Automobiles and Socio-Economic Sustainability – Do we need a Mobility Bill of Rights?

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Abstract

This essay argues for the establishment of a Mobility Bill of Rights. That the current car system is not sustainable in environmental terms has been much discussed in academic circles and is increasingly accepted in wider society, as reflected by governmental attempts at reform. The current trend for remodelling this car system largely involves the substitution of petrol/diesel for potentially more ecologically sound methods of powering the vehicles such as electricity. Attempts to reach environmental sustainability in this manner do little to impact on social or economic sustainability and thus will fail to address the triple bottom line. Rather, reliance on automobiles in the present vein may continue trends for mobility-related exclusion. To tackle this we need a debate on how the transport needs of ordinary people can be met.

Key Words

Cars define the modern age and there are few more powerful signifiers of contemporary consumer capitalism than private automobility. The presumption for vehicle ownership is writ through twenty-first century life to the extent that there are over a billion cars on the road – likely to double in the next two decades.[1] The number of automobiles reaches new heights each year as the world's fastest growing economies such as Brazil, Russia, India and China aspire to Western levels of car consumption – while Europe and the US show little sign of reducing their ownership levels.

This car system, though, is patently not sustainable. Cars are at the forefront of global oil usage and CO2 emissions, exerting a detrimental impact on the planet that will impede the lives of future generations.[2] One of the main alternatives being pursued by governments around the world are electric vehicles. Indeed, the UK's coalition administration committed £500 million to encourage consumer take-up of electrics.[3]

However, electric cars represent evolution not revolution. While they might be more environmentally sustainable than internal combustion engines (though not necessarily),[4] they offer little on socio-economic sustainability. Environmental justice, rather than social equity or economic fairness, has been the focus of much sustainable transport policy and activity to date despite the three tenets all being necessary for true sustainability.

As a result, we see a reduced ambition to merely curb some of the environmental harms of the car system with such technological fixes offered in place of broader visions to exert wider societal benefit through mobility reform. Instead of the current approach, we require policies balancing effective fiscal, planning and other soft measures to manage excessive mobility and over-reliance on car-based travel whilst improving accessibility through focused investment into appropriate sustainable modes. It is essential that issues of socio-

economic justice be brought into discussions of sustainable transport, ensuring that planning and development aims for an equitable distribution of social benefits.[5]

In particular, little is being done to address the issue of transport poverty. In the UK, 21 million households spend at least 10% of their income on transportation according to the RAC Foundation.[6] For the average household, transport is the single biggest cost at 14% – the majority of this being spent on owning and running a car. Those without a car make, on average, half the number of journeys as those who have automobiles and thus miss out on many of the opportunities available to those with their own vehicle.

Cars are generally considered a necessity in the countryside. Low population density means housing stock is often located at too great a distance from key services to be practicable for active travel while public transport infrastructure is often inadequate and declining further with cuts under austerity. Research from the RAC Foundation shows more need for cars in rural areas.[7] The 85% living in the countryside would find it very difficult to go without a car, against 69% in towns and cities. Rural residents need their car more for work (81% to 48%), medical issues (69% to 38%), school (74% to 36%), shopping (73% to 46%) and a social life (68% to 27%).

This countryside car dependency creates potential for social exclusion amongst vulnerable groups. Those too young, old, with a disability or employment issues are all threatened with isolation from mainstream society when access to services equates to access to cars. As travel is now so essential to avoid being left behind, mobility should be considered part of the commons of shared community assets: a resource to which all citizens are entitled.[8]

Discussions of the commons usually involve natural resources such as air, water and soil but mobility should also be included due to its centrality in twenty-first century life. As such, we cannot allow mobility to be carved up based on the ability (financial or otherwise) of citizens to own cars. That some might be shut out of ordinary life because they cannot afford to run a car challenges notions of a fair and democratic society. We must work to earn money, we need medical services for good health, shops are necessary to buy food and clothing, and leisure facilities offer a means for socialisation. To tackle inequality, we should reconceptualise the way we understand transport: mobility must be seen as a right.

Energy and Fuel Poverty

In establishing our rights to mobility, we can learn from the work Fuel Poverty Action has undertaken on fuel poverty in recent years.[9] They produced an Energy Bill of Rights to protect citizens' ability to heat their homes. This treatise was taken up by UK politicians and launched as an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons by Caroline Lucas MP (former leader of the Green Party) in late 2014 and, amongst others, was sponsored by the (now) Labour of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn MP.

The Bill outlines eight requests, starting with the principle that we all have the right to affordable energy meeting our basic needs to cook food and keep warm. Other demands include abolishing standard charges that penalise those who use less, curbing the ability of

energy companies to disconnect those who cannot afford to pay and calling for democratic public ownership of energy utilities.

Traditionally, a household has been considered fuel poor if more than 10% of income is spent on energy to maintain an adequate standard of warmth. In the government's Annual Fuel Poverty report, it emerges that over two million UK households are currently living in fuel poverty: a little over 10% of the population.[10] Unemployed households are worst hit with almost a third of these fuel poor. Depressingly, the findings show that 10,000 Britons were killed by not being able to properly heat their homes in 2013.

The Energy Bill of Rights seeks to combat this dangerous marker of deprivation and there must be a similar move to shine a lens on transport poverty. As yet transport poverty has not been widely discussed, little research exists and there is no commonly accepted definition. It may be the case that simply transferring home energy costs to transport outgoings is the most appropriate means for tracking this phenomenon. There may also be more sophisticated ways to measure such as the three factors combined by Sustrans: time taken to access essential services; distance to the nearest bus or train station, and; family income.[11] They estimate half of the nation's local authorities containing high risk areas – mostly in rural areas.

While the UK's rate of fuel poverty is unacceptably high, transport poverty should also be given attention, especially if the RAC Foundation figures were to be given credence suggesting tenfold the amount of households struggling with transport costs over fuelling their homes. As such, the UK needs a similar Mobility Bill of Rights that builds upon the clear and concise set of demands made with relation to energy. Proposals must be people-centred and ensure that the needs of ordinary citizens and their communities take priority over the business-centred capitalist profit motive that dominates in neo-liberal ideology.

The Energy Bill of Rights gains much of its power from being a simple and easily communicable document so I have attempted to keep this new Mobility Bill of Rights as close to the original as possible. The two issues have strong parallels making it possible to treat mobility in a similar way to energy. What follows is a first draft adaption of the Energy Bill of Rights for mobility purposes.

Mobility Bill of Rights

1 We all have the right to affordable transportation to meet our basic needs.

Everybody should be able to travel where they need to go when they need to be there.

2 We all have the right to transportation that does not harm us, the environment, or the climate.

This means shifting from private automobiles powered by fossil fuels to alternatively fuelled vehicles, especially those with a renewable energy source as well as increased public transport provision and more opportunities for active travel.

3 We all have the right to transportation that does not threaten health, safety, water, air or the local environment of a community.

This means addressing harmful automobile emissions at a local level, most pertinently, though not exclusively, in more built up urban areas.

4 We all have the right to a fair transport pricing system that does not penalise those that use less.

There is a need to ensure that those who need to use a car for regular journeys are not prevented by restrictive purchase costs and taxation. At the same time, it is important that pricing for private automobility operates on a sliding scale to penalise overuse of more destructive transport choices when viable alternatives are available (and feasible). Reform of train and bus ticketing is necessary to protect those who might only travel short distances but are tied into larger zonal fare systems, which do not reflect the actual journey travelled and those regular commuters who cannot buy season tickets up front.

5 We all have the right to not be cut off from society.

People should not become socially excluded because they cannot afford the mobility required to access key services.

6 We all have the right to not be forced to use a car.

Nobody should feel compelled to buy and run an automobile in order that they can properly participate in the wider society.

7 We all have the right to a public transportation system that is owned by us and run in our interests.

Public transport should not run in the interests of big business and shareholders. Mobility should be conceived of as a public service, which the state must be responsible for facilitating in the interests of all in a democratic and accountable manner. There is also an important role for local community ownership.

8 We all have the right to efficient, inviting mobility options that do not adversely contribute to resource depletion.

This must pay special regard to the most vulnerable in society: namely, the young, the elderly, the disabled, the unemployed and those with uncertain incomes.

Next Steps

Such a Bill puts the emphasis on the state to provide adequate alternatives to private automobility that ensures no-one faces the choice between crippling debt and marginalisation from society if they cannot afford to run a car. Such demand does not simply mean the state subsidising transport but, rather, looking at mobility in a broader context that also includes localism and the ways that grassroots projects can be facilitated in opposition to centralisation as well as the great potential provided by the internet to overcome some spatial barriers. If cars are needed, more work to make alternative fuels more affordable is vital, as well as promoting alternate ownership/usage models. Options for sustainable living must be made affordable as a matter of urgency. Planning decisions and the location of key services must also take into account mobility options beyond private

car ownership and road building. Free market economics has led to spatial development functioning with the tacit assumption of private car ownership and it should be the responsibility of the state is to protect citizens from the worst excesses of such market forces.

Having offered an embryonic Mobility Bill of Rights, it is vital that others can now pass comment on it in order to make progress in collecting a set of principles that truly reflects the essential transportation needs of twenty-first century capitalist society. These eight points are not presented as an authoritative set of conclusions on contemporary mobility. Far from it, as the spirit in which this set of principles is offered to initiate a discussion as to what needs to be covered. The rights set out in this document are all up for discussion: any and every reader is invited to critique them and, thereon, to revise, restructure and reform the Bill of Rights to better suit their vision of mobility (as they are to throw out the idea altogether and offer an alternative means to meet mobility needs sustainably).

In collaboration, I hope that we might move forward. I am optimistic that a community of commentators can help start the process towards the construction of a Bill that properly reflects the experiences of a wide array of ordinary people: this document should make points that are readily recognisable as relevant and important to the lives of the masses. At some point, wider public engagement will, of course, be crucial as any workable solution to transport issues should not and cannot be restricted an elite of academic research or policy-makers. Of course, the model can be adapted for cultures, nations and states quite different to the British standpoint from which this document was written.

In order to achieve reach towards this lofty goal of wider dialogue, it is important that the Bill of Rights be shared as widely as possible – in academia, the third sector, policy circles and beyond. This brief essay represents but the very beginning of what will likely be a very long and arduous process but it does provide an important first step. It establishes a starting point from which we could and should talk about how to meet the transport needs of the many in contemporary society without compromising the needs of those in the future by discussing such sustainable mobility in terms of the basic rights to which all citizens should be entitled.

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