

In this issue we publish the second contribution in LTT's new initiative for 2025, exploring new ways of looking at transport in its widest possible context

## Alternative thinking about transport for a different future

There's been a very positive response to the launch of our LTT initiative to start a bigger discussion about how transport should sit in the wider scheme of things as society continues on a path of rapid technological, cultural and social change. We believe new thinking, concepts and paradigms are needed to test a much wider set of future scenarios about how transport fits into the total agenda for human life on our planet – and what expectations are realistic, feasible and sustainable.

The new Government has been setting its own new priorities; with a raft of new policy and legislation affecting transport.

But will all this bring about real change in the way we think about transport as part of a broader social, economic and environmental equation?

Is our attention still too focused on planning and providing individual modes for a familiar set of travel demands, lifestyles and mobility expectations- and getting long-cherished infrastructure wish lists fulfilled?

We want to publish new 'deep thinking' on this agenda – and have an open discussion arising from it. Culminating with an event in the summer where participants can leave their projects, campaigns and vested interests at the door and take part in a major ideas exchange. If you think you already know all the questions, and all

the answers, feel free to remain in the echo chamber as this might just not be the right forum for you.

If, to the contrary, you would like to contribute or be involved in this project, please get in touch with us.

*To get us started, in our last issue Duncan Irons from SYSTRA shared his own reflections on some shortcomings he believes are embedded in the current professional mindset about the role and expectations of transport planning.*

*This time, Professor Glenn Lyons considers what he feels are unwelcome forces blocking the way to a more sustainable transport future, and how best professionals can respond to such frustrations.*

*Do join the discussion with us on these issues!*

**Peter Stonham, Editorial Director**



**Deep  
Thinking  
Initiative**



## Looking for the light in a dark age

**By Professor Glenn Lyons**

The farewell speech from President Joe Biden from the White House last week warned the United States (perhaps the world) that “an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power, and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms .... a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of a very few ultra-wealthy people”

He recalled the 1961 farewell address of President Dwight D Eisenhower and mention of the dangers of the military-industrial complex with “the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power”. Six decades later, Biden was equally concerned about “the potential rise of a tech-industrial complex that could pose real dangers for our country as well.”

Alongside this, 2024 marked another record year for fossil fuel emissions globally and carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere; it was the hottest year on record. Meanwhile Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg has abandoned fact-checking and called for more “masculine energy”; and Elon Musk has been giving his advice to his acolytes on seemingly any topic, from his decaying social media

platform while offering the world rockets, chisel-edged sci-fi trucks, and the promise of an army of AI robots. Adding to the mix, a felony conviction has not halted the arrival of a new White House occupant, whose first acts have included leaving the Paris Climate Agreement and ending the US EV mandate.

If I was sat 30 years ago at the start of my transport planning career and someone had described the reality of 2025 to me, it would have seemed preposterous. It would have sounded like a future in which humanity was entering another dark age - characterised by a world stumbling into an unknown and unfathomable future, governed by forces outside anyone's real control.

And here we are, with this as a backdrop, able to hark back to the 1990s when we last had a Labour Government entering power and producing an integrated transport white paper. And we now dust off our expectations once again, from within our relatively comfortable transport planning bubble, as we're given the chance to advise government on what it could or must do in creating a new Integrated National Transport Strategy for England. Behind us is the government that had a weird 'plan for drivers',

and before us a mission-led government with a dominating 'plan for growth' in its sights - perhaps at the expense of other priorities.

Many of us would like to see reduced car dependence, more integrated, affordable and usable public transport, alongside promoting the importance of active travel. We call for better integration between land-use and transport planning. Moving with the changing times, we are now also expecting a vision-led approach (as if vision was absent in the past), a role for digital connectivity (because, as we are so fond of telling people, travel is a derived demand), and most importantly a commitment to tackling the climate crisis.

Give us the chance and we'll indulge ourselves again in a lengthy debate about why road pricing is needed and whether, why and how it could or should happen. We'll be only too pleased to revisit again the inputs to appraisal, and the economic arguments about saving travel time. We'll remind ourselves of the diversity of circumstance and need in society when it comes to accessibility and transport. We'll freshen up our effusiveness for 'intelligent' mobility solutions by tailoring new research agendas around how artificial



# Thinking about transport in a different future

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## Looking for the light in a dark age (*continued*)

*Continued from previous page*

intelligence is going to change transport for the better. We'll even laugh together at the false precision of the circumstances we are planning for but still allow it to draw our gaze, fascinated as we are, by analysing what the future could have in store with our 'reference case', 'core' and 'most likely' mindsets (and scenarios).

We're still a young profession, us transport planners. LTT itself is just approaching 40 and the Transport Planning Society is less than 30 years old. We've only had a professional qualification for just over half that time. We've been able to dream as we galvanise around what we see as ways to improve transport to better support society. Perhaps understandably we hoped those dreams would come true if we repeated our mantras often enough and generated enough publications and reports to tell the world that it made sense to be so.

And we sometimes get glimpses in the real world of our dreams. A brave political figure will lead change in the right direction, before their term of office concludes. Trends in behaviour will point in a direction that gives us hope. New imperatives emerge that suggest greater prospect for decisive action. A pandemic changes the ground rules. But often these are only fleeting glimpses. Meanwhile motor vehicles are getting bigger and heavier, the convenience of the private car remains addictive, cheap getaways by plane persist, social diversity and inequality become more not less apparent, land use and transport planning remain largely estranged, transport's emissions stubbornly resist going down, and 'congestion busting' is still a phrase used in headlines about new road building.

Can we really contemplate holding onto our dreams for another 30 years as transport professionals? Would that be naive? Will our commitment to the cause make those dreams come true? Or will politics, profit, and power trump the real interests of the planet and its people and shatter our dreams?

Can there be a happy ending – or at least some renewed confidence in the status quo of our professional pursuits and ruminations, and in our potential influence?

Regrettably there are two reasons I cannot give you very much comfort on that point.

One is the growing sense I have that pursuing the realisation of our transport planning goals is like a Sisyphean task – we push our hopes and ambitions up the long hard slope (sometimes nearly reaching the top) only for them to roll right back down before we start all over again (albeit that perhaps, just perhaps, we've chipped away a little at the scale of the task).

The other reason is the deep uncertainty I feel about the future – for our profession and for society. The uncertainty might play out in our favour, of course. Future conditions might emerge, such as changing trends and new shocks, that lend a Herculean hand to our Sisyphean task. Like, for example, the pandemic's impact on access to employment and leisure travel which lessened pressure on the transport network thanks to widespread uptake of flexible working and staycations. But hang on, don't I hear now that employers are driving their staff back to the office, and that airline and airport traffic are booming?

The uncertainty could alternatively spell more, not less, trouble. We may find ourselves increasingly feeling like deckchair attendants on the Titanic – busily debating and honing our craft, oblivious to the bigger issues dictating future conditions and prospects. In a recent workshop, someone suggested to me that we might not in future have the luxury of needing transport planners because all resources will be devoted to asset management and disaster management as extreme weather wreaks havoc on our ageing transport infrastructure, and on services. Maybe some of our skills will need to be transferable to that?

I certainly wouldn't pin my hopes on technology saving us. As other scholars have noted in the past, technology has a way of ironically being a cause of our problems that then more technology is brought in to try and solve. As Sir Colin Buchanan aptly put it in the 1960s, the motor car is a prime example of a mixed blessing. Why we might now think self-driving cars are the wonderful gift we've all been waiting for, is frankly beyond me.

Talk of 'technology fix' leads me to make the distinction between a simple problem, a wicked problem, and a predicament. A simple problem can be solved. For example, signal timings at a junction to minimise delay and maximise throughput of traffic.

A wicked problem is multi-dimensional and difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements and can therefore only be managed. For example, congestion, or social injustice. A predicament can be understood as an inevitability that is faced.

Much of what we deal with as transport planners tends towards wicked problems, such as the notion of sustainable transport. Perhaps some of what we deal with is a predicament. Maybe it is inevitable that in the current system of society, with its addiction to over-consumption, convenience and self-indulgence, the dominance of the car will endure.

As a transport planner passionate about creating a greener, fairer future, I need to manage my expectations in the light of all of the above. And I have finally settled upon a quote from Gandhi that helps guide me. "It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result."

For me, that means focusing on authenticity and the importance of stepping up and speaking out for what we believe in – sometimes reaching beyond our comfort zones to do the right thing, with a belief that individual actions accumulate to potentially become a sea-change. At its heart for me, transport planning is about supporting society. While a dark age may replace knowledge and understanding with ignorance, error, and the abuse of power, the need to support society endures.

So let us push the boulder again up the slope as transport planners, perhaps this time doubling down on how we take communities and politicians with us into the future with visions and realistically achievable actions. But can we do that? After all, the boulder is decidedly heavy. Can we afford not to?

Glenn Lyons is Mott MacDonald Professor of Future Mobility at UWE Bristol.

**Do you agree? Or disagree?**

**What's your thinking?**

**Join the Discussion at LTT/TAPAS**



LTT is keen to foster discussion and the exchange of ideas prompted by our deep thinking initiative.

Alongside the contributions in the fortnightly digital magazine we will post them on the expert discussion platform website [TAPAS.network](https://www.tapas.network), where further contributions can be made to take forward issues raised.

We also welcome suggestions for contributed articles and new topics to be the subject of this discussion.

Contact us at [hello@lttmagazine.co.uk](mailto:hello@lttmagazine.co.uk)