

Coward? Traitor?

by Tom Carbery

“Though cowards flinch
And traitors sneer . . .”

I trust I do not sneer, but I fear I am a traitor. A traitor, not to the Labour movement, or at least not yet to the Labour movement, but to the omnipresent defence of and advocacy of public transport.

As attentive readers of this column will recall I served for many years, first as secretary then as chairman, of PACE - Public and Co-operative Enterprise. Moreover, for some five or six years I was chairman of the Scottish Association for Public Transport. The cri de coeur of both these organisations was that Public Transport is good and the use of the private car was uneconomic and anti-social and impaired, if not quite destroyed, the atmosphere. It was and is predicted that horrendous things will occur if we continue to pollute the atmosphere to the extent we have been and are doing.

An Environmental Agnostic

Over the years I have become dis-encharnted: I am an environmental agnostic - I no longer believe. Or, to put it another way, I cannot work myself up into a tizz and accept the declaration, akin to that of some evangelical groups, to the effect that “the end of the world is nigh!” The first nudge down the road of disenchantment came from the hypocrites and their associates of the NIMBY lot. Thus I recall being invited with others to a British Rail - sponsored dinner in a city hotel to discover how we could persuade more folk to leave the car at home and travel to town by train. Memory suggests there were 15/20 at the dinner. When it was over and we made our farewells it transpired I was the only one going for a train to convey me to the delights of suburbia. The others including the B.R. executives, were all going home by car. Worse - they did not have the good grace to look embarrassed.

The Strathclyde Buses

The second factor in my abandonment of the faith declaration “public transport is good!” is the state and running performance of the Strathclyde buses. Their recent and existing manner of operating results in the passengers being shaken and stirred, being bounced, shoogled, juggled, thrown, jerked, jolted and knocked about like balls in a pin-ball machine.

This did not occur some sixty years ago when I travelled by bus to school.

So what is the variable or even variables?

There are diverse possible explanations:-

I am older.

The buses are older.

The drivers are less competent.

The drivers are less careful.

The clutches and brakes are more volatile.

The traffic is heavier.

The roads are less even.

There may be still more variables. What I know is two fold. First, the treatment which I and others receive is very akin to and reminiscent of that for which we used to pay sixpence at fun-fairs - but then it was self-inflicted torture. Moreover if it is hazardous and frightening when one has no parcels it is all compounded at geometric progression when one has baggage or parcels or both.

Such are the delights that one enjoys when the bus comes.

As a sort of hors d'oeuvre one has to wait for the bus. Ostensibly there is a time-table but that has as much relation to reality as an editorial in Pravda or Izvestia at the peak of the Stalin years.

Then again, the 'regulations' have it that there is no smoking, no spitting, no drinking, no eating, on the buses. But yobbos do all of that, and more forby, while drivers apparently conclude that discretion is the better part of valour. Action is neither taken by them - nor against them.

The Case for the Car

Frankly I would use my car into town, if I could. When I was in the University I was in a position to use a car because I paid £120 a year (at 1990 prices) for a space in one of our car-parks. I could have such a space in the car-park below my existing office. It would cost me £1500 to £1800 a year and would require a 53-point turn to get in and out, for as I say in my own version of Esperanto, "je suis ein multo duff driver!!"

The overall effect is that when I have to go out of town I go by car if I can. When this occurs the car leaves when I wish to leave: instead of my

waiting for the bus, the car awaits me. If I want the heater on - it is on: if I want the heater off - it is off. The same control applies to the opening and closing of windows. Despite my self-declared incompetence at manoeuvring, the car proceeds at the speed I decree and, remarkably, slows and halts without the jerking, struggling, throwing, bouncing of the buses. If I want the radio on or a tape played I can have it: if I want silence I can have it. The only disadvantage is that I cannot travel and read - yet, that said, in bus travel reading is difficult and occasionally impossible. As for attempting crosswords the throwing - about results in answers to the clues going into inappropriate squares.

The Prospect

My former colleagues in SAPT and such bodies tell me that they seek not only fewer cars on the roads and more people travelling by public transport but also better public transport facilities. I readily agree that trains could be made acceptable, I can readily believe this could be achieved because the trains are almost acceptable as it is. That the buses can be brought up to standard and operated smoothly by the existing cadre of Formula One drivers seems to me to be markedly more problematic. Indeed I reckon it cannot be done without a massive investment in capital equipment, manpower selection, training and discipline and even heavier investment in urban road maintenance - all in all a programme of such intensity and duration that I do not believe it will be achieved in my lifetime even if it started tomorrow. And it will not start tomorrow.

Meanwhile I watch with interest the activities and pronouncement of my former colleagues. Occasionally some of them wave to me at traffic lights but I never seem to see them on buses. Do they all travel by train - except of course when they are in cars that stop at traffic lights?

The Author

Professor Carbery recently retired from the University of Strathclyde where his teaching had ranged over Economics, Public Administration, Government - particularly British and American - and Information Technology. Some of his wider areas of service are the Labour movement, consumer affairs (including his book *Consumers in Politics* and chairmanship of the Southern Scotland Electricity Consumers' Committee of OFFER), broadcasting and the press and the Co-operative movement.