



alliance against road building
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24th February 2006

Chairman Tim Yeo MP
Environmental Audit Committee
House of Commons

Dear Mr. Yeo,

Reducing Carbon Emissions from Transport

Introduction

Road Block is an alliance of groups and individuals campaigning against road-building. It was launched in response to the U-turn in transport policy, where the Government's original commitments to a policy of traffic reduction were abandoned for the old-fashioned notions of predict-and-provide, which characterise present policy. The present massive roads programme is in direct contradiction to the logic and spirit of the stated concerns of Government for a policy of environmental protection, sustainability, social inclusion and integration.

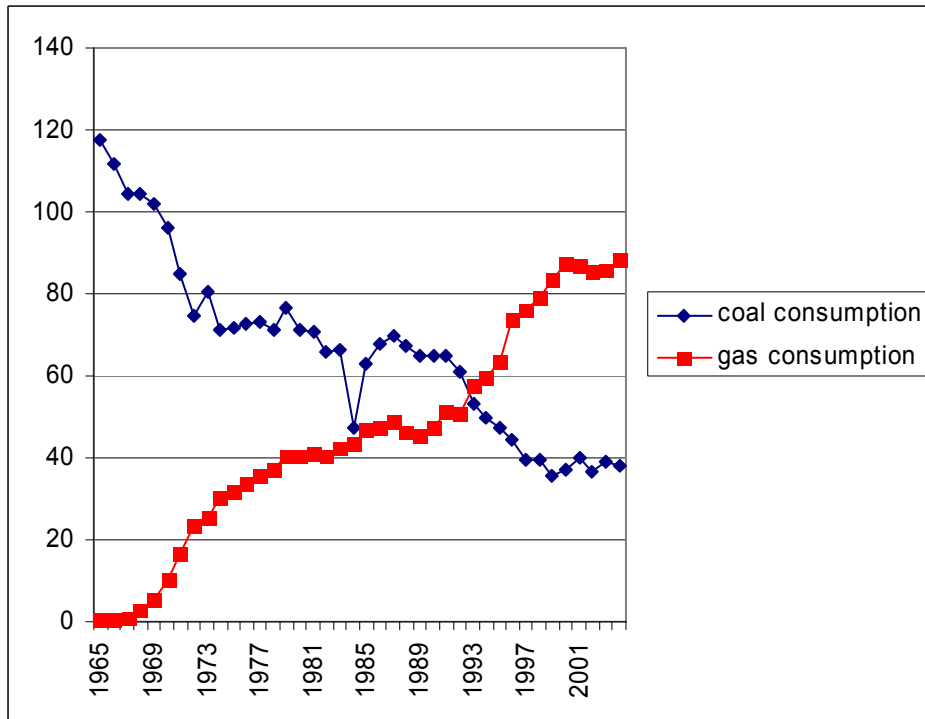
Climate Change

Nothing so well illustrates the move away from the assertion that *'the Environment is at the heart of government policy'* as the faltering commitment of the Government to action on climate change. This Government has made great play on the world stage of its greenhouse gas commitments, stressing how it would meet not only its Kyoto commitment of 8% below 1990 levels of CO₂ by 2008-2012; not only its EU commitment of 12.5% below 1990 levels by 2010; but would meet its own standard of 20% below 1990 levels by 2010 (note that none of these levels comes near what Climate Change scientists say is necessary to avert disaster, especially considering it leaves out the worst potential emitter - the aviation industry¹). The government has given up on its boasted 20% target but has consistently boasted (Ministers like Margaret Beckett and Elliott Morley for example) until very recently that it *'is on course to meet its Kyoto targets'*.

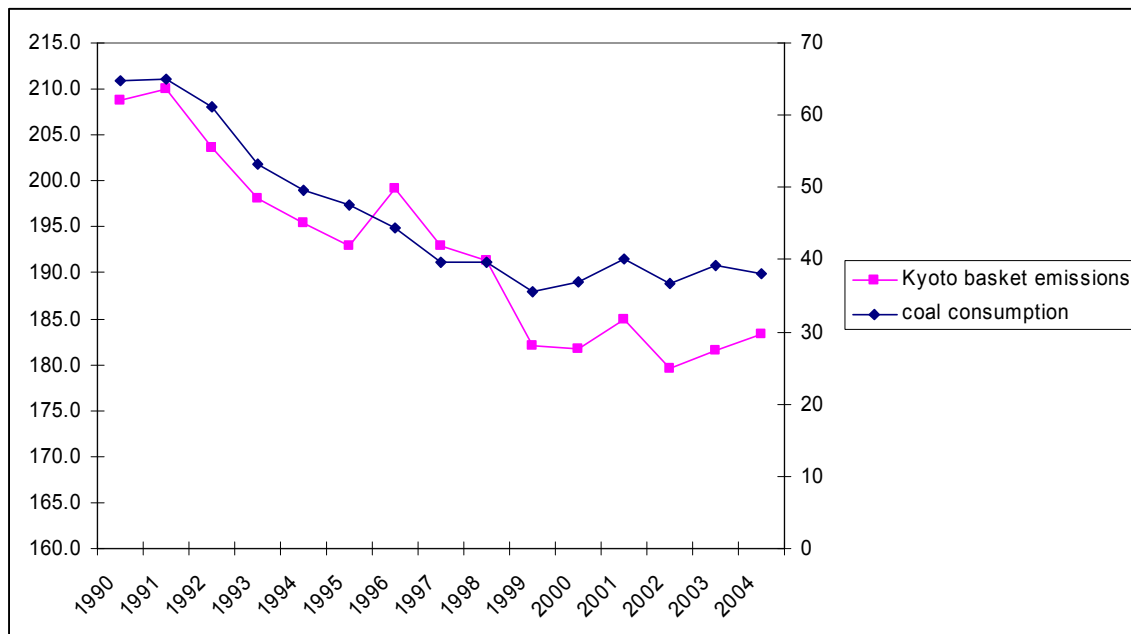
If this were true, it would be very difficult to assert that it had anything to do with government measures to reduce emissions. The main contributor to Britain's decline in greenhouse gas emissions has been the trailing effect of the destruction of the British coal industry and the flight

¹ Clearly the protection of the profligate aviation industry is the greatest scandal of climate change, but your press release precludes discussion of this.

to gas (coal energy from oxidising carbon – output CO₂; gas energy from oxidising carbon and hydrogen – output CO₂ and water).

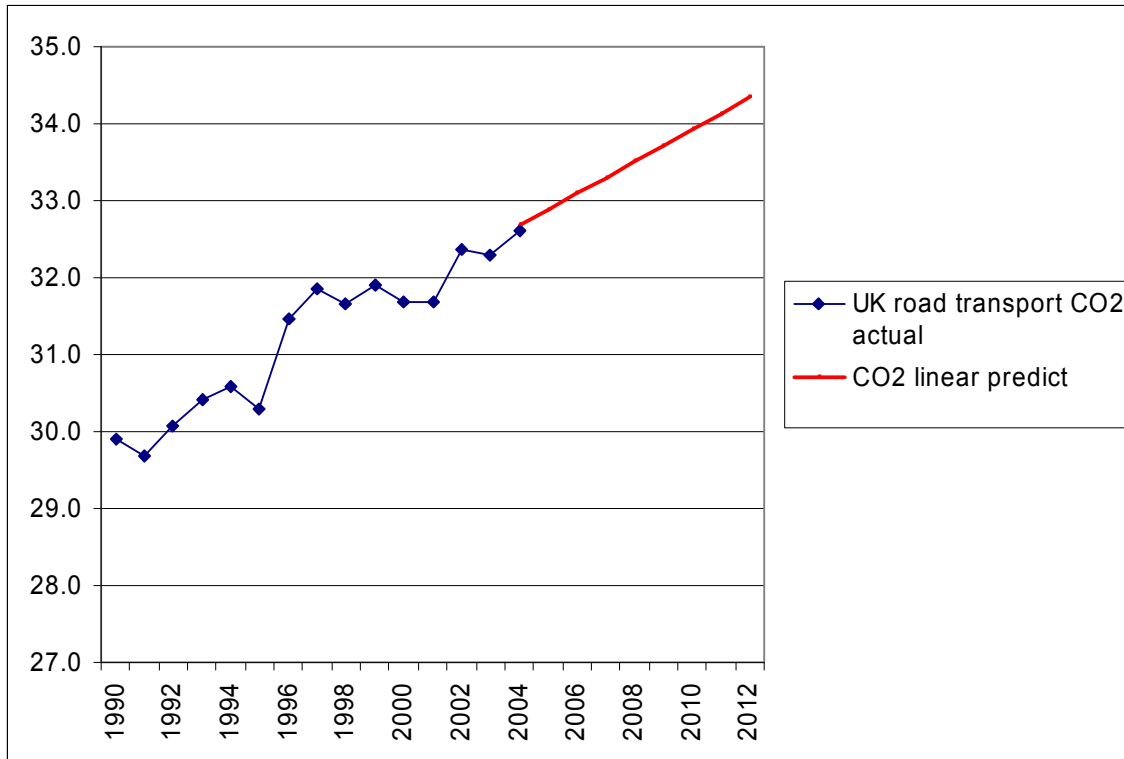


The Kyoto progress merely appears to pick up the tail end of the coal decline:



The important thing is that the coal effect is bottoming out (reflected in the graphs for the energy industry generally). What we know about road transport, however, is that the emissions are

rising (where the energy industries and other industries have declined by about 12% [2004 on 1990], road transport has increased by about 9%:



The mythology promoted by the DfT and DEFRA is that automobile technology will ensure new efficiencies. Technology clearly is improving all the time, but automobile technology is a mature technology – unless there are fundamentally new insights into the technology (and there haven't been for 40 years or more) the normal model of technology development may be expected to apply – i.e. incremental efficiency gains get smaller with time. There is no obvious sign that the growth in road transport emissions is asymptotically slowing – indeed we can pretty well fit a straight line by normal statistical least squares processes - the red graph above extrapolates the trend.

So industry emissions are apparently bottoming out, the residential emissions are rising (not shown here) and the transport emissions are rising, without prospect of remission. The net effect is becoming obvious in the tail of the Kyoto graph. The bottoming out of the Kyoto basket appears to have occurred at 2001. While the data does not permit too much extrapolation, the current trend in the Kyoto basket puts the figure at the end of the Kyoto window (2012) at -5% on 1990 levels instead of our commitment of -8%, and at the 2010 point, instead of our commitment under the EU of -12.5% (and our own boast of -20%), we will achieve only about -6.5%. In all cases the situation continues to worsen into the future.

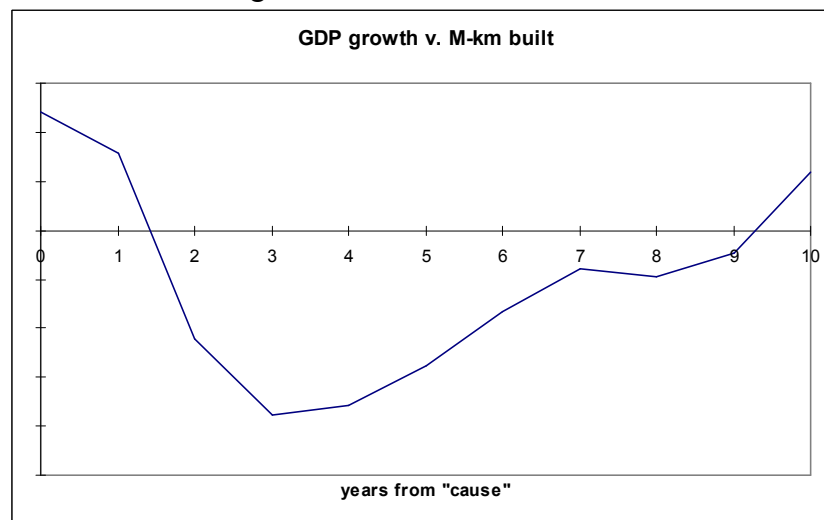
Why is Road Transport Protected?

Apart from the particular disgrace of air transport, road transport appears to be given special dispensation by Government to go on polluting. We do not understand why this should be so. It seems extraordinary to us that central government is actually going out of its way to encourage

profligate use of resources for an activity which appear not to confer any net economic benefit on the nation. Compared with manufacturing or financial service sectors of the economy, which clearly are wealth-generating, it is not clear to us how the road transport sector is contributing net value.

It appears to be assumed that road transport is an unqualified good in the economy. Yet such studies as there have been (e.g. the Blueprint studies of Professor Pearce) have shown that road transport externalises about $\frac{2}{3}$ of its costs (taxes collected in hypothecation amount to about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the quantifiable externalised costs). Without road transport paying its true costs it is hard to see why one should assume that it represents an overall economic good for the nation. Indeed there appears to be no evidence from the overall statistics that investment in road infrastructure has an economic benefit.

We can, for example, relate economic growth to the length of new road built. As an example we can mathematically correlate a time series of GDP growth rate and motorway-km built per year.² If we do this we for 1957-2004 we get the curve below:



What this mathematically signifies is that, on average, across the nation, a year or so after building a road there is a negative economic benefit (as one would expect from any investment – all cost and no return), but not only does this not recover, but it gets worse, and overall for more than 10 years after the investment the statistics indicate that the economy tends to suffer from the investment (if the conventional, government view of the economic benefit of roadbuilding were correct this curve should be for the greater part positive).³

² General trends of measures are not sensibly correlated, since unrelated things that happened to increase with time (hamburger consumption and mobile phone usage for example) would show correlation. What are sensibly tested for correlations are the fluctuations on trends – economic growth rate and miles of new road construction per year are fluctuating quantities – if the fluctuations correlate then this is prima facie evidence that the quantities are related.

³ It might be argued that the trend of this correlation suggests a move into the positive after 10 years and thus road building represents a long-term investment. In fact continuing the graph to 20 years does show a brief interlude of positive benefit, followed by a further plunge into the negative; but this is in any case to push the statistics too far into the noise – correlating over 20 years on 50 years of data is highly suspect.

We are not saying that transport, including road transport, is not necessary to the wellbeing of an economy, merely that the evidence suggests that road transport is at a level beyond economic usefulness. The famous observation that Glasgow supermarkets sell milk from Dorset, when there are plenty of cows in Scotland, is a simple demonstration of a distorted economics, which we can assume is brought about by road users not paying the true costs of their activity.

Road transport is probably, therefore, a net consumer of wealth. And yet compared with other economic activity it is considered less necessary to tackle its adverse climate change effects. The DfT may have adopted a PSA committing itself to reduce greenhouse gases in line with the overall EU commitment and enshrining an aim to meet the more stringent 20% objective, but there is no evidence yet that it is actually going to do anything. As seasoned observers of the DfT we know that it will not do anything unless the top level of government forces it to.

We would observe for example that the DfT still justifies its road investment by its COBA assessment which gains its presumed benefit of investment from increasing the traffic. The DfT is certainly planning huge increases in road infrastructure, all of which will increase traffic and emissions (quite apart from the resource use and emissions from the activity of construction itself).

Where did we go wrong?

The intellectual argument on road traffic was won more than 10 years ago. Government acknowledged that *'we cannot build our way out of congestion'* - road building merely generates traffic and solves no problems. Parliament acknowledged that there was too much traffic 10 years ago, but in 1998 the Government effectively emasculated the Traffic Reduction Bill by promising good intentions ('trust us') – John Prescott (Guardian 6/6/97): *"I will have failed if in five years time there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car. It's a tall order but I urge you to hold me to it"*. And the Secretary of State for the Environment (Today programme 1/12/1997): (we will deliver) *"a major change in the use of transport"* and bring about *"the reduced use of cars and vehicles on the road"*.

So what happened? The Fuel Protest was the excuse for the U-turn, but the scale of the protest does not explain this. The actual Fuel Protest was a tiny affair compared with environmental protests – at its peak fewer people were involved in picketing the refineries than were involved on the construction site every day for 5 months at Twyford Down for example. The protest only had its effect at the petrol pump as a result of media hysteria and the police not taking any of the sort of action they have always been very happy to take with environmental protest.

The ability to make the U-turn was undoubtedly partly down to a personal anti-environmentalism at the heart of government, at considerable odds with the posturing on climate change there. But the promised traffic reduction path was also undoubtedly undermined by the ever subtle workings of the DfT – the old *trahison des clerics*. Opponents of roadbuilding soon realised what was going on. For example, the discovery by Government of what everyone knew, that building roads generated traffic, was brilliantly subverted by the DfT. Where most people would think that adding traffic was only making a manifest problem worse, the DfT began computing benefit from it. The COBA process now explicitly adds benefit to the appraisal of a road scheme, by considering induced traffic is the realisation of an opportunity to make more journeys.

Now the DfT is as big a road-builder as it ever was under the discredited *Roads for Prosperity* policy. Major schemes are now promoted by as gung ho a Highways Agency as ever. The supposed new deal of 1997 was suborned in dozens of ways. The language of environmentalists was taken over. Objectors at Inquiries found that roads were being astonishingly represented as performing an environmental purpose, that ‘sustainability’ was absorbed into the oxymoronic notion of ‘sustainable growth’, that even ‘integration’ was suborned into the notion that new roads allowed local authorities to introduce public transport.

In the infamous multi-modal studies, consultants, with a long pedigree of business in highway planning, would supposedly examine the transport requirements of corridors, but only come up with new roads as fundable schemes and righteous public transport future wish lists that they knew would be unfundable.

What can be done?

If we believed that the DfT actually means to abide by the PSA commitment it has asserted then it takes very little imagination to think of how they could achieve climate change gas emission reduction.. Having observed how the wishes of Parliament expressed in the Road Traffic Reduction Bill and the international commitments we have made on Climate Change, have been suborned by the DfT, however, we have very little faith that they will mend their ways.

As we have said, very little can be expected from improvements in the technology of motor vehicles. The other greatly misleading hope that Government expresses is for increased use of biofuels. It is now clear that the market for biofuels is driving destruction of large areas of Amazonian and Borneo jungles. How the clearance of rainforest, the great sink of CO₂, can be reckoned to assist the combating of global warming is beyond any sensible imagining. And the use of scarce land for fuelling motor cars in the rich west, when 2 billion people on this planet are short of food, is simply monstrous.

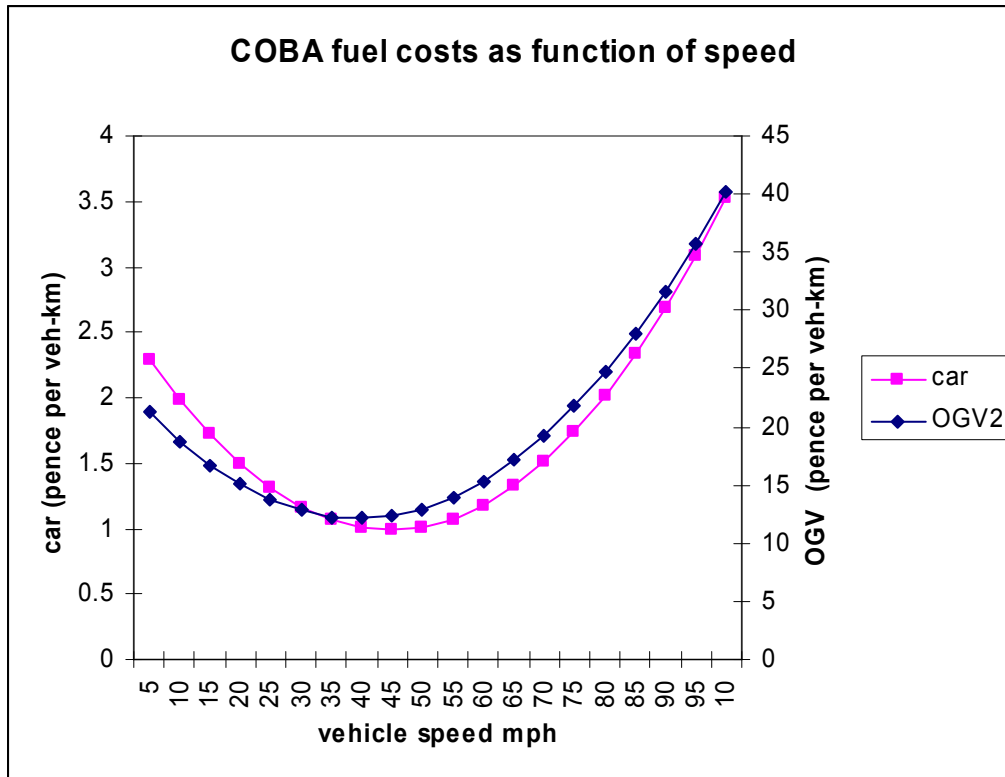
The single most effective thing that could be done is to change the purpose and structure of the Highways Agency. If government were the least bit serious about tackling climate change it would order an instant moratorium on all road building. This should not be a moratorium of the dishonest kind that we had ten years ago, that could be subtly undermined by the assiduous workings of civil servants, but a real acknowledgement that the age of road building was over. As such the Highways Agency would have no more responsibility for planning and building roads, but merely maintaining them.

As we have said it is obvious what measures can be taken to reduce climate change emissions. Essentially we need to reduce road traffic. The obvious process for this in the short term is to step back on the fuel price escalator. No tax is more fair and equitable – firstly the road user is merely beginning to pay some of the huge externalised costs he/she is placing on society, and secondly it is obviously much better/fairer to tax polluting activity than, say, income.

In the longer term, satellite-based road pricing is much more discriminating – it can tackle road traffic where it most does damage (i.e. where it most externalises its costs). Actually we do not understand why the government sees road pricing as such a distant prospect (global warming and our failure to meet our climate commitments are decidedly short term). This can have nothing to

do with the technology as is asserted, since the technology already exists – it is merely a matter of government will.

Additionally we ought to reduce the speed of traffic, since firstly this reduces the emissions of a given trip and secondly, slowing traffic down will increase the time of trips and through elasticity factors deter a certain fraction of trips from being made or divert those trips to other more environmental modes.



From the COBA manual assessment of fuel consumption costs, which directly map to CO₂ emissions, we see that cars minimise their emissions per kilometre if they travel at 45mph and large goods vehicles at 40mph. A simple immediate measure would be to lower the motorway and dual carriageway maximum speed to 60 mph and the national maximum speed limit elsewhere to 50mph. Provided this was properly policed this would also have a much-needed additional benefit of reduced accidents – we consider the Government has done far too little to tackle the lingering disgrace of road accidents. If road pricing were introduced speed becomes a factor in pricing and can additionally be used to prosecute excessive speed.

Conclusion

Action on Climate Change is long overdue. Aviation is the worst offender, but road transport has to be tackled. This needs a fundamental reappraisal of our attitudes and policies. It will require restructuring of the DfT to take on the role of encouraging sustainable transport policy. We must stop building new roads and must reduce traffic on existing roads. The polluter must be made to appreciate the damage he/she is doing.

We must do this quickly – there is no long term in this. The imperative is urgent. But if it were not for the dangers of climate change we would have to adjust to a lower energy world anyway, as a result of the depletion of resources following Peak Oil. Restructuring our society, rethinking our priorities towards a more sustainable society now will help us as this other imperative begins to bite.

Should the Government take its responsibilities seriously there will no longer be the necessity for an organisation such as ours or the myriad campaign groups across the country that we support and that support us. We would enter such oblivion thankfully and would be able to get on with our lives.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C J Gillham', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Gillham