

JULY 2021

FOCUS

**HERE COMES A
REVOLUTION**

**A NEW FUTURE
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AFTER THE REVOLUTION?





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Is there any hope that greater social equality, dignity and a people-centric, low-carbon mobility future awaits us beyond the pandemic?

The big winner from the pandemic is set to be the car, risking a reinforcement of longstanding transport-related problems. What will it take to bring forward a new era of mobility that breathes life into our cities and communities for everyone as we face the existential threat from climate change?

It may be that the only course of action is revolution. This is not the revolution politicians and technologists love to talk of when it comes to technological innovation in transport promising to make everything better, it is a revolution of hearts, minds and actions of the people. Of those who should be at the centre of 'building back better' from the pandemic.

Nose dive?

Before the pandemic, and with the exception of a few small kinks in the long-running trend due to other crises, airline passengers carried globally was only going one way – inexorably upwards. According to the World Bank, the global number of passengers carried annually passed one billion in 1990 and had reached 4.4 billion in 2019. Then it fell off a cliff.

According to the International Civil Aviation Organisation, passengers carried in 2020 dropped by 60%. This corresponds to a 66% reduction in the number of seats offered by airlines, but will data points for 2020 and 2021 appear no more than a blip in the trend when we look back in 10 years' time?

Flying high

Aviation's inexorable rise had been running in parallel with a change from almost no one globally using the internet in 1990 to over 4.6 billion internet users at the start of 2021. Unlike the cliff that aviation fell off when the pandemic arrived, internet use climbed a mountain.

Headline numbers can be deceiving and mask massive disparities internationally. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2019, the proportion of 18–29-year-olds who use the internet at least occasionally or report owning a smartphone ranges from 100% in Australia, the USA and UK to 65% in Nigeria and 57% in India. For those aged 50+ the range is starker: from above 80% for Australia, the USA and UK to 31% for Nigeria and 18% for India.

Car-led recovery?

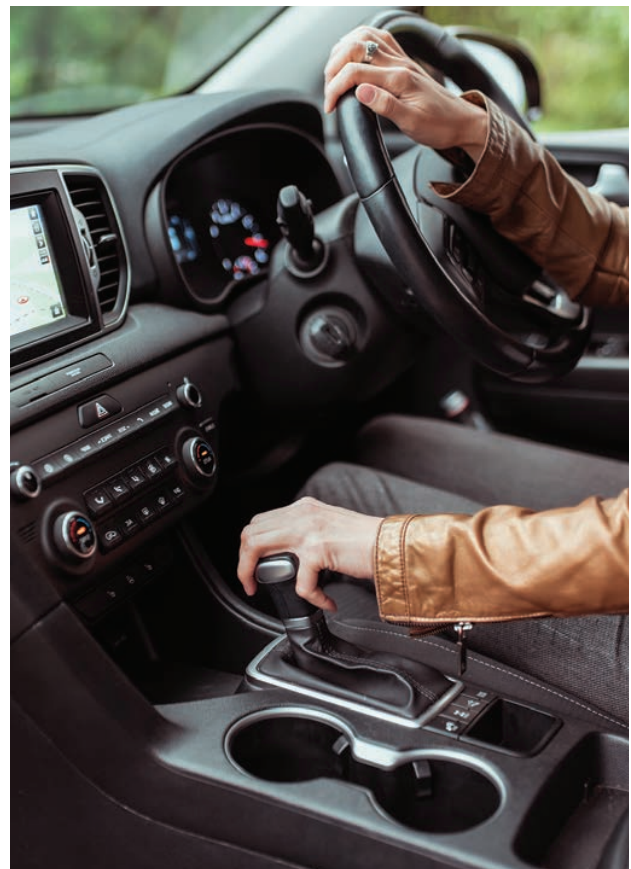
According to the TomTom Traffic Index that reports on traffic congestion in over 400 cities around the world, there was, unsurprisingly, a 'huge drop in urban congestion levels around the world'. Compared to 2019, in 2020 Boston had 42% less traffic; New York had 30% less, as did Santiago. London had 18% less, New Delhi 16% and Brisbane 12%.

This article is a writeup of the 10th PTRC Fireside Chat that took place on 28th May 2021. The event was a truly global conversation across continents that set out to explore what a cocktail of pandemic, digital age and climate crisis means for transport on this planet.

This may speak to cars, but at the same time we have seen public transport – and those dependent on it – punished by the pandemic or at least by governmental response in many countries, in spite of lack of clarity over whether or not the public transport environment is strongly associated with virus transmission.

Latest data from the UK Department for Transport shows that as of 24th May 2021, car traffic in Britain has grown back to over 90% of the pre-pandemic level of early February 2020. Meanwhile, bus use inside and outside London is still more than a third less and train use more than half less than pre-pandemic levels.

▼ The big winner from the pandemic is set to be the car





^ Before the pandemic, the number of airline passengers carried globally was trending upwards

→ As we emerge from the pandemic we face global economic challenges, but looming large is a climate emergency. There is therefore talk of a green recovery from Covid-19. As the energy transition edges forwards for motor traffic, one could be forgiven for thinking that the global motor industry is sitting smugly; use of cars and vans is bouncing back and motor manufacturers, it could appear, are parading themselves as the green saviours of the planet as electric vehicles (EVs) join their showrooms.

Digital connectivity seems here to stay and may have irrevocably changed the prospects for commuting, and domestic and international business travel. Can public transport, micromobility and active travel find their place in the green recovery?

Which transport modes are going to be the winners and which the losers in the years ahead? Will such fortunes bode well or badly for reducing social inequality and drawing down CO₂ emissions from the transport sector?

Politics and people power

There is volatility in geopolitics to contend with, too, as we move towards the UN 2021 Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November, and transport, with its importance to the economy, is never far away. Consider, for example, Chile, where it was a fare hike on the Santiago Metro that sparked protests across the country in

2019 about high levels of inequality. In the referendum that resulted, nearly 80% of people voted to rewrite the country's constitution. Earlier in June, an election took place for places on the Constitutional Convention, the body that will write a new constitution to put to the public vote. 'Government-backed candidates have only secured about a fourth of the seats,' we are told.

There is much to contemplate about what the future has in store when we ask: 'Where now for transport?' What better way now to proceed with such contemplation than to move to our international panel representing Australia, Nigeria, the USA, Chile and India.

Wicked problems

I had a real sense from the round-the-world introductions of our panellists of just how wicked the problems are that we are facing and trying to address. There is no technology-fix answer to these – restoring greater equality, greater dignity, greater opportunity to thrive in healthy, sustainable ways calls for fundamental sociopolitical change.

I asked the panel whether they saw a real prospect for change coming out of the pandemic or whether we are to remain perpetually caught in a cycle of optimism and disappointment when it comes to making transport more sustainable and better able to support a fair and dignified society.

6 Moving towards good in the future starts with awareness and engagement with where we are now. 9

Balance of power

With the arrival of President Biden, Robin Chase, Co-founder, Zipcar, Veniam, NUMO, USA, observes: 'There's a real political commitment to address these twin issues of climate change, and inequality and racism in the US.' Yet she sees in the budget proposals the largest share is on transportation where a huge funding allocation is for EVs.

Juan Antonio Carrasco, Associate Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Universidad de Concepcion, Chile, could relate to Robin Chase's observations from the USA. In Chile, just before the revolution, a political presumption was expressed that the pursuit of EVs was attractive because it was the easiest way to address the climate agenda. He sees therefore a need for a rebalancing of power. The north of Chile holds a substantial share of the world's lithium that will be needed for EVs and powerful players are circling this opportunity.

I wondered: is the vehicle electrification sweet spot of economic recovery, playing to powerful vested private sector interests, and seemingly addressing the climate emergency, too irresistible to allow for prospects of more fundamental change?



^ Compared to 2019, in 2020 New York had 30% less congestion

More pressing than the climate crisis?

Meanwhile in Australia, Kate Mackay, Australia Practice Leader for Transport Planning, Mott MacDonald, noted that not very much is happening in terms of EVs. The government's position nationally is that there will be no subsidies for EVs, unlike other countries where they have been taking off. The climate crisis really is a wicked problem in Australia.

She says: 'In our last federal election, the party that got into power with a sizeable majority got in essentially on an anti-climate-change agenda.' Affordable housing is a much higher priority, according to a recent poll, than addressing climate change: 'At the national level, the focus is very much on jobs and on the economy.'

In terms of the climate emergency, it was becoming apparent from the conversation that the global picture is clouded by problems of balance of power, lack of systems thinking, lack of plans and implementation capacity, and other priorities that overshadow the emergency.

Looking for optimism

I was struck by the sense of national actions not necessarily equating to global action. There is great diversity internationally in the state of transportation and the awareness, appetite and means to address transport decarbonisation. Is the best answer to the



global climate emergency for countries like the USA and the UK to focus upon their own decarbonisation or on helping other nations accelerate their own plans?

Is revolution the answer?

Sarika Panda Batt, Director, Nagarro, and Founder & Trustee, Raahigiri Foundation, believes total reform is needed in India's political system and in its governance when it comes to climate change and inequality. Especially in India, it is the poor who are the victims of climate change. The question is how to improve the lives of the poor, how to attend to the needs of 90% of the population, not the other 10% more privileged part of the population.

In Chile, Juan Antonio Carrasco, sees that the mainstream discourse of politicians has become irrelevant now in terms of technological solutions for tackling decarbonisation, as attention turns to aspects that more directly affect people's lives (which may relate to climate change). Revolutions are for those who are uncomfortable or who suffer or fear suffering, he points out. It seeks a rebalancing of power that can help address people's discomfort and suffering, and from how that is addressed will emerge the prospects for future transport and decarbonisation.

I was left contemplating what forms revolution can take in bringing about momentum for change. Perhaps alongside the very visible and vocal revolution will also come quieter, but powerfully cumulative changes in attitudes and behaviours that undermine the balance of power. Perhaps the ranks of the uncomfortable will have swelled globally as a result of the pandemic, and continue to swell as issues of inequality and climate change become more prominent.

What could good look like?

In the interests of looking for optimism within the current state of flux, I asked the panel to consider the question: 'If you had the power to make it happen, what would good look like in terms of transport in 2030?'

For Kate Mackay, the first priority would be to move attention away from only transport to much greater emphasis on access. She would want to see transport and land-use decisions made hand in hand, and decision-making would be much more vision led than more narrowly on pursuit of, for example, growth targets. She would also like to see rail services in place across Australia to compete with air travel and green energy replacing coal fired power stations which have become a source of powering EVs.

Robin Chase would wish to see the reallocation of space in dense urban areas by 2030 with safe networks for walking, biking in an environment: 'so people could truly live a multimodal life.' This would mean a move from single-occupancy cars to single-occupancy electric micromobility, allied to a backbone of public transport. Sharing of rides would feature across people's multimodal lives, as would shared or public ownership of vehicles, in contrast to private ownership.

Sarika Panda Batt, too, sees shared electric mobility as the future she wishes to create. Her guiding principle is: 'plan for the masses, not for the classes', and in which multimodal opportunities exist for the masses.

For Emmanuel Mogaji, Senior Lecturer, Department of Marketing, Events and Tourism, University of Greenwich, moving towards good in the future starts with awareness and engagement with where we are now, and the recognition that we are not doing very well and can do better. He believes this would lead to small changes made by many as a conscious effort to do better. He sees the need for infrastructure redesign with provision for safer and more commonplace active travel.

Juan Antonio Carrasco wanted to emphasise two words: public, and dignity. In Chile, there is much privatisation and yet the value of public (including public transport and public space) has come to be appreciated as the crises have hit the country. There is a need to recognise and address the importance of dignity, recognising and addressing the needs not only of those who are (already) comfortable, but of those who are not comfortable.

I was struck by a question from the audience, which has acted as my steer for choosing the title of this report: 'Revolution, ok; but then what?' Even if the revolution becomes more widespread, what change becomes possible in the new balance of power that follows? There is still an awful lot of work to be done. ☹️

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You can view the full event on CILT's YouTube channel.