



Don't put democracy on lockdown

Claire Fox asks if it is undemocratic for local areas to introduce fundamental shifts in transport policy as 'settled' without a proper public discussion?

The new COVID-19 Britain we're all living in has undoubtedly revealed that there's more ways to travel than public transport or driving.

My sisters and I have clubbed together to buy my nephew a bike for his lockdown 21st birthday, to get around London in the face of restricted tube trains. I have been on more proper walks (as distinct from frantically running from one meeting to another) during lockdown than in a lifetime – and enjoyed them. All good. But should this mean a change in transport policy? Of course not.

And yet, the extraordinary circumstances of travelling during COVID-19 has prompted a declaration of 'a new era' of local transport. Major policies have been declared – all without democratic debate. Councils should be outraged. Instead, they lead the charge.

When transport secretary Grant Shapps used a coronavirus briefing to announce a £2bn package to create a 'new era for cycling and walking' he didn't even try to disguise the fact that it had little to do with a short-term, pragmatic re-organisation based on social distancing. He said: 'We know cars will continue to remain vital for many, but as we look to the future, we must build a better country with greener travel habits, cleaner air and healthier communities.'

Since then, it's clear more politicians (city mayors in particular) are using COVID-19 as a cover to bring in their pet green projects, often with an openly anti-car bias. In relation to his latest 'Streetspace' measures, London mayor Sadiq Khan has reintroduced the congestion charge – increasing its cost and extending the hours of operation.

There's lots of Brave New World hyperbole, going

far beyond managing a pandemic. Manchester City Council's leader Sir Richard Leese describes the crisis as providing 'an opportunity to think differently about how we use our towns and cities, and we must take it'. But where is the mandate for local politicians using COVID-19 as the opportunity to change everything? Mr Khan waxes lyrical about 'a fundamental reimagining of how we live our lives in this city' – but in whose imagination? When he urges London boroughs to 'sing the merits of spending more leisure time in our local areas', it feels more a dystopian enforced parochialism than an inspiring vision of the freedoms usually associated with mobility.

As we get on top of this virus, the priority must be to get society moving again – and fast

This sort of freedom of movement has 'liberated' people from living, shopping and socialising round the corner. When my mother developed Alzheimer's, we practically had to prise the car keys from her as she knew that without being able to drive, her world would be narrower and more restricted; it was the beginning of the end of her independence. Essential travel – rather than freedom of movement – is being decreed as 'the new normal'.

What is really galling is the burst of energy and urgency in building infrastructure to restrict travel, rather than directing resources to kick-starting economic productivity – which would require more, not less, transport options. Statutory guidance urging councils

to reallocate road space for significantly increased numbers of cyclists and pedestrians was 'fast-tacked... effective immediately'.

Resources are no object – that £2bn investment is merely part of a larger £5bn Government package that promises to fund and work with local authorities across the country to create pop-up bike lanes, protected spaces for cycling, wider pavements, safer junctions and cycle and bus-only corridors.

West Midlands Mayor Andy Street excitedly embraced a Government trial of e-scooters, urging people to leave the car, arguing it offers 'greener travel solutions for the region, at a time when we are facing a climate emergency'. Greater Manchester wants to create 150 miles of protected cycle track, and Transport for London plans a 'bike tube' network. What a shame councils aren't lobbying for that money to fast-track house building, construction projects, road building, high-speed rail, airport expansion, mains infrastructure or internet connectivity with the same speed and enthusiasm.

But more importantly, isn't it completely undemocratic to declare these fundamental shifts in mobility as 'settled' without a proper public discussion? After the extraordinary events of recent months, as we get on top of this virus, the priority must be to get society moving again – and fast.

We must be focused on mitigating the worst aspects of economic meltdown, and we won't do that by staying at home, getting on our bikes or putting democracy in lockdown. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Academy of Ideas and a former MEP