

Cycle Protest on the Day of Action Against Climate Change

8th December 2007

Address by Koy Thomson CEO London Cycling Campaign (after the riders had enjoyed a cold rain drenched two hours ride round London)

Welcome to the Department of Transport.

You probably don't think the weather could get any worse. But it can, and is much worse, but for others for whom bad weather is more than an inconvenience.

I have worked in the aftermath of cyclones and droughts in Bangladesh, India, Mozambique and Malawi. Inconvenient weather kills. It destroys families and threatens centuries old livelihoods. Inconvenient weather has a cause – climate change, and our lifestyles in the rich world are to blame. We must drastically reduce our carbon footprint – which is why as cyclists we are here – to raise cycling as an important part of the solution.

There are four reasons why those who are not cyclists, or who by habit demonise cyclists as urban law breakers, should be promoting cycling. And it is these people I address, not the converted.

Reason one: The transport imperative. Public transport investment cannot keep up with the growth in the urban working population. We are already facing years of disruption on tubes and rail as past years of neglect catch up. Billions of pounds earmarked for new projects such as CrossRail will go through the predictable overspends and delays. Unless cycling is encouraged with vigour the public transport system will collapse. Cycling is a public transport pressure valve, guarding against an explosion of commuter misery, dissatisfaction and anger. Bang for buck it is a damn cheap one. Promoting mass cycling across thousands of kilometres of London streets will cost the equivalent of a few kilometres of CrossRail.

Reason two: There is a crisis of health and inactivity. If you can cut beyond the cheap and nasty war on the obese, there is a serious health cost to our inactive lifestyles. Time and time again studies have shown that it is far more dangerous living a life with your backside shifting in succession from train, tube or bus seat, office seat, then back again to sofa than to cycle in London or any other busy city. The mass solution as we know is not a £400/year gym membership, but to build everyday, regular, habitual activity such as cycling or walking into your daily lifestyle. Bike to work, to shops, to school, to friends, to leisure!

Reason three: Cyclists are the pit canaries of a healthy city. This is why we dress in yellow. If cyclists disappear or keel over the city is sick. Automotive disease will already have destroyed the public realm – our shared spaces – and torn the social and physical fabric of the city apart. If you love London, you love cycling. A cycling perspective will free London to realise its potential. A cycling perspective breathes life and possibility through London's streets and spaces, not fumes and danger.

Reason four: The climate imperative. Around 40% of trips are short trips and could be cycled. By a conservative estimate 1 in 5 people in London could be regular cyclists (more in other cities). Each one of these future cyclists could be reducing their carbon footprint by one tonne per year, which assuming our annual output is 5 tonnes, is as much as one fifth (although some of us produce up to 10 tonnes). One tonne is a serious pile of carbon. It is easy and affordable and individuals gain by cycling, they don't have to give up things or forgo pleasure as with many green actions.

Why is this climate solution not being taken more seriously?

Why in the words of the 1996 National Cycling Strategy has the status quo not been changed in favour of cycling?

Why is urban transport and planning not creating advantage for cycling at every opportunity?

A large part of the reason is petrol addiction and car hegemony. Hegemony is a pattern of thinking that becomes so accepted and dominant that it destroys our ability to think in different ways. What could be more dangerous than something that kills imagination?

Another reason is that cycling has not been viewed as serious. It has been seen as niche or even part of an undesirable rebellious fringe.

But that is changing.

In the past decade we have struggled at the margins and gutters to create towns and cities fit for cycling.

We have pushed against the reduction of our vision of cycling to endless technical engineering consultations, crap cycle lanes, needless conflicts with pedestrians and safety experts who blame the cyclist, while at the same time the huge pro-motorised traffic investments and infrastructures, the gyratories, one way systems, multilane roads and other barriers grow or remain intact.

But through this we have proved and demonstrated that with political will, the right policies and investment cycling can grow. It can shift from the fringe to the mainstream, from the leisure to everyday.

We have proved that cycling is a serious solution.

A serious solution to public transport overload.

A serious solution to the health crisis.

A serious solution to sick a congested cities.

A serious solution to a sick and hot planet.

We need to see cycling fully credited with the health, human and environmental benefits it brings. For every turn of the pedal a cyclist generates health benefits, public purse savings, and planetary benefits.

We should be paid to cycle!

The street is a public asset. The street needs to be shared. Sharing means users don't degrade the resource for others. In fact sharing from a sustainability point of view means regenerating what is shared. Cyclists do this. But motorised traffic, like smokers, creates passive harm for others. Passive motoring must be seen in the same way as passive smoking - placed where it can do no harm. Like smokers with sclerotic and cholesterol slimed arteries, motorised traffic has clogged our streets. We are heading slowly and surely for an urban heart attack.

Car dependency has created a toxic environment.

Toxic to our cities, to our one small planet, to our freedoms. As others have said, toxic to our childhoods and families.

Cyclists are and can be the vanguard of change.

This means raising cycling from being a technical, engineering and solely transport issue to becoming a major political project.

The business not only of transport – like the Department of Transport here, but of health, global environmental security, economy and planning.

Cycling can generate a new vision of the city – regenerated and liveable and contributing to planetary health.

But for this we need the following:

- We need 20 mph as the default urban speed limit. A case that has been intellectually accepted but needing political will and ultimately a change in the law.
- We need cycling restored as the Siamese twin of rail. We need a revolution in bike carriage on trains and cycle parking at stations.
- We need planning which reduces distances travelled. Planning which builds incentives to get on a bike not slide into a car. We need to stop motorists treating neighbourhoods as through routes by closing roads, encouraging no-car zones – encouraging motorists onto a coarser network of roads. At the same time we do the opposite for cycling – opening streets and routes so that the whole city is permeable, comfortable, direct and convenient. Coupled with accessible training, this will encourage the wobbly and nervous cyclist onto the street – the family and children into cycling the school run.
- We need a change in the law to put the assumed liability onto the motorist in collision with cyclists.
- We need safe off-road routes and greenways too (don't forget to vote for Connect 2 in the Peoples Millions Lottery)

- And we need a mass cycle hire schemes to boost the cycling culture in our cities.

Cycling is truly the indicator of a healthy and sustainable city and planet.

But these measures will not fall into our laps – no matter what official policies and plans exist.

Keep the pressure up. Keep active. Never stop making your presence felt. Never give up. In this the LCC and the many activist organisations that have helped to make this protest work will support you. Join us!