued a joint statement in September 1989 entitled 'Roads to Ruin'. It condemned the plan for threatening air quality, wildlife and the countryside; it called for more spending on public transport and for a joint committee between the DTp and the Department of the Environment (DoE) to resolve the 'contradiction of policy between the two'.

Conflict between Transport and the Environment under Mrs Thatcher

The environmental organisations wanted to involve the DoE in transport policy because their relations with that department were better than with the DTp; they believed some ministers and civil servants at the DoE shared their concerns. Previous actions of the DoE had not always inspired such confidence. Things began to change after June 1989, when the Green Party achieved its highest ever share of the vote in European elections (15%). The Conservatives dropped behind Labour for the first time in a European election. A month later Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher implemented a wide-ranging ministerial reshuffle. One of her targets was the Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley, an abrasive right-winger with little sympathy for the green movement. Sir George Young, formerly one of Ridley's junior ministers, publicly called for him to be replaced by someone with 'more conviction and credibility'.