



JONATHAN BRAY



Why we need the politics of dignity

Public transport can bestow dignity on both a city and its citizens. Politics determines whether it does - and we need more of it

► December 1, 1955: Montgomery, Alabama, USA. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white man on a bus in Montgomery and was arrested. This led to a year long bus boycott which ultimately led to segregation on city buses being lifted (in theory at least). In the process Rosa Parks became an enduring symbol of the civil rights movement in the US. In 1963 these protests became a model for the response to the colour bar on employment on municipal bus services in Bristol - a policy broken by boycotts, campaigning and non violent direct action.

October 2019: Santiago, Chile. Secondary school students began a campaign of fares evasion. They are doing it in protest at fares increases on what was already a relatively expensive transit system for the region - and in the context of a wider cost of living crisis. Before long this escalated into widespread protests and rioting which led to a state of emergency being declared. Something similar happened in Brazil in 2013 in the 'Revolta do Ônibus' (bus rebellion) where protests about public transport fares were the spark for wider protests about government corruption and economic inequality.

It's interesting how often public transport becomes the trigger and arena where fractures in the social fabric find expression. Often it's something to do with dignity. The dignity that public transport can provide through allowing people to participate in civic life, particularly because those with the least are often most

reliant on public transport. And perhaps also because of the public theatre of public transport use lends itself to the playing out of wider social tensions. Buses in particular are a largely unsupervised social space, where the existing passengers are the audience for the interaction between the driver and passenger. As was the case for Rosa Parks (the driver she defied in 1955 had, on an earlier occasion, taken her fare at the front of the bus - then driven off before she was able to get back on the bus at the rear of the vehicle to access the seats designated for black people).

It's perhaps in the US that the politics of dignity are most explicitly emphasised on transport. Its role is both in providing access to the civic and in acknowledging and addressing the sins of the past (reflecting the legacy of Rosa Parks and the wider civil rights movement). In the US you will find free fares schemes introduced not on the basis of fond hopes of attracting middle class people out of their cars but solely on the basis of providing access to opportunity for excluded communities. You have a transportation

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secretary in Washington who says: "...highways routed directly through black and brown neighborhoods, often in an effort to divide and destroy them, continue to affect the well-being of the residents who remain. In other cases, we see inequities in our failures to invest, as with transit deserts that leave out the communities that most need affordable transportation options, or contracting opportunities for transportation projects that fail to engage and utilize women and people of color."

And in New York City you have a transport authority that has been leading the way on supporting minority and women owned business to take up the contracting opportunities it offers (half a billion dollars worth and counting). Here in the UK, on transport, the politics of dignity are not as explicitly focussed on outputs as they can be in the USA but more often on seeking to ensure that the diversity of transport organisations themselves better reflects the diversity of the areas they serve.

At this point I would like to widen out the argument to say that transport can not only give dignity to individuals in a city it can also lend dignity to the city itself. Or as the chief executive of London Transport, Frank Pick, wasn't afraid to say, in 1935: "Underneath all the commercial activities of the board, underneath all its engineering and operations, there is the revelation and realisation of something which is in the nature of the work of art... it is in fact a conception of a metropolis as a centre of life, of civilisation, more intense, more eager, more vitalising than has ever so far been obtained."

Where a transport authority prioritises good design, where there is an ambition and a generosity of spirit, a city's public transport can enhance a city's identity and add to its allure. The example of London Transport is well known but Montreal's Metro system is another good example. Montreal had been dreaming of a subway for decades but it finally happened under the determined and visionary leadership of mayor Jean Drapeau in the 1960s. It also tied in with the city hosting Expo 67, often cited as the most successful World Fair of the 20th Century. The coming together in Montreal of the right people at the right time, from many disciplines, led to the creation of a subway system of enduring character, where art, architecture and engineering fuse and flow,



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Rosa Parks became an enduring symbol of the civil rights movement in the US. Pictured is a sculpture of her inside a bus at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis

and which in turn shaped the city's character.

Some people in the sector's dearest hope is that the politics will be taken out of transport. Not going to happen. If democracy were to be further eroded I can guarantee it won't be because of a burning desire of politicians to make the working lives of transport professionals more predictable. Politics determines what we have now and will determine how it changes. Indeed we could do with more political energy, more of the politics of dignity focussed on public transport in the UK - instead of it all being to do with the culture wars over cars. Be it air quality charges and low traffic neighbourhoods in London, or radical plans to tackle traffic in Oxford and Cambridge, it's limiting the free movement of cars which gets more people mobilised, argumentative and prepared to act.

We could do with more parallel cultural forces on the side of public transport with an ability to infiltrate and drain some of the poison from the 'war on motorists' framing that so often becomes the meta narrative. There are some tentative signs of this on

both sides of the Atlantic. For example, in the US you have the 'New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens' (NUMTOTs) movement which is fundamentally pro-public transport. Although, with its knowing in-jokes and sideways social media savvy it's a world away from the way public transport is usually framed. NUMTOTs' rapid growth, and backing for progressive transport policy, has given more young people the confidence to make their own way in the transport sector - as well as earning it praise from presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (who also joined the group).

Meanwhile in the UK we have Francis Bourgeois geeking out so hard and endearingly that he has, almost, made trainspotting cool. Equally unlikely a few years ago we also now have musicals about bus deregulation... on roller skates.

Public transport can bestow dignity on both a city and all its citizens. Politics determines whether it does or doesn't. And when it doesn't then the intrinsic nature of public transport means it can be the flashpoint and arena for

wider discontents. We therefore need more of the politics of dignity focussed on public transport. We need a widening out of the UK transport's organisational focus on equalities and diversity - to also encompass what those organisations do for all the people and places they serve. And we also need to welcome the new forces that are capable of infiltrating the cultural territory of the transport debate that technical arguments just can't reach, in short memes, roller skates, and dreaming like Frank Pick - not just cost benefit analysis, consultancy reports and press releases. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com