

# IN YOUR CAR NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM! ARE TRAFFIC CONTROLS IN CITIES A NECESSARY EVIL?

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*Although widely accepted, traffic controls are an unnecessary evil, imposed on a road network by governments with no commercial incentive to ensure the free flow of traffic. Far from making our roads safer and less congested, traffic lights make matters worse. They take our eyes off the road, obstruct our progress and cause needless delay. In the process they damage our health, the economy and the environment. There is another way: remove controls and restore the common law principle of first-come, first-served – or ‘filter-in-turn’, as it’s known in the Channel Islands. The optimum form of traffic control is self-control. The onus should be on government to prove otherwise.*

## Introduction

‘Why stop at red lights? Once you’ve seen one you’ve seen them all!’ An old joke, but why *should* we stop if it’s safe to go? Observe a junction where the lights are out of action: no congestion. As soon as the lights are ‘working’ again, the jams are back. We complain about the traffic, but could it be traffic controls that are the problem?

Ostensibly, traffic policy is intended to expedite the movement of people and goods with minimum delay, danger, expense, inconvenience, and minimum damage to the environment. But the controlling authorities have no direct incentives to ensure that traffic flows freely. In this context, are policy-makers doing a good job, or have they got the congestion question fundamentally wrong?

## Once upon a time

Before regulations existed, all road-users had equal rights under common law. Motorists were responsible for avoiding collisions, and had a duty of care towards other road-users. A motorist arriving at a junction gave way to anyone who had arrived first, pedestrians included.

Then along came regulation. In 1929, during a Royal Commission investigation chaired by police

commissioner, Sir Henry Maybury, the AA proposed priority from the right (as at roundabouts today). But the RAC eventually won the day with priority for main roads.

The problem with main road priority is that it confers superior rights on main road traffic at the expense of minor road traffic and pedestrians. Roads suddenly became dangerous, difficult, even impossible to cross. To this day, traffic trying to enter or cross the A303, for example, suffers interminable peak-time delays.

Into traffic regulation crept misconceptions and contradictions that have claimed countless lives, cause huge traffic jams, waste untold time and fuel, pollute the air, and lead to unjust decisions in court. The system violates basic legal, engineering and safety principles, and billions are spent on high-tech computer equipment intended to overcome self-inflicted problems.

## Traffic lights – a necessary evil?

Congestion is routinely blamed on volume of traffic, but volume becomes a much bigger problem when flow is interrupted – which it is, day and night, by traffic lights. Lights are inefficient because they make us wait at red even when no one is using the green.

To detain us as we go about our lawful business, the authorities must demonstrate a need. But no government body has shown a need for detaining us at lights when there is no conflicting traffic.

The main objective rationale for lights is safety, but the Transport Research Laboratory says: 'It is a myth that signal junctions guarantee safety for pedestrians. Recent research shows that the provision of red/green man pedestrian crossing stages does not enhance safety; in many cases such facilities actually make matters worse' (see <http://www.mini-roundabout.com/main.html>, p. 1).

Another study concludes:

'Traffic signals compress an hour's traffic into half-an-hour of green time and halve all headways. They make drivers go fast and keep close to the vehicle in front for fear of missing the green light, their eyes in the air rather than on the road. The combination of high speed, tailgating, diverted attention and sudden stops causes rear-end collisions. The pedestrian's unshakeable faith in the traffic signal is entirely misplaced – as many get run down walking with the green light as against red.'

(Todd, 2004, p. 11)

In the event of an 'accident' with a pedestrian, lights absolve the motorist of guilt, even if the pedestrian was there first. By imposing unequal rights and removing individual responsibility, the current system is fatally flawed. The law of lights is the law of aggression. It forces humans into unnatural patterns of behaviour. There is something inhumane about a system that instils greater respect for a traffic light than for human life.

That traffic signal control is undesirable has been known for 77 years. Roger L. Morrison, Professor of Highway Engineering at the University of Michigan, listed its drawbacks in 1929: delay to traffic; speeding up to beat a green light; running red lights; making detours to avoid lights; contempt for unnecessary traffic regulations; rear-end collisions; helping criminals rob their victims (see Morrison, 1931).

Who is the better judge of when it's safe to go – you and me at the time and the place, or remote lights programmed by an absent regulator? If pedestrians can cross the road when they judge it to be safe, why, the moment we are on wheels, do we become incompetent to judge, despite proof of proficiency in the form of a driving licence?

Rooted in a misreading of human psychology, traffic lights override commonsense. They tell us we are incapable of intelligent judgment. They outlaw discretion, demand blind obedience, prevent us from 'going on opportunity'. They generate hostility, reduce road capacity, cause needless delay. Time and again they interrupt our progress, often for no good reason.

The Department for Transport says, 'Traffic lights should be avoided wherever possible' (Road Safety Good Practice Guide 4.134). Yet still lights proliferate. The Transport Research Laboratory asks: 'Why traffic signals? When mini-roundabouts would work better!!' (see <http://www.mini-roundabout.com/main.html>, p. 1).

Vice-Chair of Transport for London (TfL), Dave Wetzel, provides an answer: 'If a council wants a mini-roundabout, it has to pay the cost. But traffic lights are paid for by TfL'. So traffic lights – even at tiny crossings such as Eastcastle and Berwick Street – are an accident of planning.

### Is there an alternative?

What happens when controls are absent? Is there a breakdown of civilisation as we know it? Footage recorded at London junctions where the lights were out of action and then 'working' again, proves beyond reasonable doubt that we get along better when left to our own devices. Free of vexatious rules, we approach junctions slowly and filter naturally. To quote a London cab driver: 'You've just got to be a bit more careful on the junctions, that's all'.

'One day last week we had a power failure in parts of Fairfax County,' wrote Robert Funk in the *Washington Post*, 14 April 1989, p. F3.

'All the traffic lights were out. You would expect chaos, but the traffic flowed beautifully. There were no backups, people were careful and polite, and I saw no accidents. Traffic from side streets flowed into the main street on opportunity. Drivers would slow down and motion them out. Perhaps the lack of frustration from sitting at lights for up to 15 minutes was responsible, who knows? All I know is that it worked. I arrived a full 25 minutes ahead of my normal time. Perhaps stop and yield signs could do a better job than this complicated and expensive light system that creates huge backups. Perhaps it is time to rethink our traffic control system that seems to make the mess worse.'

In the Channel Islands, this eminently fair and efficient 'system' is known as filter-in-turn. Requiring no manpower or technology, it lets vehicles and pedestrians proceed with minimum delay. Road capacity and filtering opportunities are maximised, journey times and fuel use minimised. Everyone benefits, including pedestrians, who breathe cleaner air and are seen as fellow road-users rather than obstacles in the way of the next time-consuming light. By contrast, our 80-year-old traffic control system is inefficient, unsafe, vexatious and expensive. Ironically, to achieve the efficiency and other benefits of filter-in-turn, mini-roundabouts are not even needed. Filter-in-turn works if a dotted line is painted across each road at the point where it enters the junction.



By all means let there be a programme of re-education. Psychological traffic calming could be introduced and an advanced test to raise standards and help drivers meet the challenge. At the very least, flashing lights that enable filtering on opportunity could replace mandatory lights that forbid it.

What could be the objection to filter-in-turn – that it *has never been tested*? Two years ago I suggested some trials. The idea was to turn off the lights in a test area and monitor the results for congestion, journey times, accidents and air quality. Brent Council agreed, but Transport for London, the controlling authority, refused.

### Putting the theory to the test

After the 2005 flood that put lights out of action at Hardwicke Circus in Carlisle, congestion dissolved. Now lights operate at rush-hour only. As a result, a major cause of congestion has been removed, and journey times have been cut.

In Drachten in Holland, 24 sets of lights were removed. Accident rates fell, congestion was cut by 20%, and typical journey times were reduced by ten minutes (Clarke, 2006). Pioneer of shared space, Hans Monderman said: 'Treat people like zombies and they'll behave like zombies. But treat them as intelligent, and they'll respond intelligently' (*Sunday Times*, 22 August 2004).

'Shared space' is a progressive form of urban design which abolishes segregation between road-users. Distracting traffic signs and signals are removed, pavements and streets are levelled and cobbled. Street activity is encouraged. The idea works on eye contact and interaction. It also relies on traffic going slowly – and in the absence of traffic controls, that's exactly what it does. Given responsibility, motorists see good reasons for good behaviour. Safe in the knowledge that motorists are paying attention and behaving appropriately, you can almost walk into the road without looking.

'Humans have evolved to read each other's intentions in the blink of an eye,' says urban designer, Ben Hamilton-Baillie, involved in the

### Exhibition Road shared space project:

'If you remove the regulated world of signs, lines, markings, traffic signals, barriers and bollards, we start to think in the same way as if we're simply walking down the street. What shared space does is to exploit the natural skills of humans to negotiate movement, resolve conflict, and engage not only with each other but with their context. Shared space streets might look chaotic, but people are using their brains and intuition, not acting as mere automatons in response to signals from on high.'

(Einstein Network, 2005, and pilot film for *In Your Car No-one Can Hear You Scream!*, 2006, prod. Martin Cassini)

Liberated from the burden of mandatory controls, we are free to obey our co-operative instincts and exercise more meaningful *self*-control. Urban spaces become civilised, regained from the technocrats who have been reducing our quality of life for too long.

The same holds true for other forms of traffic control. In Montana, removing speed limits brought a 7mph drop in average speeds and a 30% drop in accidents. Chief engineer Charles Dornsife said: 'The idea that in the absence of speed limits, motorists will drive in a manner that ignores their own and other people's welfare, and at reckless, irresponsible speeds, is pure nonsense. An intense federal study proves just that' (see <http://www.ibiblio.org/rdu/a-montge.html>). 'The safest period on Interstate highways was when there were no posted limits . . . The desired safety effect of speed limits is achieved by removing them' (see [http://www.hwysafety.com/hwy\\_montana\\_2001.htm](http://www.hwysafety.com/hwy_montana_2001.htm)).

If policy-makers harnessed human nature instead of hampering it, they might find that most of our congestion and road rage problems would disappear.

Given the benefits of self-regulation, what do our highly-paid policy-makers propose? John Birt: 'No comment.' Transport Minister Douglas Alexander: 'Road charging!' Head of Highways Agency, Derek Turner, in charge of de-congesting our roads: 'Speed delimiters!' In other words, more expensive technology to hamper human nature and expand the control industry.

Traffic controls show contempt for our time, our money, our intelligence, our freedoms, our quality of life, and the planet. Every litre of fuel burned releases 2.3kg of CO<sub>2</sub> and other toxic gases. Multiply the minutes of enforced idling at mandatory lights and beside all-day bus lanes by the hours in the day, and night, by the days in the year, by the number of vehicles – add the CO<sub>2</sub> from clamping patrols and vehicles trying to park – and it is clear that policy-makers are

responsible for environmental damage on a prodigious scale.

Any analysis of UK traffic policy reveals it to be not only inefficient – last year the annual cost of congestion was put at £7.7 billion – but negligent. Innumerable lights and a 24-hour bus lane have inflicted semi-permanent jams along the entire length of the Euston Road. On 24 May 2005, *The Standard* reported: ‘Particulates at a monitoring site on Marylebone Road exceeded standards for the 36th day this year. Under EU law, levels should not exceed standards on more than 35 days’. With pollution in London off the scale, research by Imperial College, London, shows that official monitoring tells only half the story (see Kaur *et al.*, 2005, 2006).

We are told to avoid unnecessary journeys, but no one says anything about abolishing the controls that cause the congestion in the first place.

Air pollution from vehicle emissions causes ten times as many deaths as road traffic ‘accidents’. Yet outside Camden Town Hall, even though Midland Road has been closed *since 2001* for work on the Channel link, traffic signals still operate full-time. Euston Road carries 95% of the traffic, but gets only 50% green time. Camden environment chief, John Thane, refused to discuss the matter. So did Transport for London, despite the mayor’s duty to reduce seven key emissions. Euston Road/Midland Road is a glaring example of traffic mismanagement based on defective principles allied to negligence and hypocrisy.

### Congestion charging

Congestion charging is hailed as a success, but footage recorded on outer routes shows displaced traffic in gridlock. Now the mayor is extending the zone, justifying his scheme by claiming it will shorten a typical journey by five minutes. What’s the one thing above all others that extends journey times? Stopping. If de-regulation had been tried and capacity exceeded, congestion charging might be justified. But it has not been tried, so congestion charging in London is unjustified.

Mandatory traffic lights, all-day bus lanes, motorbikes banned from bus lanes, ferocious parking controls, premature congestion charging,

one-way systems that make you go via XYZ to get from A to B . . . having devised these obstacles in an attempt to drive people on to public transport, the authorities are now raising fares to cut overcrowding. The circle is complete.

To reduce congestion we need to scrap coercive measures and let people regulate themselves. If human nature were allowed to take its competent course, we would see a dramatic overnight drop in accidents, journey times, fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions.

People frequently complain about cyclists ignoring lights, but most cyclists are simply going on opportunity, like pedestrians on wheels – which is what we all are and should all be able to do. Instead of being held in suspended animation by the tyranny of mandatory lights, all road-users should be free to exercise intelligent discretion, and go on opportunity.

As Einstein said, ‘The problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.’ Traffic lights are an unnecessary evil. A simple solution is at hand. Let’s scrap one and seize the other.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Kenneth Todd.

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