2. The Case for Controls

If road building by itself will not solve our problems, there are only two alternatives. We must either permit the situation to continue much as it is, or even to deteriorate further, or we must find some way of making better use of roads. The prospect of an indefinite continuation of the present situation is sufficiently disagreeable to make a search for better ways of using the roads well worthwhile. A detailed discussion of the possibilities will be found in Chapter 9, but they all have one thing in common. They all imply some departure from the principle of the unrestricted, or indiscriminate, use of the roads; the idea that any vehicle may use any road at any time. But any suggestions that contravene this principle tend to arouse strong resistance, among some influential people at least, and are accepted, if at all, only with the greatest reluctance. It is largely because of this feeling that so little has been done to explore the possibilities. The feeling is understandable but completely misplaced and nothing is more important than to dispel it as thoroughly and as early as possible.

A number of quotations will illustrate the attitude. The first one dates from 1927; no one would use quite this language today, but the attitude survives.

But shall we ever endure such a denial of individual liberty [as a policy of restricting the use of private cars in towns would represent]? If I am right in my opinion that the right to use the road, that wonderful emblem of liberty, is deeply engrained in our history and character, such action will meet with the most stubborn opposition. More street space and more road space will have to be provided whatever be the plan for it or the cost of it.¹

Distrustful though we find the whole idea, we think that some deliberate limitation of the volume of motor traffic in our cities is quite unavoidable. The need for it simply cannot be escaped.²
Some people would like to push us into a frame of mind in which it is considered anti-social to own a car; selfish to drive one; and positively sinful to take it into a built-up area. Of course traffic in towns creates a problem. . . . My approach to this problem is not to restrict, to hamper or to confine the motorist. Instead we must learn to cope with the motor car and to care for the motorist. . . .

Two feelings are revealed in these quotations. Any control or intervention by the authorities is seen as a restrictive act—one more encroachment by the state on individual liberty. Provision is seen as a positive, active policy, in contrast with restraint which is negative and defeatist.

This attitude presupposes that provision is in itself a possible policy, whereas, as has been seen, it could not produce the desired result. This misunderstanding produces others. The most important is the idea that we have a choice between a policy which involves some restrictions and a policy which does not. There is no such choice. All policies involve some restrictions, including the present policy. The present freedom to use a motor vehicle, or to move in other ways just how and when one pleases, turns out to be only a legal fiction. In practice travellers are prevented from moving about as they wish, not indeed by rules imposed from outside, but by other travellers. The choice is only between the restrictions inherent in the workings of the present system and rules consciously worked out in accord with some idea of the general advantage.

The fact that the restrictions inherent in the present situation do not take the form of rules and regulations makes it difficult to recognize them as restrictions at all. In addition, the present system has been with us so long that we tend to regard it as the natural state of affairs, and anything else as an aberration. We accept the priorities implicit in it without question, without perhaps even realizing that there are any. Nor would there be any if the system worked according to the theory, with provision made for all travellers and all activities. But because such provision is impossible, conflicts arise which are settled according to a very questionable set of priorities.

The first conflict, which is too familiar to need emphasis, is between vehicles and the environment. The rule that 'any vehicle may use any road at any time' ensures that vehicles will always win this conflict, which tends to spread from the main
roads to quieter side roads, as drivers increasingly seek quicker and less congested routes. The only protection that the residents or others affected have is that the design of the network may be such that drivers do not want to use those streets because they would gain no advantage from doing so.

The second conflict is between travellers by motor vehicle and pedestrians and cyclists. Other things being equal, one should presumably start with the principle that all travellers have equal rights, regardless of the means by which they choose to travel. But since travellers by motor vehicle are better armed and better protected than pedestrians and cyclists they tend to take priority whenever any conflict arises. One aim of policy should be to correct this bias. Moreover, from the general social point of view, other things are not at all equal. Pedestrians and cyclists are much cheaper to accommodate than motor vehicles and do no environmental harm. This is a strong reason for giving them not merely equal, but preferential, treatment.

The rule 'any vehicle may use any road at any time' means that all motor vehicles are treated equally, in particular that buses and cars are treated equally. To start with the principle that all travellers should be treated equally would imply, in congested conditions, giving priority to buses because they carry more passengers. In fact buses tend to lose more than cars under congestion. They have no opportunity to seek better, less congested roads, and delays to particular buses on particular sections of the route have repercussions on the performance and reliability of the whole bus system.

The principle that all travellers should be treated equally is itself only a starting point; some account should be taken of the urgency of different travellers’ journeys and of their particular travelling requirements. But the present system is extremely unselective. No priority is given to travellers who need to make their journeys to a particular place by a particular mode at a particular time over those who could travel elsewhere or by other means or at another time.

These unfortunate tendencies, which are the natural results of congestion, have been reinforced by the traffic management measures which have been traditionally used to help cope with the problems. The aim of these measures has been to increase the speed and flow of moving vehicles. Amenity suffers, since
drivers have been encouraged to find alternative routes, including roads which ought not to carry heavy flows of traffic. Buses and lorries gain, as one element in the traffic flow, from increased speeds, but these gains may well be offset by longer and less convenient routes and by difficulties in stopping and unloading. Pedestrians sometimes gain, as measures intended to increase flows and speeds can sometimes, incidentally and fortuitously, work to their advantage too. Cyclists always lose.

The techniques of traffic management do not have to be used in pursuit of these particular aims. But the traffic engineer's job has traditionally been to cope with a flow of moving vehicles which for him was 'given'. So long as the problems could be dealt with at that level, there was no need to think in terms of the movements of people and goods, which are the underlying reasons for the movement of vehicles. Also there is a natural tendency in any complex problem for attention to be drawn to its most conspicuous parts. Traffic jams are headline news, but the decline of cycling is not. The eye is more naturally drawn to a long line of stationary vehicles than to a group of people waiting patiently at a bus stop or trying to cross the road. People who do not travel are the least conspicuous of all. There may be many people, especially the old, the very young and the infirm who would like to travel but are deterred by the decline in services or by the physical difficulties involved, but no attention has been paid to their problems.

Another stimulus for traffic management measures has been the fear that unless something drastic was done, the traffic would finally grind to a halt, with immensely damaging effects for the economic life of the city. To prevent such a catastrophe some sacrifice of amenity and some discomfort and inconvenience to certain travellers or would-be travellers was clearly justified, especially when the restrictions were seen as temporary only: stop-gap measures until new roads could be provided on an adequate scale. The fears were groundless but the motive was respectable.

There is very little to be said for the way that the present system works, either in its natural form or as reinforced by deliberate acts of policy. It is wasteful, arbitrary and damaging to civilised conditions, not freedom but a free-for-all. To introduce controls should, therefore, be thought of as a means of
correcting the restrictions and biases inherent in the situation, not as an additional restriction.

As for the rights of the individual, there is no new principle at stake. If one person can only exercise his freedom at the expense of others, then it is right to restrict him. Moreover in this situation it is not a simple matter of one fixed class of people losing and another fixed class gaining. The system tends to favour car users against other travellers, but it is not clear that even car users in fact gain from it. People now using cars might prefer to walk or cycle or go by bus, if only conditions were better by those means. But because all the alternatives give such an indifferent service, people choose to go by car—and hence contribute to the further worsening of the alternatives. Freedom to choose between the available options is not very interesting if all the options are poor. Controls might limit the range of options, but would improve their quality. Restriction of traffic is not restraint of movement.

A numerical example may help to illustrate the way in which a situation can develop which works to no-one's advantage, although it results from every individual's acting rationally in his own interest.

Table 1 is concerned with journeys to work to Central London in the morning peak. It shows the average journey times, for car travellers, bus travellers and both kinds of traveller together, that might be expected on different assumptions about how journeys are divided between bus and car. No great realism is claimed for these figures, which are necessarily based on very broad assumptions; they are only being used to illustrate the theoretical point. For the sake of the illustration, it is assumed that each traveller wants to minimise his journey time, in reality many other considerations will weigh with travellers.

According to these figures, the greater the proportion of travellers by car, the longer the journey time for all travellers. For any particular split between bus and car, it is better to be a traveller by car than a traveller by bus, but is better to be a traveller by bus when 10% or less of journeys are made by car than a traveller by car when 50% or more of journeys are made by car. But of course the individual traveller is never confronted with this choice. He can only choose how he will travel, not what the overall split will be. If 10% of travellers are going by car, then
TABLE 1

Times of commuter journeys to Central London by car and bus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of journeys made by car</th>
<th>MINUTES TAKEN TO TRAVEL BY</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>Both modes together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>(52.6)</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>58.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>71.2</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>108.2</td>
<td>108.2</td>
<td>93.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Both sets of journey times are door-to-door times, including waiting, walking and parking times. The time allowed for parking is ten minutes.


The average bus traveller sees a substantial advantage to him in switching to car; he hopes to reduce his journey time from 52.7 minutes to 54.5 minutes. But if enough other bus travellers make the same choice, he does not in fact manage to travel in 54.5 minutes, but only in 56.9 minutes. This is still better than travelling by bus, however, particularly since the time by bus has itself increased—the journey now takes 55.7 minutes. So more people decide to switch to car and this process can continue, long after it is in everyone's interests to stop it, until a limit is reached set by some external factor: for example, the number of people who have the use of cars, or the number of parking spaces available. The object of a control would be to prevent the situation from degenerating in this way.

This sort of situation is common in urban affairs and is one of the main justifications for having a planning system at all.
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The courses of action that are open when people act as a community, accepting the disciplines that such cooperation involves, are more attractive than those open to the same people acting individually. Thomas Sharp has put the point very clearly, in another context:

Men are sick of the wretched towns they have been given to live in. It is natural and right that they should want to escape . . . they will escape to Suburbia if nothing better is offered . . . But is the flight to Suburbia a real escape, after all? Every person who goes to the suburbs seeking the edge of the countryside pushes the countryside away from somebody else — and then he in turn suffers from having it pushed away from him. The inhabitants of Suburbia continually thwart themselves and each other, and the more they strive to embrace the object of their desire the more it escapes them: the more they try to make the best of both worlds the more they make the worst.4

It is useful to express these points in terms of the traffic engineer's concept of demand, since this concept occurs again and again in the context of road planning and obviously exerts a profound influence, although there is very little substance in it. We have seen that traffic engineers have traditionally thought it their duty to provide in a positive way for all the demands that might be made on the roads for which they are responsible. Understandably and creditably, they dislike any suggestion that they cannot and should not attempt to do so — it sounds like falling down on the job. But in fact there is no other sector of the economy in which it would be thought right to supply all demands in a limitless and indiscriminate way, nor would the recipients wish them to be supplied if it involved the destruction of other things which they valued or the commitment of large resources for which there were better uses.

In fact such 'demands' are not in an economic sense demands at all, but only vague desires, which have no particular claim on anyone's attention. The situation is still worse if the traffic flows which can be seen on the roads are interpreted as an expression of either demands or desires. The flows represent people's behaviour and choices after they have adapted themselves to the possibilities and limitations of the situation. They may be forced into a course of action which they thoroughly dislike. If a shopper buys a certain product only because the other ones he
asked for are out of stock, the manufacturer would be unwise to interpret such a purchase as showing a desire for his product. But analogous situations occur constantly in urban transport. The man who waits at a bus stop for ten minutes and finally hail a taxi is only the most obvious example. But no commercial analogy can do justice to congestion; the fact that one customer buys Brand A does not produce an immediate deterioration in the quality of Brand B.

It may be objected at this point that although the argument is logical enough, public opinion would not accept it. If this were true, it would indicate a need to educate public opinion; it would not be an argument for continuing with policies which cannot achieve the intended result. However, the available evidence does not support the contention; it suggests that the public is prepared to accept controls as part of a package deal in which certain rights would be foregone in exchange for a general improvement in travelling conditions and the environment.6

One more analogy may help to clarify the issue. It is sometimes said that although most Englishmen live in towns they are all countrymen at heart and would really like to live in the country. Suppose that there is some such desire, no-one would suggest that the aim of housing policy should be to satisfy it. Such a policy would not succeed, vast sums would be spent in its pursuit, the attempt would destroy the very amenity which it is trying to make available, and at the same time would fail to make the best of the opportunities that really are inherent in the situation. All the same things can be said of the attempt to base urban transport policy on the principle of the unrestricted use of the roads.

It is essential always to bear the question of controls in mind when assessing the ideas that have been put forward since the war years or the schemes that have been proposed for particular towns. Has the need for controls been realised? If it has, have controls been seen in a purely negative light as something forced upon us by the difficulties of building enough roads, or in a more positive way as an essential condition of constructing a satisfactory transport system? These questions are considered in the following chapters.