



The future of mobility

*If the bus is to play a leading role in the long-term future of urban mobility, we need to be **scanning the horizon now and sowing seeds of change** to ensure that a very different bus world stakes its claim to exist.*

*We shouldn't be spending time and energy implementing a retro 1980's governance model for yesterday's buses but be focused on **designing a new age of the bus looking toward 2030 and beyond.***

*This is the **twelfth** of fourteen weekly articles on what different aspects of that new bus future could look like and the kind of things we need to be sowing seeds for now if we are to truly **ride the wave of future opportunity.***

*We need to **be bold if we are to shine** over the next 40 years and do more than invest in a zero-emission fleet, tinker with governance and introduce the odd capped fare.*

Episode Twelve – What could possibly go wrong?

Episodes One to Eleven set out a bold, ambitious, high-level plan to inspire the development of a new golden age of the bus contributing to the UK Government's commitment to **Net Zero** by **2050**.

There is a view that, whilst recent operational and trading conditions have been challenging, the **long-term prognosis for the industry is positive** in light of its major potential to contribute to **combatting Climate Change** and **improving the urban environment**.

However, we cannot simply sit waiting for the **apple to inevitably fall from the tree**.

It is **not a given that buses will thrive in the medium to long term**. Yes, the industry has 'potential' but that **potential needs to be nurtured, developed and directed in the right way** if it is to be realised.

We need to work at it.

These articles are a **direct result of thinking through how the industry needs to develop over the next 25 years to realise its true potential.**

Understand and grasp the **positives which we can control.**

It will not all be plain sailing - there will be **challenges to overcome, storms to endure and battles to fight to earn that golden future.**

In this **Episode**, we identify **10 broad threats** to that future which we need to **address, confront and manage if the bus is to thrive.**

Climate Deniers and Conspiracy Theorists

Let's just get this one out of the way first!

There are **those who believe that Climate Change simply does not exist** – it's just weather being unpredictable, and we should simply **go with the flow and it will all be fine.**

There are also plenty of **conspiracy theorists who will see something sinister** in any programme for change.

We need to **devote enough attention to keeping both in check** and in proportion and **vaporize the spurious theories** they profess but, broadly, democracy works, and, in that context, they will finish up as simply a noisy minority.

The majority, who fully accept that **Climate Change** is all too real, should never be complacent and **always be ready to challenge the Climate Deniers with factual evidence.**

Our Global Addiction to the Car

This risk is much more serious and **tops the genuine risk list for a reason.**

In the UK context, **Harold 'you've never had it so good' MacMillan**, UK Prime Minister of the 1950's broadly fired the starting gun on mass addiction to the car in the UK when he proudly said that **the man in the street could now afford his own motor car.**

About ten years later **Colin 'it will all end in tears' Buchanan** published the **seminal Report on car addiction and its ultimate consequences** entitled **'Traffic in Towns'** forecasting the *Carmageddon* the world was slowly sleepwalking into.

We can't say we weren't warned as **cars have gradually taken over all of our towns and cities and the roads in between** totally dominating the urban environment either stopped stationary in traffic jams or stopped stationary and parked everywhere!

A majority of the population honestly believe that civilised life requires immediate access to a car and the 'freedom' of mobility it allegedly provides. Harold MacMillan would no doubt be proud of the current UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak's defence of **the right of the motorist** in his *'Plan for Drivers'* **to motor wherever and whenever they choose.**

The **political reaction** to Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, **extending the city's Clean Air Zone to the outer suburbs should ring alarm bells across the country.** It is a stark reminder that the **car lobby is alive, alert and resistant to 'cold turkey'.**

Certain politicians will run scared of it.

Addiction to the car is deep seated with many of us, **even before we could walk, driving a toy car on the lounge carpet** and graduating to a real one on street as soon after our 17th birthday as possible.

Times and the mood of the population are quite definitely changing and younger generations, particularly, will push for change but the biggest hurdle to overcome is the **addiction which prevents people stepping back and absorbing the madness** that is **'traffic'** and its association with **'congestion'** and **'pollution'** and **'poor health'** and **'death'**.

Without a sea change in the attitude to **'traffic'**, an **Active Travel and Mass Transit First** environment will **not** thrive.

This threat, above all, needs work!

Labour Supply

An **Active Travel and Mass Transit First** future will **dramatically increase the number of front-line staff required** in the bus industry to drive, to supervise, and support customers - even with a proportion of autonomous vehicles.

It is **imperative that bus operators function with an abundance of drivers to deliver high standards of reliability.**

It is **unlikely that the numbers required will be available in the UK workforce** even with recruitment from a much more diverse pool of staff.

As a developed economy, it is **highly likely that there will be a major need for international recruitment** and, therefore, a reasonable pathway to **visas for internationally recruited staff is essential.**

Recent research published in *The Lancet* confirms that **plummeting birth rates in all major western nations will make them reliant on immigration for the remainder of this century.** To maintain public services and economic growth, **high income societies like the UK will have no choice but to rely on an influx of immigration from poorer countries in Africa with higher birthrates.**

Currently, the **door is closed to international bus drivers** working in the UK but, **unless that situation changes** in the next few years, **the necessary growth in fleet and service levels** to deliver the volume of modal shift required **will be impossible to deliver** due to staff shortage.

This, therefore, becomes the **second greatest threat to the bus realising its full potential** on the road to *Net Zero*.

Ambition, Imagination and Courage

Around **75% of current bus services** across the UK are **delivered by 5 major operating groups** – *Stagecoach, First, Arriva, Go Ahead and Mobico.*

Three of them are now **private equity owned** and it is distinctly possible that the other two may end up moving in the same direction.

Are they all **ambitious enough to engage with a commercial expansion strategy of this scale and nature** or would they shy away from it and prefer to settle into public sector contracting, **leaving the commercial risk to the public sector?**

Heaven help us if they do!

Executed well, the new golden age of the bus would be a **solid wave to ride over the next 25 years if the ambition, imagination and courage are there** amongst the operating industry and its many suppliers and stakeholders.

It requires **vision, imagination, ambition, competence and substantial investment** over a sustained period of time.

Starting now with a deadline of **2050** to reach **Net Zero** makes it **very manageable if there is clear alignment on the direction of travel.**

The prospect of **solid, ongoing organic growth** should serve as a strong incentive.

Franchising in English Mayoral Authorities

We have at least **4 of the Mayoral Combined Authorities in the North of England bogged down for the next 3 – 4 years simply delivering a governance change to a franchising model <yawn!>** where they will **own all of the buses and depots, absorb all of the commercial revenue risk and be responsible for the product design, retailing and marketing.**

Busy with governance - not substance!

The asset ownership issues **saddle them with substantial debt which does not apply in the London Model** where most of the bus and depot assets are on the Balance Sheets of the operators.

They have already produced **Business Cases** for their bus networks **over the next 40 years which**, apart from delivering a zero-emission fleet, **are pretty much silent on *Net Zero*, major modal shift and the transformation of the urban environment.**

All governance over substance!

Given the nature of the Strategic Cases in their Franchising Assessments, **the concept of an *Active Travel and Mass Transit First* urban mobility would not be out of place.**

The **threat turns on** whether they are capable of **funding, delivering and managing the kind of transformational growth** in the size and nature of their bus operations, **embracing the consumer marketing challenge**, and simultaneously **restructuring their urban infrastructure and highways in favour of the community instead of the car?**

In their **lemming like rush** to take control of their bus networks and wrap them in a 1980's operating model, they seem to have **failed to think through the long**

term potential trajectory of an industry they assumed was brain dead and on its last legs.

Episodes One to Eleven make it very clear that there is a **very positive and bright outlook for the bus** in the context of **delivering *Net Zero*** and the Franchised Networks are in danger of having '**misread the dress code**'.

Franchising was **all the rage with Ken Livingstone in the 1980's** but they should now have a **chat with Anna Hidalgo in Paris and Ravi Balla in New Jersey about 2030 and beyond to *2050***.

Following an ***Active Travel and Mass Transit First*** urban environment with their **asset heavy approach** to franchising would be a **huge and risky challenge**.

This may lead them to resist the approach unless they **change the risk profile** of their bus operations by **reverting to operator owned assets and the possibility of commercial concessions where operators take revenue risk** replacing franchised contracts.

This poses a huge dilemma **needing much thought and discussion** to unravel **if the bus is to play its full part in the delivery of *Net Zero***.

Scotland

Scotland has a **completely different problem** to overcome.

Urban franchising only arises as an issue in **Glasgow** or, to be precise, the whole Strathclyde Region. If Strathclyde moves in that direction all the same risks outlined above will also crystallise there unless their **Business Case for Franchising takes on a different character to the asset heavy '*not very London like*' version** currently preferred by Manchester, Liverpool, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

However, **Scottish bus policy is in a muddle!**

The good news is that it is **focused on modal shift, with a target, but no visible means of how that target will be delivered**.

Currently, **Scotland has no funding available for bus priority or investment** in improving the bus operating environment. All **the money is being spent on rail, ferries** or providing **free countrywide bus travel** on both local and long distance bus and express coach services for everyone under 22 and over 60 plus those with a disability.

Since the over 60's scheme was first introduced in the mid 2000's there has been a constant squeeze on its funding to the point where it is now pushing up fares for those aged between 23 and 59 – the very group who need to deliver **modal shift** from car to bus.

In addition to that pressure on core adult fares, the **burden of financing the concessionary scheme for the over 60's is also putting negative pressure on the network.**

Scotland is now in the position where **those holding free concessionary passes are seeing the services on which they can actually be used, decline!**

The **only hope of reversing that decline lies in solid investment in bus priority** and the operating environment but, **despite promising to spend an encouraging £500m in that area in 2020, only £26.9m has actually been spent so far** and now the Government has 'paused' any future spending as it **simply can't afford it!**

Ironically, Edinburgh **is** seriously concerned about the tyranny of the car and taking genuine steps to prioritise **Active Travel and Mass Transit** and **no visible intention of franchising** its bus network.

Strathclyde also openly acknowledge that they will **need serious levels of government money** if they proceed to franchise.

Hence the **muddle!**

A **solution to the free travel conundrum is outlined in Episode Nine on Funding** but, given the sheer scale of the Scottish free travel schemes, it will **take some time before the burden eases sufficiently to free up money for investment in both the bus and highway environments** to underpin an **Active Travel and Mass Transit First** approach to the **Net Zero** challenge.

As with the issue of Franchising in England, the whole **Scottish bus strategy needs thought and discussion if the bus is to play its full part in the delivery of Net Zero.**

Wales

Apart from the proposal to franchise the bus network, **Wales is much more aligned** with the broader **environmental aspects** of the proposals contained in

Episodes One to Twelve with its **ban on new road development** and default **20mph speed limits** in urban areas.

It is clearly taking the role of transport in delivering *Net Zero* seriously.

From the current starting position, it is possible to see how **Wales could align with the kind of actions** set out in **Episodes One to Eleven**.

On balance it is **more friend than foe** to the *Active Travel and Mass Transit First* approach to *Net Zero*.

Local Authority willingness and ability to deliver and fund the changes to the environment

It is not simply the bus industry which **needs to be ambitious, imaginative and courageous** in preparing a pathway to *Net Zero*. The proposals set out in **Episodes One to Eleven** require **substantial policy and investment decisions in every urban area** to create a **physical environment compatible with an *Active Travel and Mass Transit First*** urban mobility model.

With the tight **control exercised by central government in the UK on local authority spending**, it is a **challenge** which **also needs to be embraced by the UK government**.

The threat emanating from **local government policy** is **very much tied together with the success in addressing the addiction to cars** discussed above.

It is one and the same challenge. **Win the hearts and minds of the community and the local authorities and politicians will follow.**

Securing close alignment amongst allies

The vision of *Active Travel and Mass Transit First* urban mobility **requires a foundation of alliances, co-operation and partnership to succeed.**

It is imperative for **buses, trains, trams, taxis, bikes and scooters to accept that they are all on the same side** and need to present a **joined-up alternative to the car if the whole strategy is to succeed.**

Yes, **each mode needs to be innovative, dynamic, commercial and competitive** to attract consumers from their car to *Active Travel and Mass*

Transit but carefully balanced by the need to integrate and present an overall product superior to **'traffic'** and the car.

It would be all **too easy to fail to see the big picture and**, as a result, **lose the prize**.

Time to **know who your friends are** and learn to play nice.

Similarly, the **existential challenge of Net Zero** needs to be **underpinned by a strong political consensus** with national and local government and their leaders in what is, of necessity, a **long-term direction of travel over the next 25 years**.

Bus Design

The **current bus fleet** in the UK, including some of the shiny new zero emission models being delivered today, **is not all fit for this purpose**. Conventional **single door double decks on core urban services need to be replaced** by vehicles which lend themselves **to higher operating speeds and shorter dwell time** at stops, for example.

This is probably **sacred cow slaying time** in the UK context but needs must for the reasons spelled out in **Episode Two**.

Similarly, catering for **inter city travel and suburban commuting will require** the design of some **more stylish, comfortable vehicles** fit for that purpose.

The bus and coach **product on the street needs to raise its game** if this agenda is to succeed.

This needs **ambition, imagination and courage** on the part of **Operators, Highway Authorities and Bus Manufacturers working together**.

Conclusions

So, what **could** possibly go wrong?

The **battle for a sea change in the attitude to cars** in towns, cities and interurban roads simply **has to be won**.

We need to face up to the **need to embrace significant levels of immigration** to provide the scale of workforce required.

Notwithstanding the current debates about franchising and partnerships, we **need a reset of bus policy in England and Scotland, and some tweaks in Wales, to support the progressively greater role of the bus from 2030 and beyond** and the levels of investment and commercial risk that will entail.

We need a level of **shared vision, ambition and consensus between politicians, authorities, operators and the wider industry** which needs constructive thought and debate.

The **bus can clearly play a bigger role in the future** than it ever has in the past **but that is not a given.**

We all need to do the work.

Next Week

Episode Thirteen will draw together everything which has been discussed and proposed in **Episodes One to Twelve** and provide a summary of how we can **build a new era of the bus** over the next 25 years **as a core component of the UK's path to *Net Zero*.**