

# Putting roads first

**Julian Glover, 2017 Wolfson Economics prize director and former special adviser to the Transport Secretary, argues that the transport industry should pay more attention to roads and road users**



**After spending almost four years working with the previous Secretary of State, Patrick McLoughlin, to shape transport policy I have a confession to make. We spent, in Government, far too much time working on rail policy and not enough on roads.**

We never managed to think about roads as a system, with income and costs and customers. Because of that, our roads are not funded as well as they could be.

There has been some progress. Patrick McLoughlin led the creation of Highways England, which is proving to be a real success. He created the Roads Investment Strategy (RIS), with five-year funding, and a host of new start schemes on trunk roads, as well as new funding for local projects through Local Enterprise Partnerships. We also oversaw the evolution of the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) from a rail regulator to a roads and rail regulator, with Transport Focus speaking up for the users of England's major roads.

But even with these developments, the real political energy and time still went elsewhere in the transport sector. And that is still the case.

## A joined up approach

New capital investment needs to be joined up with the equally important, but less exciting politically, business of day-to-day maintenance. We need to improve the way local roads are run, or create a national roads network of the kind some are now rightly advocating. And we need to think about where funding will come from in an age of changing technologies and falling fossil fuel use.

That is the point of the 2017 Wolfson Economics Prize, a £250,000 competition to find better ways of funding better roads. We are asking: 'How can we pay for better, safer, more reliable roads in a way that is fair to road users and good for the economy and the environment?'. The quality of

the judging panel is a sign of what we could achieve with strong entries: led by Sir John Kingman, who ran the Treasury until this year and is now chairman-elect of Legal and General, as well as Alistair Darling, the former chancellor, Danny Finklestein, the leading commentator on the Times, Isabel Dedring, former Deputy Mayor in London and now at Arup, and the transport economist Bridget Rosewell. The prize is an original and creative way to shape UK policy and there is great interest in the prize submissions inside Government.



Road users pay more than £33 billion a year in taxes, but perhaps only a third of that goes back into investment and maintenance. The pressures to change funding and operation of our highways are only going to grow and the Government needs to be able to make more sensible and responsive decisions about investment. Roads should be run to make it easier for people to travel.

## Communicating with road users

Open, new thinking and good communication with the public is essential to ensure their support for the inevitable future changes in the highways. A responsive highways industry should be shaped not just by the logical possibilities of technology or investment, but also by what the end users want and will support.

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**Julian Glover**

Autonomous vehicles, for instance, excite those involved in developing them but they will not succeed unless

road users are actually persuaded they are a good idea. Likewise, new projects and road schemes risk running into environmental objections if we don't show that we are taking account of things like air quality and landscape.

In this way, we may actually bring clear improvements that people want, whether that is better air quality, less noise, more capacity, economic growth and a good return on investment. So if the highways industry is going to consider more intelligent ways to use technology to manage demand and charging – and it should – then it has to communicate the benefits to road users.

The industry also needs to communicate the way we will use our roads in the future – one day it will seem unimaginable that road users could just join a major road whenever they wanted, without any data communication, or fee, or that traffic jams existed. In the future, there may not be private car ownership in the way we think of it today.

All of this is going to take a massive shift from the days when the Treasury could count on big tax take from fuel and vehicle excise duty and gave some of it back in an uncontrolled and indirect manner to roads and the rest of transport.

We don't yet know how that shift is going to come about, or how long it will take, but it will take explanation, persuasion and new thinking. And Britain is well-placed to show the world how to do it. ☺