



21st Annual Transport
Practitioners' Meeting
28 - 29 June 2023

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Member of the SNC-Lavalin Group

Why don't we just...

The perplexing future of road investment

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Overview

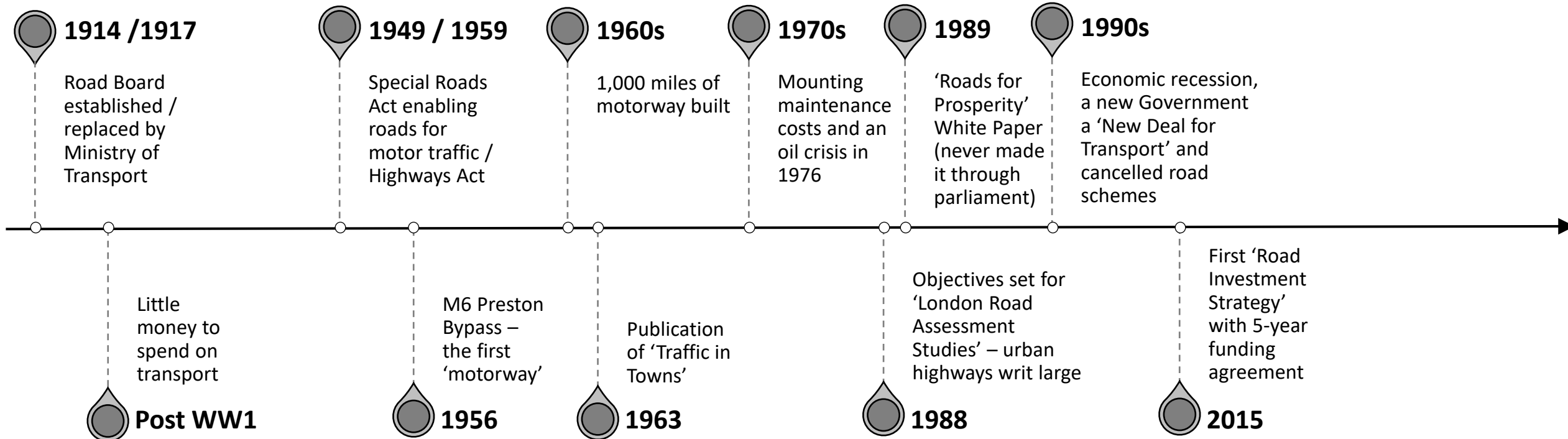
- **Once upon a time...** (a very brief history of roads)
- **Winds of change** (affecting the context of road investment)
- **Under scrutiny** (causes of concern that need to be addressed)
- **Conundrums** (why the future of road investment is in deep fog)

Spoiler alert (look away now)

- In 1957 the UK didn't have a motorway, now it has a quarter of a million miles of roads overall
- With a climate emergency and a huge asset to maintain, building more road capacity may not be a good idea
- Road investment and expenditure face some tough questions if we are to be persuaded of sound decision making ahead
- Road investment evades the clutches of technocratic governance leaving subjective judgement in the face of conundrums

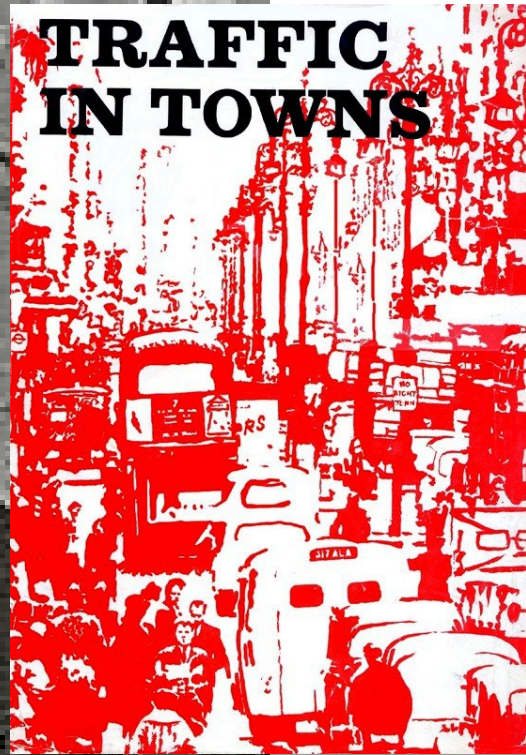
Once upon a time...

Timeline





Ernest Marples, Minister of Transport, 1963



“ we must try to plan our towns so as to **give the maximum use of this great and beneficial invention, the motor car, ...**

... which at the same time, if it is proliferated too much, **will strangle us** ”

London Assessment Studies

Volume 137: debated on Wednesday 13 July 1988

 [Download text](#)

Peter Bottomley, Minister of Roads and Traffic

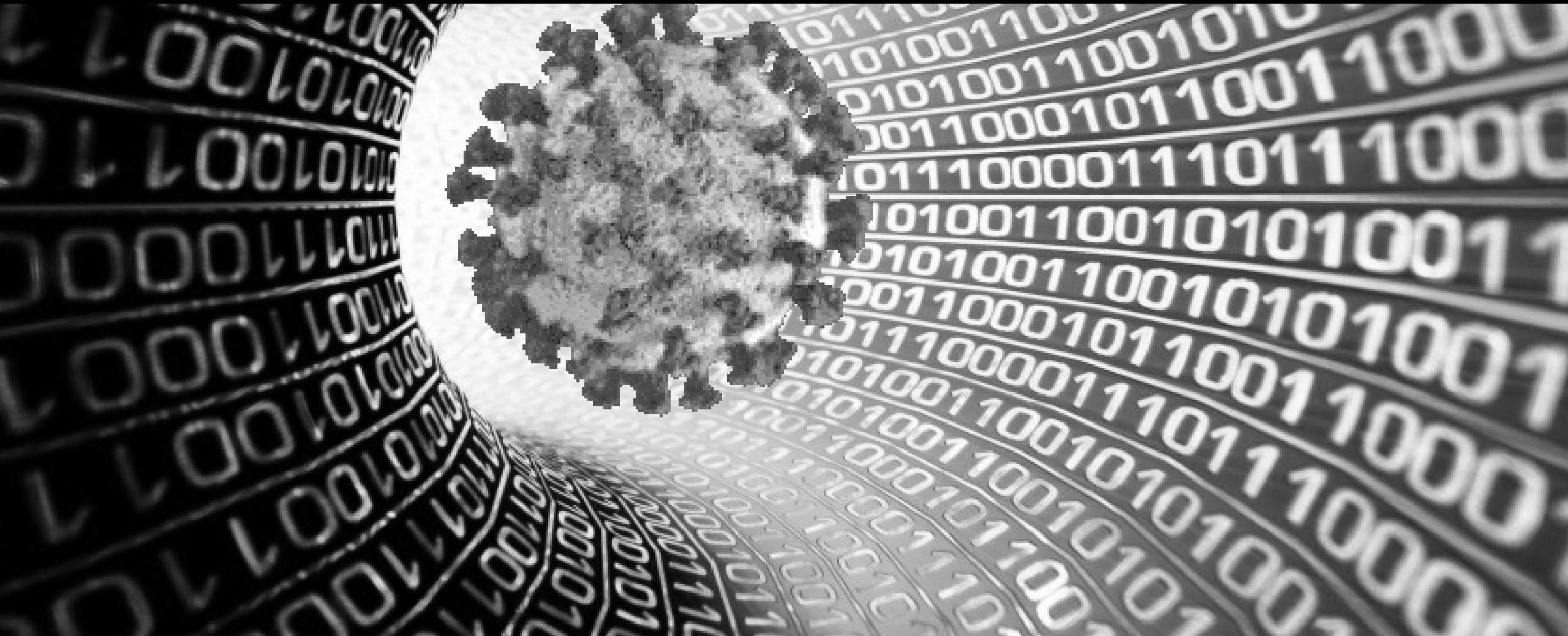
“

It should be noted that **these objectives cannot be considered individually, they need to be considered together.** For example freedom of choice should not be regarded as an absolute condition and will be assessed as it relates to the other objectives.

”

Winds of change

The digital age changing how we access people, employment, goods and services in society – and propelled further forwards by the Covid-19 pandemic



A heightening sense of urgency surround climate change





Stop the road to climate chaos

Road building is making it harder to tackle climate change, increasing CO₂ emissions when we urgently need to reduce them



Legal challenges to new capacity-enhancing road schemes

Under scrutiny

**Key questions for
road investment and spending**

January 2023



Time to speak up about road investment

7 questions

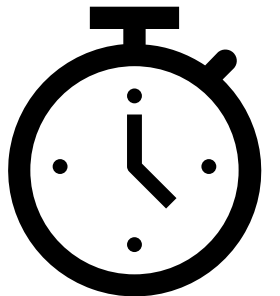
decarbonisation **biodiversity** **health and social impacts** **maintenance and optimisation** **safety**
consideration of alternatives **robustness of investment decisions in a changing world**

Common themes

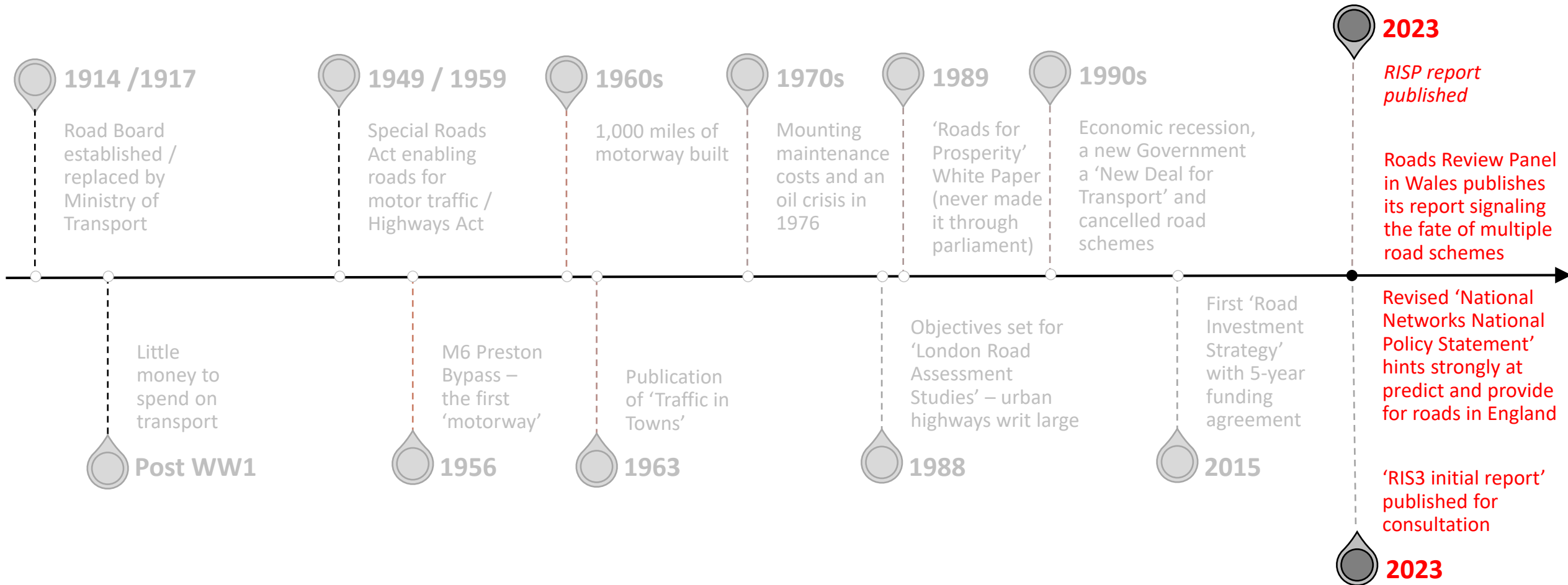
- the need for more **transparency** to allow scrutiny of decisions
- a need for a more clearly **coherent** approach to decisions - demonstrably consistent with broader obligations, including statutory requirements in areas such as decarbonisation and biodiversity
- a wish to see that individual schemes are fully and proportionately **compliant** with evolving procedural obligations and standards
- a need to ensure that decision-making is **well-informed** and draws upon a wide and **diverse range of expertise and perspectives**
- a sense that all of the above could be well-served by a greater role for **independent scrutiny** of decision-making

RISP recommendation

- However challenging, Government should:
 - i. publish a projection of the change in vehicle miles by carbon-emitting vehicles necessary or prudent to stay within an acceptable carbon reduction trajectory (recognising that this will have to be carried out against an uncertain cross-sectoral backdrop)
 - ii. indicate with sufficient confidence how such change can be achieved in practice in the required timescale (recognising that time is getting very short for fresh measures to be developed and implemented)
 - iii. make this analysis available as the basis for decisions on individual capacity-increasing road schemes



Timeline



Conundrums

Governing road investment

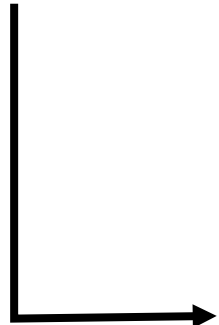
- i. Where, and by what means, should we create **additional road capacity**?
- ii. How should we manage the **consumption of the road capacity** that we have?
- iii. How should we **look after the road capacity** that we have?

Except between these questions, and answers that can win wide support, are two **conundrums...**

...**a conundrum being**...

Conundrum:

a question or problem having
only a conjectural answer



Conjecture:

an opinion or conclusion formed on
the basis of incomplete information

Perplexing:

completely baffling;
very puzzling

1

What makes you confident that the nature and extent of the benefits you seek to achieve will be realised?

Central forecast
+
False precision
=
Benefit-Cost Ratio

2

What future is best for society and why?



Halcyon days?



These questions remain conundrums whether addressed technocratically or politically or in combination



Yet perplexing though they may be, answer them we must, since even doing nothing is really a decision to carry on regardless

Our conclusion on providing road capacity

All judgements about the provision of road capacity are necessarily subjective, because they hinge on **forecasts** and assessments of **relative values**

Nevertheless they should be:

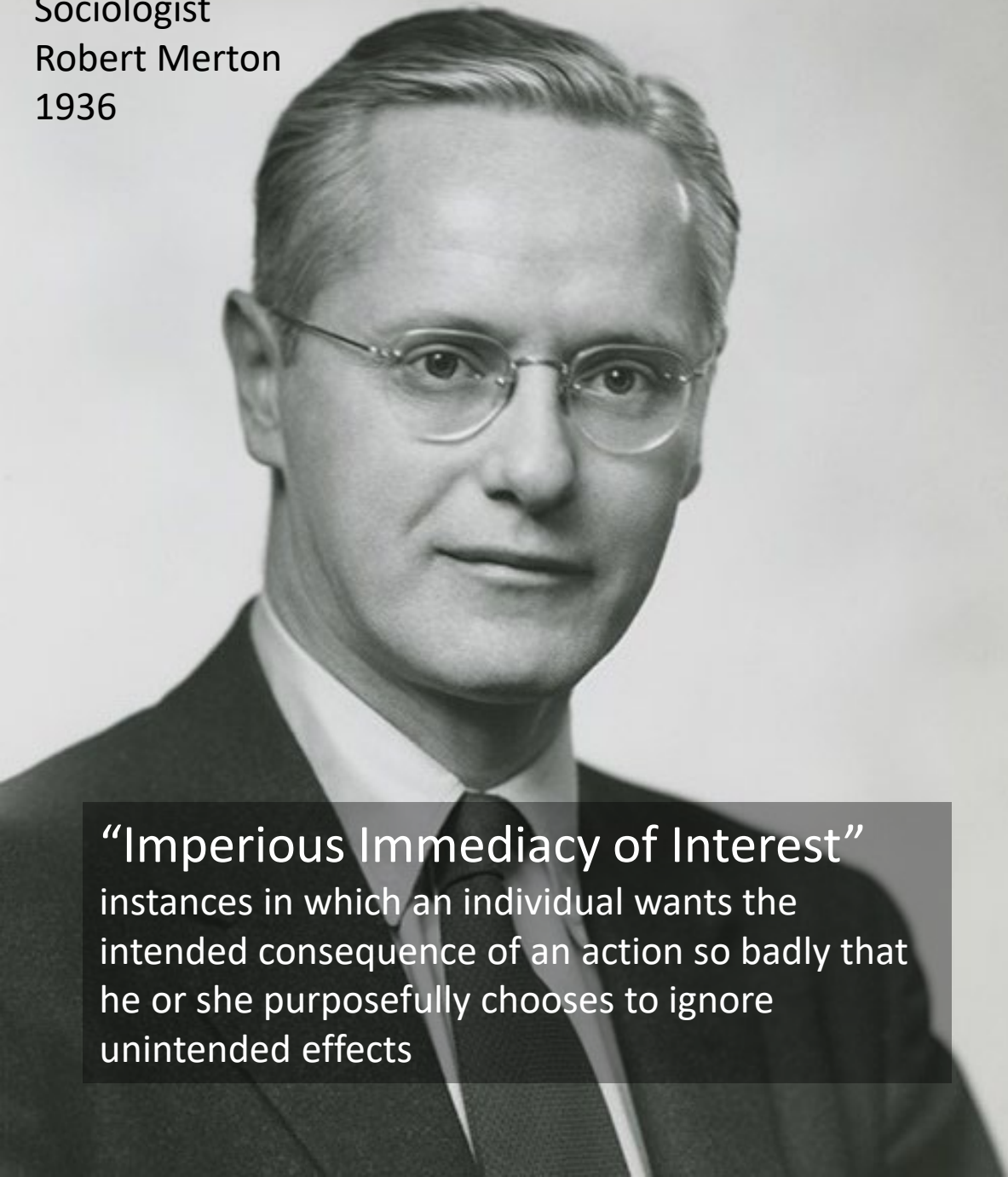
- as **well-informed** as they reasonably can be
- taken and documented in a way that allows for **transparency**
- taken with as clear and sharp a focus on the **downside risks** as on the upside benefits

Our conclusion on road expenditure

We judge that there is now a strong argument for re-calibrating our public policy attention away from capacity enhancement and toward capacity preservation (maintenance and resilience) and management (road space allocation)



Sociologist
Robert Merton
1936



“Imperious Immediacy of Interest”
instances in which an individual wants the intended consequence of an action so badly that he or she purposefully chooses to ignore unintended effects

