



## Professional Reflections

# Don't be a bystander – bring constructive challenge to your role

**Professor Glenn Lyons** last week urged fellow transport planners to “speak up, speak out, question things when they don't seem right” when he addressed the annual dinner of the Transport Planning Society. Here he reflects on how the challenges facing his profession have changed in post-pandemic times and how he believes practitioners should respond



Self-confessed ‘metalhead’ Glenn Lyons in ‘ready to rock’ pose

With the UK on the cusp of its first ‘Red Extreme Heat Warning’, I set off for London in my Bloodstock festival t-shirt and shorts last week. I was heading to the 2022 Transport Planning Society (TPS) Annual Dinner, the first one since 2019.

For such an august long-standing professional body (well, 25 years old actually) should I have been wearing a shirt and tie instead? After all, I had been invited by Mark Frost, current chair of the TPS, to be the after-dinner speaker.

It's a privileged but unpredictable spot to have, entertaining a large potentially unruly audience mainly out for a fun summer social night. It's one thing putting together your plans at home and imagining how it might go. But it's quite another when you get there to a large upstairs room in a waterside pub near the Tower of London. But I was playing to the home crowd so decided they would be on my side, hopefully.

There was customary banter to begin with about an academic professor doing an after-dinner speech and how painfully long (and worthy) it might be. I reassured the audience – like my students – that slides would be circulated afterwards and they didn't have to take notes. In fact, there were no slides. Just a hand mic and my script.

TPS will always have a special place in my heart. I became involved near the beginning of the Society and 20 years ago this year I was chair of TPS. It really did feel like I'd found my professional home – and a home where you could speak up and speak out – constructive challenge was the order of the day.

During my time as chair, I worked with Professor Phil Goodwin on an initiative that became known as the ‘Professors’ Letter’, to the then transport secretary of state in 2002. Worded by Phil, we managed to get 28 professors of transport to sign it (no mean feat getting that many big-brained individuals to agree to a form of words) – an open letter to the secretary of state Alistair Darling.

It expressed our significant dissatisfaction with transport's state of affairs, and suggested that road pricing should be part of the answer to the tensions between supply and demand, with road building being kept in check.

### A career highlight

This was in a time where it seemed we, as experts, had a fighting chance to engage with the political class. The Government had taken a serious look at road pricing in the noughties, and I did get a reply from the minister. More significantly, I appeared with Phil Goodwin in a Clogs cartoon in LTT about the Professors’ Letter. This is one of the highlights of my career and the cartoon now adorns my office wall at home. Its creator Greg Holland even added colour to it for me.

It was back in June 2019 when the Society was last together. That feels like a lifetime ago. At the time of that dinner, Theresa May had just resigned as prime minister with Boris Johnson waiting in the wings. We'd not long had a state visit from Donald Trump. But it wasn't all bad news. Chartered

Status was being conferred upon the Transport Planning Professional qualification.

On 12 June 2019, as she prepared to stand down, Theresa May announced a new legally binding target to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, making the UK the first major industrialised nation to propose this goal. And 2019 was the year the book ‘Invisible Women’ by Caroline Criado Perez was published. Ah, the relative calm of 2019 – when we were oblivious to the deluge of things just ahead of us.

So, what has happened since that has been of relevance to transport planners? A great deal, actually. Here's my list:

- Almost a year ago, the Welsh Government put a freeze on roadbuilding and set up a Roads Review Panel.
- Nearly two years ago the UK Government launched a consultation on pavement parking. Over 19 months since that consultation closed, the Government is still analysing feedback.
- A year ago, the UK Government published its Transport Decarbonisation Plan.
- Molly Hoggard, Laura Brooks and Marie Godward developed GET-IT – The Gender Equality Toolkit in Transport – last year. And if you haven't got it, you should have ([www.the-get-it.com](http://www.the-get-it.com))!
- In 2021 we didn't actually “see fully driverless cars without a safety attendant in the car, on the roads in the UK” – as, in 2017, Philip Hammond, when chancellor, had said was the Government's objective.



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● On top of freezing fuel duty for 12 years, another chancellor Rishi Sunak celebrated knocking 5p/litre off fuel duty earlier this year.

● Also, earlier this year the Transport Select Committee published a report on its inquiry into road pricing, with an eye on the Treasury's need to find a replacement for fuel duty taxes with the switch to electrics.

● Prompted by the Pandemic, Working from Home has taken a quantum leap forwards in terms of practice and popularity since 2019.

● Whether or not 'going to the office' is a good thing still remains a matter of opinion with Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg having taken to leaving a note on civil servants' desks saying, "Sorry you were out when I visited. I look forward to seeing you in the office very soon."

● A group called the Tyre Extinguishers formed last year, using lentils to deflate the tyres of SUVs in cities around the world.

● The Scottish Government in December 2020 set a target of reducing total car kms by 20% by 2030.

● Two months ago, the Elizabeth Line was at last opened in London.

● Also two months ago, the World's richest person Elon Musk, who has just decided not

to buy Twitter, remarked, "I have to say this notion of induced demand is one of the single dumbest notions I have ever heard in my entire life."

● He added, presumably for comic effect, "If adding roads just increases traffic, why don't we delete them and decrease traffic?" Sharp thinking Elon, You're getting there!

● In response to the energy and cost of living crisis, Germany has introduced unlimited train travel for €9 (£7.60) per month and Spain will be making short and medium distance train journeys free this autumn.

● Affordable bus fares are even under consideration for introduction in England from later this year, with a £2 cap on all local and regional journeys.

● With the alarm bells becoming deafening, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published its sixth assessment report last year calling it 'Code Red for Humanity'.

● COP26 took place last year (Or was it FLOP26, or COP-OUT26?)

● Jillian Anable – one of our climate change heroes – was named Transport Planner of the Year at last month's Transport Practitioners Meeting. And Lynda Addison was given the Lifetime Achievement Award.

● Some of us have joined those

committed to no longer flying for business or at all if we can help it.

● Active Travel England launched earlier this year, with Chris Boardman as its first commissioner.

● Giving new emphasis to the importance of constructive challenge in a changing world, the revised Transport Planning Professional competencies were launched last year.

● Stephen Cragg, head of appraisal and model development at Transport Scotland, suggested the TPS should become the APS – the Access Planning Society. Transport Planning is dead, long live Triple Access Planning!

On a personal note, I must recognise that the pandemic – an extremely difficult time for many – has also been a time for introspection. In my case, I've grown ever more concerned about climate change. I've become more aware of white male privilege in transport and society. I've become more aware of white male privilege in transport and society. I've lost faith in mainstream media, and I realise how airbrushed some of my education has been.

I believe I am now regarded as 'woke' which, in the perverse world we are in, is seen by some as a term of insult. But the introspection is – hopefully –

about becoming more human, more sensitive to difference and supportive of the need for equality. And becoming more vocal professionally and personally about things that matter.

I've been involved in a whole series of PTRC Fireside Chats during the pandemic – an important opportunity to explore how our sector has been shaken up. In one of these – addressing women of colour – I became acquainted with a powerful phrase: 'be an upstander, not a bystander'. This goes hand in hand with the constructive challenge we now look for in our transport planners.

We are in difficult times but we are a wonderful, collegiate profession.

More than once in recent times I've been asked, "what can be done to tackle the wicked problems we face?"

Here's my answer to transport planners: given the agency within the roles you hold and the risk tolerance you each have, please bring constructive challenge to what you do – and speak up, speak out, question things when they don't seem right. Be an upstander, not a bystander and a force for good in a sector and world that really needs it.

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Professors Goodwin and Lyons, stars of a Clogs cartoon, which appeared in LTT 20 years ago