

● **Jonathan Bray**

Connections

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News and stories of progressive change

I'm glad you asked

I've recently returned from a week in the West Highlands, including the Knoydart peninsular which is best known for having the most remote mainland pub in the UK. You can only get there on foot or by boat. However equally notable is that [Knoydart](#) is owned and governed by the people who live there. As such they are engaged in a massive programme of reforestation of currently barren valley and mountain sides - one of the biggest 'rewilding' projects in the country. They are also seeking to generate as much of their own food as possible and to provide affordable and sustainable local housing which can't be sold on for profit. There's not many places you go where you have exited (if partially) the norms of modern capitalism with its financialisation of everything. Although in a microcosm of modern Britain the neighbouring estates are owned by old money (the Soames family) and the new money of some corporate overlord who has kept his estate bare to facilitate shooting parties to impress his peers.

My peripatetic summer also took in time in Derby, Estonia and York. In Derby I was spending time with my mother and was also able to make a start on putting together a compilation of my Dad's (who died earlier this year) commonplace books. I also spent some time restoring old family pictures using the latest version of photoshop which now has the capacity to restore damaged photos much more easily that was the case even a short time ago. My time in Estonia involved a side trip to Latvia to research a feature on the rail freight scene there for Today's Railways Europe.

Today (October 1st) my year long fellowship with the Foundation on Integrated Transport begins looking at interesting and transferable good practice on sustainable suburbs from across Europe and the UK. I'm looking forward to getting inspired by seeing for myself the

latest on good practice including mobility hubs at scale, the role of demand responsive buses, community micro grids - and much more besides. With the far / cosmic / fascist right recently shifting their focus to instigating and laying the ground work for attempted pogroms over the summer - rather than pursuing paranoid fantasies about 15 minute cities - it has at least given some breathing space for progressive politicians to maintain some kind of momentum around progressive approaches to urban streets.

A year ago I was in Bolton for the celebrations around the launch of the new publicly controlled [Bee bus network](#) and its gratifying to see that in its first year bus services have become more reliable, better used, more innovative and cost less public subsidy to run. The remaining opponents of bus franchising (most of the massed ranks of solid industry / officialdom / great and the good / industry 'experts' who blocked it for years are now busy burying their uniforms in the forest) have been reduced to claiming that somehow TfGM must have cheated. The success of the Bee network has helped in the accelerating shift that's taking place as privatised and deregulated public transport transitions to publicly controlled and publicly provided public transport. The battle for ideas is over. The big question now is what publicly controlled and/or owned public transport is going to look like. I argue that it's time to look forward not backwards and grasp the opportunity that lies ahead in my [latest thinkpiece](#) for Passenger Transport magazine. This is what I hope will be a series of pieces on the choices that lie ahead for the new Westminster administration.

Finally I was sad to hear about the passing earlier this year of [Professor John Adams](#), a transport academic who knew how to make his influential ideas relatable, as well as the importance of working with progressive campaigns on the ground, and as such played a key role in bringing road building in London, largely, to a halt in the 1990s. Also much missed will be [Dai Powell](#), a former South Wales miner turned social entrepreneur who brought both energy, innovation and a social conscience to the bus sector. Dai was always great to work with including most recently as part of a renegade pro-franchising group of bus operators which helped in establishing the groundwork for making bus services more socially responsible in line with Dai's wider vision.

Policy geek postcard: Sheffield



Double take down by the Don. I used to walk this street lots as it's where the South Yorkshire PTE offices were. If I were to have been teleported there I wouldn't have recognised it anymore. And this isn't a one off showpiece. Sheffield is the site of the biggest [grey to green](#) transition in the country. These rain gardens link up. They also built an amazing park in the city centre where any other city might have looked the other way whilst another anonymous speculative residential spike (slum of tomorrow) was inserted. There is a mini orchestra of xylophones you can play. And all done in quality and in a way that goes with the urban grain and scale rather than clumsy clattering pedestrianised deserts. You can tell because people are using it. Sitting among those trees on that nice wooden bench. Mobbing the park and having fun. Sheffield always waited to do it right - not necessarily first. Sheaf Square (the gateway to the station), the Peace Gardens and the Winter Gardens set the tone. It's always done it best and now they are taking it to the next level. And this is Sheffield so it's not just about carving out quarters for universal hipster tropes and cliches - it's for every kind of people. Sheffield had the spur of some terrible flooding plus the commercial pressures are perhaps less than they are in other cities. But still. Sheffield shows what we could do country wide if we used the money that we are wasting on new zombie road schemes that speak to the superficial macho optics of 'growth' - even when all they do in reality is redistribute economic activity from urban centres to car dependent, dystopic nowhere lands. Or you could have [this](#).

Stories of progressive change: Freeway fighters of America



I'm a veteran of the anti-road campaigns of the 1990s which helped demolish first a major road building plan for London and then gutted the national roads programme. If this period is remembered it's remembered for the direct action campaigns (Twyford Down, Swampy) but whilst direct action dramatised the policy conflict in itself it didn't stop the roads where the protests took place. What stopped the roads before the bulldozers starting building them was concerted and coordinated community-based campaigns. The focus, by and large, was building alliances of the respectable and the radical, the facts and arguments with the emotional. Underneath all that the blight and potential collapse of property values of affected middle class areas was one of the key motors in detaching the Conservative government of the time from the roads industrial complex which at that time completely dominated transport planning. That complex is still there - but it's much more undercover and less publicly assertive and more subtle these days. It also no longer dominates transport policy to the same extent relying more on historic momentum to keep the road programme in play. With the formative experience of the anti-road campaigns in the UK it's really interesting to see what's happening in the States. Firstly, there's a much more explicit focus and analysis of the race and class dimension to urban road building in the States. Roads in both US and UK cities were smashed through urban areas for the benefit of suburbanites at the expense of the more diverse and less prosperous communities that lived there. However, arguably with even greater ruthlessness in the US. It's neither been forgiven or forgotten in the US and it's something that's explicitly recognised and addressed in the current administration's transport policies. When launching a \$1bn programme pilot program aimed at helping reconnect cities and neighborhoods [racially segregated or divided by road projects](#), Transport Secretary Pete Buttleg said: "*Transportation can connect us to jobs, services and loved ones, but we've also seen countless cases around the country where a piece of infrastructure cuts off a*

neighborhood or a community because of how it was built...We can't ignore the basic truth: that some of the planners and politicians behind those projects built them directly through the heart of vibrant populated communities. Sometimes as an effort to reinforce segregation. Sometimes because the people there have less power to resist. And sometimes as part of a direct effort to replace or eliminate Black neighborhoods.' Some cities in the US have also torn down urban freeways as they become life expired or even when they have not. However, this doesn't mean that road building in the US has gone away - far from it. Nor have the community-based campaigns to stop it. However they are more diverse than they were (and certainly more racially diverse than the road building campaigns in the UK in the 90s). They are also [networking](#) as the Freeway Fighters which had their first national summit in October 2023 in Cincinnati. Something has changed in the US on freeways and the opposition. Compared to my time campaigning against road building in the UK this is a more diverse movement which is not only about stopping new roads its about recognising and redressing the damage already done and the biases that led to that damage. As Ben Crowther, Policy Director at America Walks, says: *"If the original [1950s/60s] highway revolt era is about stopping urban renewal, there is definitely a component of the contemporary freeway fighting that is about urban revival, specifically repairing the damage that's been caused by urban renewal and the highway projects associated with it."*

In depth: Ireland challenges car dependency



Ireland's 'celtic tiger' boom (between the mid-1990s and 2008) turned the Republic from one of the poorer western European countries to one of the wealthiest. In doing so it put a new car and a new house suddenly within reach of many more people. When the boom times ended a property bubble burst and Ireland was left with more sprawl (30% of the population live in one-off houses or ribbon developments), some of Europe's worst traffic congestion in Dublin, and a sense that the country had failed to sufficiently invest in its public transport infrastructure during the good times. The hangover from the boom years is now over and the Irish economy is on more of an even keel (with population and employment at record levels that are way beyond what was forecast). There's a desire to get it right this time, to show leadership on climate and to put Ireland more on a par with successful comparator small European nations where public transport infrastructure and provision is more comprehensive.

Cometh the hour cometh the man and determined but astute leadership is being given on transport by the Green Party's Eamon Ryan who has held the post of transport minister in a

coalition government since September 2020. Ryan is clear that it's the end of the road for a car-dominated transport policy in Ireland and that a decisive shift to public transport and active travel is non-negotiable. But he also wants to bring people with him, given how people's fear of the unknown can easily be used as rocket fuel for reactionary politics. He talks about helping people who are 'captive' motorists and are spending too much of their time in traffic jams instead of with their friends and families. He says he is not out to 'shame or price people off the roads' but to provide viable alternatives to car use.

As well as seeking to bring the public on side, the transport strategy attempts to co-design ways forward through working groups representing both private and public sector interests. It also roots transport policy in its contribution to a broad range of wider government objectives, such as putting 'town centres first' and supporting rural economies. Interestingly, it also covers topics that seem to be sidelined by the Department for Transport in England, like the role of parking.

What this looks like in practice is the Irish state backing transformational plans by local authorities for active travel (active travel spend is up from €23m in 2017 to €343m in 2023), road space reallocation and the implementation of enhanced networks of bus services which will benefit from more priority measures. Support for capacity building for local authorities to do this sits alongside the routing of more funding to those authorities that get on board with this new agenda. All of which is accompanied by significant investment in mass transit in Dublin and a positive mindset about the potential for rail reopenings across the island of Ireland.

One of the biggest successes for this new approach has been in rural areas where hitherto bus services have been decidedly patchy. Although almost 38% of the population live in a rural area, over 70% of those have limited or no public transport connections and almost 200 villages across Ireland were not served by regular public transport at all. 'Build it and they will come' doesn't always work for rural buses given that people have already planned their lives around the lack of bus services and cynicism about whether a new rural bus service is a gimmick that won't be around long. But, in Ireland, they have built it and people have come. The rebirth of the rural bus in Ireland is built on the firm foundations of careful planning and effective co-design which have underpinned the role of new 'Local Link' bus services and networks (alongside greater provision by state-owned Bus Éireann and existing commercial services often provided by long established SMEs). The National Transport Authority works with 15 regional Transport Coordination Units (TCUs) that administer and manage the Local Link services on behalf of the authority. Network redesigns have been rolled out based on regular interval, frequent services on core routes, coordinated with infill feeders (some of which are on a demand responsive basis).

Since the implementation of phase two of the project in 2023, 190 new towns and villages, 42 hospitals, and 34 higher education colleges have been connected by 120,000 more weekly kilometres of bus services. In one week, in June 2024, 95,000 passengers used these services (up from 6,000 passengers per week in 2018). Even its architects at the National Transport Authority have been surprised by the rate and extent of take up of these new services. Pent up demand from those who had been doing 'work arounds' because of the lack of a bus service, older and younger passengers (who can't or don't want to drive) and car-free tourism all appear to have played a part. Maybe too the fact that in Ireland the new bus services are seen as something provided by the Irish State and therefore there is more of a sense of permanence.

Moving from Ireland's countryside to its capital city, the pace of change is also picking up – as is the challenge for Eamon Ryan of taking people with him. Road pricing may be off the table but radically changing the balance of road use in the city centre is not. A new Dublin transport strategy aims to do just that. Even before this, if you spend any time in Dublin it won't be long before you see new, or under construction, active travel schemes. But, as has recently happened in New York (which stepped back from road pricing at the last moment), as implementation of the plan draws closer to sign off a reactionary crescendo is building with siren voices calling on Dublin City Council to water the plan down. Eamon Ryan is urging them to stand firm at what is a pivotal moment.

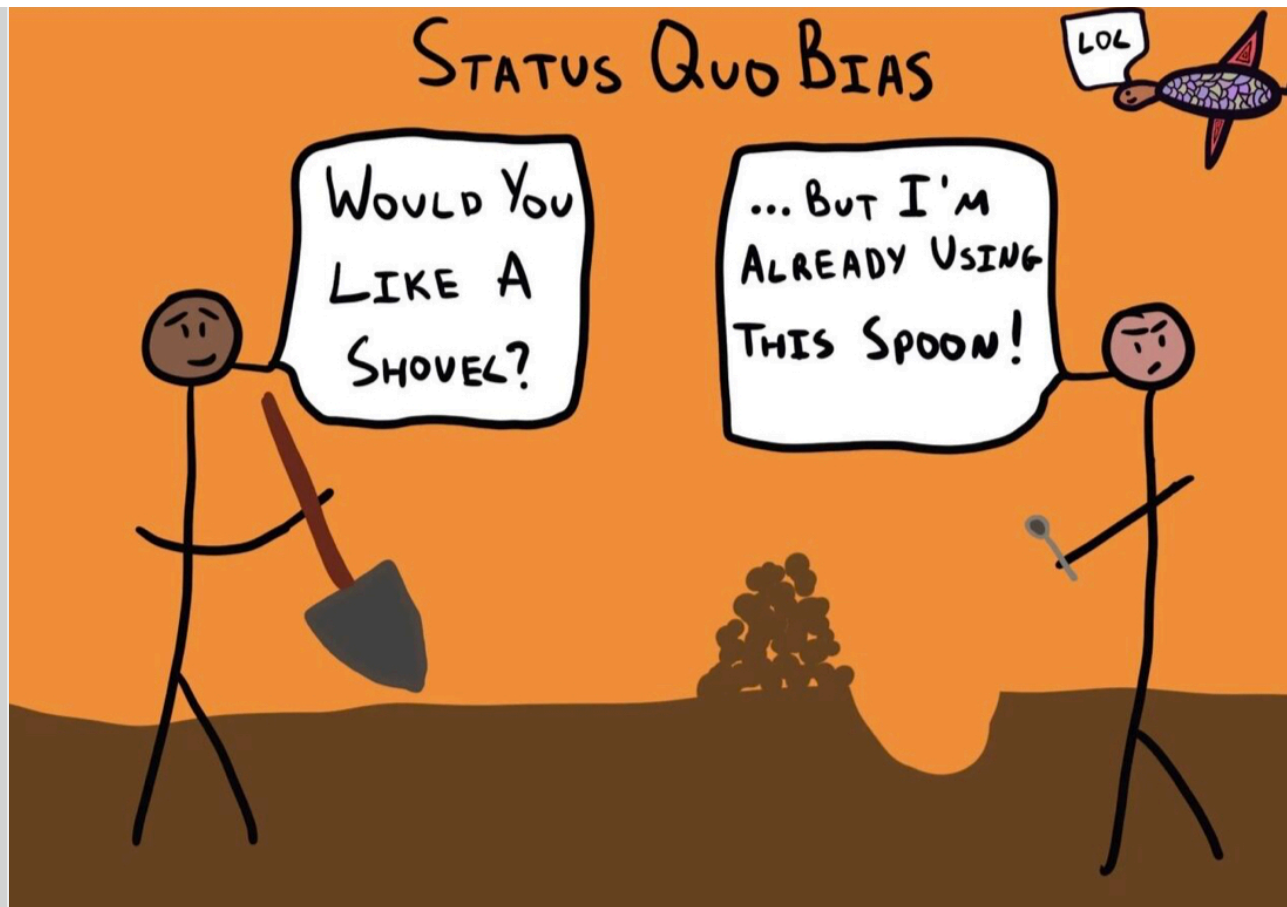
Alongside the hoped-for remaking of Dublin for people rather than predominantly for private vehicles, a step change in rail-based mass transit is also on its way. At present Dublin's rail and light rail provision has three main elements – all with their own separate branding and identity. The DART (cross-city from North to South), LUAS (a tram system on east to west and north to south axes) and heavy rail commuter services. Of these the DART does a great job but is showing its age. LUAS is modern and smart whilst commuter rail services can be low frequency and provided by Japanese-built trains which haven't aged well for noise and vibration. Meanwhile Dublin's buses are a further separate entity. Fare integration between the networks is improving (but not fully there yet) and when you know the system you can play tunes on it to get to where you need to be.

The plan (in a nutshell) is to renew and extend DART (including transforming more existing heavy rail lines), keep expanding LUAS and add a new baby to the family – Ireland's first Metro, running from the airport to the city centre. You can see a lot of transit orientated development already if you ride the rails of Dublin's transport network, but the system expansions are predicated on a whole lot more. Meanwhile there are plans to keep rolling out more bus priority corridors – which, alongside the greening of the bus fleet, and a network redesign, should be transformative.

Ireland has a good story to tell already on public transport and active travel. The current young generation is the first where there has been an increase in walking and cycling to school. Car use in absolute and modal share terms is falling whilst public transport use is at record levels. Small countries can do big things at a time when leadership and opportunity come together. That's where Ireland is right now.

This article first appeared in Passenger Transport magazine. An illustrated PDF version can be found [here](#)

The future shock three



1. **Behavioural science meets transport planning:** Trying to change something on transport? You need to know about 'status quo bias. Here's why. If you describe a town centre that's good for active travel, people will assess the pros and cons and often come to a favourable conclusion. However if you describe a town centre in exactly the same way but call it a plan or a proposal, people will focus on how it could go wrong and come to a significantly less favourable conclusion. The best way to reduce 'status quo' bias is to say that you are returning things more to how they used to be. Don't believe me? Then [read on](#). A sign of why we need more behavioural science / persuasive arts in making the case for progressive transport measures

2. **Green gentrification:** How do you make better places through traffic reduction schemes or other transport measures without inadvertently triggering the [gentrification of those places which turfs out the people it was supposed to benefit in the first place](#)? There's an element of the rows over reducing traffic in suburban / secondary streets that is not about the transport plan per se - it's about what it does in the context of the wider financialisation of housing (within which different types of transport approaches take on a wider role as monetised cultural signifiers). Or as one US book title has it 'Bike Lanes are White Lanes'. Not easy to address - given that housing has becoming ultra financialised (a global market as well as, in effect, a fund for social care in later life in this country). Some [partial fixes](#) include community engagement, protection for existing affordable housing (including rent control) and the creation of new affordable housing, interplay with creation of jobs for locals, and looking at how schemes impact on access to opportunity for locals. But the starting point is to recognise that green gentrification is a thing.

3. **Green community schoolyards:** New York City has been [converting asphalt school playgrounds into green community spaces](#) - involving kids and communities in their design. It is great for climate resilience too. It is also being done at scale with 226 schools converting

700,000 acres of asphalt, involving 220,000 children and community members, putting 5 million people within 10 minutes of a green space, and diverting more than a million gallons of stormwater a year. I love ideas like this that cut across policy silos and where the win-win-wins just keep rippling out. Action on climate and sustainability entails a lot of tough stuff and culture war grind - but to put some kind of joy and inspiration into it we also need to go hard on these kind of easy to grasp and implement win-win-win concepts and programmes.

Side projects: The Piusa Caves



The Piusa Caves

A butterfly can live through the winter in the Piusa caves by switching off its heart

Here in the perimeter of the world where the bowl of the sky meets the earth and you crouch down in its darkening apex

The bats have already left the darkness. They exhibited no particular national characteristics

What sacrifice should I make?

What should I bury?

Here at the border

A racoon dog sniffs the unexpected wind

Paws at the buried uniforms

The tree line tenses

The air is thick with fern spores

The ground is rivulets of ants

'The Godfather' plays on a 'Handy'

You sink down into the fine silica

And unlike the butterfly, you dream

[The Piusa sandstone caves in Southern Estonia, close to the border with Russia, provided sand for glass making in Estonia between 1922–1966 and are now home to one of the biggest wintering colony of bats in Eastern Europe and a museum]

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Jonathan Bray

16 Wilton Rise, York YO24 4BW, York

United Kingdom



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