

● **Jonathan Bray**

# Connections

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## News and stories of progressive change

### I'm glad you asked

Happy New Year dear readers. I'm writing this in snowy Tartu in Estonia where I'm preparing for a 1,000 mile flight free rail trip back to York. En route I will explore some of Europe's most progressive policies on decarbonising transport in suburbs as part of my [Foundation for Integrated Transport fellowship](#). This long trip is mainly focussing on checking out the experience of mobility hubs at scale in Berlin, Bremen and Flanders. But there should also be some Bundesliga, Dampflok in the snow (hopefully) as well as Wallonian diversions along the way.

Meanwhile, gratifying to see the decades long battle (against just about the entire bus establishment) over bus regulation coming to fruition. Greater Manchester has now turned all yellow with phase three of three of the Bee bus network now in place. All the former PTE area are now following suit which means over 30 million people in the UK (plus Channel Islands and Isle of Man) now enjoy publicly provided or controlled bus services - or will do once due process has been completed. Meanwhile among other things the new draft Westminster buses legislation seeks to give local transport authorities a wider range of options – including an initial direct award to commercial incumbents as well as options around partial franchising within an area. It was a good time therefore to take part in a well received on line Landor seminar last week on what it all means for rural England (playback available soon I understand). I'm also pleased to be on the roster for an in-person Landor quality rural buses conference in the summer (details available soon).

So, looking across the UK, whilst Northern Ireland, wisely, has never come close to touching bus deregulation with a barge pole, England and Wales are moving at pace to reverse the damage with new legislation for both Wales and England due to be passed in 2025. That leaves Scotland where capture of policy by vested interests is clinging on. Most notably by slowing and fixing the buses legislation to make it very difficult for local transport authorities to use it to franchise services. That's been done by taking five (!) years and counting to finalise the guidance and regs and by giving an unaccountable quango control of the approval process. I was pleased therefore to be invited to [provide evidence](#) to the Scottish parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport committee on why the regs shouldn't be approved by Parliament in their current form. The parliamentary committee subsequently agreed that they shouldn't - only to be finally overturned in the full parliament on the Government's casting vote and off the back of a series of concessions. It's not over yet though as the highly effective [Better Buses for Strathclyde campaign](#) is backing a parliamentary petition to get a more workable process in place.

Finally, new year, not so new Westminster administration anymore. Here's a long-ish read on where things stand after the first eight months of the current UK Government's approach on transport entitled: ['impulses clear, details contested, outcomes unclear'](#)

## Policy geek postcard: Belgian national railway museum



Only in Belgium would a cartoonist be given the role of designing the national railway museum. And I'm here to tell you that it works. A lot of railway museums are dominated by their collection of locomotives. Because locomotives are rather big they end up dominating the space to the exclusion of the wider railway story – which can end up being fitted in around the sides. A lot of locomotives packed together also means they lose some of their individual impact. The visitor is always aware of the compromises that have been made. The Belgian railway museum takes a rather different approach. There's a strong emphasis on theatrical visual impact and on progressing through spaces which focus on different railway elements (the museum's name – [Train World](#) – is exactly right). Rather than a sense of compromise there's a sense that this is somebody's creative act (in this case the graphic artist François Schuiten). But it's not an ego trip. More a trippy sharing of the joy, wonder and pleasurable and strangeness of entering different railway worlds. Because it doesn't look like a conventional museum the visitor is less likely to sink into a pre-anticipated overwhelmed stupor. You just don't know what's coming next. The locomotive problem is solved in a variety of ways - hanging them in the air, or making one locomotive the centre of one room and using lighting and sound also gives the locomotives drama and vitality. Whereas the standard overhead lighting of many railway museums only emphasises the way in which the locomotives have lost their animating life force. The museum also avoids the dangers of modern interpretation which can tend towards telling the visitor how they should feel and pre-masticating everything rather than letting the visitor chew things over in their own way. I am not saying that the Belgian approach would be right for the expanded National Railway Museum but it certainly shows that different approaches are possible.

Finally the museum's designer, François Schuiten has written a rather wonderful graphic novel, with a surreal twist of course, about the streamlined superstar of Belgian railway design – the Class 12 locomotives. Six of which were built initially to power boat train expresses from Brussels to Ostend based at Schaerbeek depot. Schaerbeek station being the home of Train World with the class 12 prominently displayed. The book ([La Douce, translated as 'the beauty' in English](#)) is available in English and well worth getting hold of if you can.

## Stories of progressive change: 1971 the Netherlands - stop the child murder

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We all know about the Netherlands and its bicycle culture. It's always been like that right? well no, it hasn't. And as with many big shifts in transport policy it was down to effective popular campaigning rather than the wisdom of the managerial and professional class who as elsewhere at the time were busy remaking urban areas for cars rather than people. One side effect of this was that deaths on the roads rose to 3,300 in 1971 – more than 400 of whom were children. In most countries this was managed through normalisation and victim blaming. However, the Netherlands is a small country with, at the time, accessible politicians and in a generally argumentative frame of mind. A number of action groups sprang up including *Stop de Kindermoord* (stop the child murder). *Stop de Kindermoord* reclaimed both their streets and the wider narrative with street parties and occupations. Instead of handing out jail sentences *the* Dutch government, provided backing which eventually begat the *woonerf* concept: a new kind of people-friendly street with speed bumps and bends to force cars to drive very slowly. Alongside *Stop de Kindermoord* cycling campaigns also upped the ante by, among other things, painting in their own cycle lanes. Eventually the real and permanent thing followed. In 1973 the oil crisis added a whole new dimension to awareness of the dangers of oil and car dependency. It contributed to the government backing a series of car-free Sundays when children played on deserted motorways and life returned to what it had been before the dominance of the car. After that there was a slow percolation of the principles and prototypes established by popular campaigns through the professionals and politicians in the main towns and cities of the Netherlands and into plans and programmes which has given us the cycle-friendly cities that we know today. The Netherlands then is a classic example of how imaginative, focussed and determined popular campaigns can smash through what appears to be an immutable managerial and professional consensus to establish a new paradigm which the managerial and professional class will then happily implement and administer once they think everyone else is going to do it too. It's a shame however that the scale of the carnage on the roads in the UK has always been 'hidden in plain sight' and largely



normalised. There was a moment in the Netherlands to change the narrative that was seized in the seventies - the aftermath of which, at least, has rippled out across the North Sea to influence progressive urban transport planning here.

## In depth: The Tyne and Wear Metro - Britain's most progressive railway



With the opening of the Northumbria line and the arrival into service of new Metro trains it feels like a good time to tell the story of Britain's most progressive urban rail network...

There's two key elements to a successful urban rail network – best use of emerging technology and local decision makers who embody the spirit of civic entrepreneurialism. That is the capacity to be quick thinking, bold and financially shrewd but with the good of the city as a whole in mind rather than narrow commercial gain. With that combination you can keep unleashing and renewing the potential of public transport to change places for the better. There is no better example of this than the Tyne & Wear Metro which for over 40 years has been the bone structure of the region's identity, economy and daily life as well as Britain's innovation railway. It's a system too that is metamorphosing again – not just modernising but also potentially widening its scope and reach. Both the Metro's uniqueness as a long standing, largely segregated light rail system and its distance far away from that there London is perhaps one reason why the Metro seems not to get the attention it deserves as an example of what public transport can be and do. Because after the London Transport roundel, the Tyne & Wear Metro's 'M', must surely be the public transport logo and brand that is most integral to a British urban area's sense of itself. Most integral too to how the city region

operates – as alone amongst our cities, Tyne & Wear has a purpose-built, fully segregated light rail system that binds the area together. A system that makes not just journeys into the centre of the city the definition of simplicity, but radial and cross city journeys simple too. You can live in the suburbs of Newcastle and travel to work in the suburbs of Sunderland across the two city centres in as little as 40 minutes. A system that serves both the area's major football clubs, its regional airport and all three universities as well as the business parks and residential areas that are strung along its lines, which are dotted with stations just 1.3 miles apart. It's not quite an anywhere to anywhere service within the conurbation but it gets closer to achieving this in a seamless way, than most urban rail systems achieve. And it does this from early to late at attractive frequencies, seven days a week. It helps join the local dots throughout the week in an economical way too. Fares have been kept down to a level which local people can afford and which fit the facts on the ground about how the local economy works. So peak fares were abolished in 2014 because so many local people are on shifts or on zero hours contracts.

Affordable fares and the reach and utility of the network help explain why for a rail system this is no largely middle class preserve either – the user demographic represents the demographics of the region. And it's not just the preserve of the able-bodied either – the system was built from the beginning so that wheelchair users could take advantage of it too. This is the railway that devolution built. A railway designed for local needs. Imagine how grim it would be if it had been remote controlled from London? In some ways you don't have to imagine – rewind to the state of the local network when it was last part of the big railway in the 1970s and some of the stations were so run down they had no electricity.

It's symbiotically Tyne & Wear's railway, but the Metro is Britain's innovation railway too. It's local but it's not parochial. The way it took a decayed heavy rail network and used it as the basis for a fully integrated urban transit network is arguably the most substantial transport innovation in a post-war UK city full stop. But it hasn't stopped there. The Sunderland extension saw light rail trains sharing space with heavy rail trains on the UK rail network for the first time and it was the first network to have a pay-as-you-go smartcard system up and running outside London. This sits alongside numerous customer service innovation firsts – it was the first urban railway where mobile phones work in tunnels and the first to ban smoking. Alongside London it also has the largest commitment to [public art](#) of any transport provider – with over half of the stations covered. Alongside the artwork some of the stations are interesting or beautiful in their own right – from expansive seaside gems like Tynemouth to the 1970s brutalism of Chillingham Road. Some of the engineering is rather wonderful too – not least the sinuous realisation of the joys of pre-stressed concrete that is the [Byker viaduct](#). The [new trains](#) now coming into service reflect the same values. Train design was based on extensive public input, local manufacturers and suppliers were involved in their construction and unlike the bleak and sterile interiors of many modern trains the new Metro trains have sensational art works by local artists as part of their fabric.

The new trains are part of a systematic overhaul and capacity improvements to what was an aging system leaving the way clear for expansion of the Metro alongside heavy rail. And there's plenty of potential for that because as Tyne & Wear's primal industries were taken out (coal, ship building, heavy industry) the railway network that served them also shrivelled. But not entirely. One way or another freight lines, redundant spurs and largely intact track beds are all there for the taking in terms of extending rail's reach to where the unserved population centres are. Looking north the recently reopened Northumberland line has put places like Ashington and Blyth back on the heavy rail map. Looking south and the [Leamside line](#) (in effect an East Coast Main Line bypass from Gateshead to south of Durham) could be

reinstated, in the process serving Washington (with a population of nearly 70,000). In addition, by branching off the Leamside line a Metro loop could be created by linking up with the line to South Hylton and onwards to Sunderland. Better services too are possible south of Sunderland on the current Durham coast heavy rail line and south along the East Coast Main Line corridor using former freight lines – as well as eastwards on the Tyne Valley line.

The Tyne and Wear Metro was a modernist marvel when it emerged from the wreckage of the local rail network in the 70s. Exhibiting the boldness and big thinking you would be more likely to see in a city in France, Sweden or America in that era. It's both an international exemplar and Britain's innovation railway. But at the same time distinctively and deliberately Tyne and Wear's railway – always alive to the needs of local people and the local economy. With its fabric renewed and bus franchising on the way Britain's most progressive railway has the opportunity to be once again part of the wider integrated public transport network it was built to be.

## The future shock two

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**Paying people to move to your town or city.** We all know the story. Young highly educated people with means and ambition move to big dynamic cities. Everyone else stays behind. Economies (and politics) polarise as a result. But given how much work can be done remotely what if you financially incentivised 'knowledge' workers to move back? That's what [Tulsa, Oklahoma](#) has done. Tulsa (sometimes known as the biggest small town in the US) was losing 1,000 college educated people annually in the 2010s. Tulsa Remote pays \$10,000 for one year for knowledge workers to move to their city. They also get a free workspace, housing guidance, introductions to local organisations and membership in a community of hundreds of fellow remote workers. Last year the scheme has brought in 643 new citizens contributing \$14.9 million annually to income taxes. Those who move save \$25,000 annually in housing costs and have high levels of civic engagement. Are there gentrification risks? Sure, says



Tulsa but out of a city of one million people, 3,000 new knowledge workers is more than manageable. So, instead of infrastructure being the answer to everything – could this work in home town Britain?

**Biodiversity offsetting.** Carbon offsets are a fairly well known concept - but is biodiversity offsetting the next big thing? The problem with nature in our financialised world is that it's hard to monetise. Who makes money out of parks, or creating and maintaining a habitat, or not building something on green space? It's not impossible but it's not easy (and often not desirable for wider reasons). The idea behind [offsetting](#) is that there should be 'no net loss' of biodiversity because of new construction or extraction projects. So if on-site mitigation isn't enough you should be able to offset the impact by spending on measures which support biodiversity elsewhere. How you practically reduce the complex biodiversity of, say, a wood, to tradable statistics is a big question. And of course many would argue that seeking to monetise nature is a head in hands sign of a much larger problem with the age we live in. But, regardless of where you stand on this it's worth being aware of.

## Side projects: Batley - a photo book



*'This is the valley of the temples, littered with tabernacles, societies of friends, masonic lodges, spiritualist holdouts, the chapels of non conformist sects. Now deconsecrated with*



*pallets of old clothes for recycling. All piled up - looking for a buyer. In the pub a man glances at the threat detecting rolling news and wonders where is my shoddy queen?'*

Access the photo book [here](#)

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