

No Stopping the Gravy Train of Car Support?

Contributed by Kurt Lesser
22 May 2009

We first present York, UK-based John Whitelegg's recent editorial in the World Transport Policy & Practice journal (Volume 15, Number 1). He shows "Investing in the car industry is wrong." Readers of our old incarnation the Auto-Free Times will recall his brilliance. Following Prof. Whitelegg's editorial is Kurt Lesser's Comment in the same edition that challenges us -- with logic so pure you'll laugh in delight -- to stop the madness of throwing more good money after bad: at cars.

Editorial by John Whitelegg

We live in interesting times. Almost all the largest world economies are assembling packages of financial support for the car industry and financial incentives to persuade citizens to throw away an older car and buy a new one. The recession and the rise in unemployment is a personal disaster for many and the pressure to "rescue" industries is intense. Sadly global thinking and decision taking on this matter is way out of line with evidence and with the need to identify opportunities out of the mess rather than continue on the same lines that created the mess.

Investing in the car industry is wrong. We need large scale investment in things that create real jobs in real communities and have a huge impact on the big things that we are all trying to address including peak oil, climate change and poverty eradication. Investing in renewable energy anywhere in the world is a "no brainer". It will create lots of jobs in every community. Designing, equipping and retro-fitting every building with whatever is needed to reduce energy use by 50% is also a front-runner for climate and job creation success. Investing in high quality streets for walking and cycling and public transport will do the same but throwing cash at an early 20th century industry based on moving objects that weight about 75 kgs in a metal container weighing about 1 tonne is not very intelligent. We can restructure cities, mobility and accessibility and in one highly co-ordinated policy deal with road safety, health, obesity, climate change and peak oil but it looks like the answer is, as usual, "no".

No Stopping the Gravy Train of Car Support?

Kurt Lesser

For months now the auto industry has publicly been seen to be begging for financial help, with dour threats of jobs at risk and promises to 'reform' by committed research for a greener car.

Some nations and the European Union have shown themselves willing to provide aid, with certain conditions.

But how can jobs be guaranteed – if sales don't pick up, if new robots are introduced, if the company or parts thereof are outsourced?

And what investments will go to the only effective reforms in transport, the only ones that are green – investments in public transport (also for transport in the off-hours), and for a greater re-organization of urban space, a de-mobilization that must involve housing and places of work and service?

Words about jobs and the greening of the car seem to have been accepted, with no questions asked by journalists, parliamentarians, and, oddly enough, by green organizations and parties.

Everyone seems to believe that benefits will result from handing money to the auto corporations, that there's a fair tit for tat and it is all for our good. A worthy investment no matter the enormous sums.

The two points very loudly made by the auto industry and its adherents, about job security and 'environmentally-friendly technologies', must be examined, questions asked, and, arguments put from the material available with our past experiences of the industry in mind.

The great question for the unions is: what may we expect of job security from such an automatized and flighty industry? And for green organisations and parties: what can we really expect of an industry that prides itself in producing the one industrial consumer product most harmful for human life and the planet, and with a bleak record of past 'reform'.

The following will question the two conditions for aid we hear most about, job security and green technology.

The conclusions may already be succinctly stated – that putting money in cars is wasting it, it will go towards prolonging our present misery. Let the auto industry embrace the tenets of letting demand shape the market, the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith, and let fall that which cannot stand.

Jobs

How many jobs are at risk? Bernie Ecclestone a few years ago told us that 50,000 jobs could be lost if Formula One folded. No-one, as far as I know, checked the jobs or even asked about them.

As with other jobs in the production of cars one must ask - what kind of job? Perhaps a contract 'agent', a one-man entrepreneur with no pension but, in some countries, with sizable tax-deductions that permit him to keep a car in style. Perhaps the shoemaker has been included in the tally, or the neighbourhood grocer. Where is the job? Is it with a national 'supplier' – or one in China or Argentina? The auto assembly line has grown since the days of Ford in Dearborn, it encompasses the whole world.

What kind of job would a green organisation or party think worthy of saving? Jobs in tobacco or arms? Is there a reason for special concern for jobs in carmaking? Why do jobs in this industry make politicians become generous? Woolworth with 27,000 employees (accounted for) was allowed to go to the wall; Wedgewood has moved most of its production to the Far East.

National pride in the car industry? Didn't Britain have pride in the textile industry that was allowed to fold or depart?

The condition for giving money is a demand for 'restructuring' – which sounds like the usual efficiency exercise, making slim and mean, whereby jobs are shed. What alterations in hiring may be expected? More contract labour, without pensions? Or expectations that the workers themselves provide support by doing extra time for less pay?

What plans does a company have for outsourcing? Has it already been done, or partially done?

Where are the director-jobs? In Detroit?

Green Technology

I've seen nothing specific on what may be sought, other than a means of reducing CO2 by fuel efficiency – which ought to please drivers, as they can believe they have a smaller climate footprint, while at the same time being able to drive more miles per gallon.

Where we can see that any fuel efficiency is spurious, as far as fuel use goes, miles travelled, the car is just cheaper to run.

Thus an inducement for car-use, as are scrapping schemes - where drivers get spanking-new cars at a reduction, and that's always more fun than using the old banger.

The scrapping schemes themselves involve exchanging cars that work, and using energy to scrap them, and as part of the tally there's the energy for making the new car. Having a fuel-efficient car does not mean that it will poison the environment less by CO and a whole spectrum of toxins from the tailpipe (we may assume that much of the money granted will go, as always, to lobbying for less strict pollution levels), that fewer than 9,000 children will be killed annually on Europe's roads, or that any of the many other iniquities of the motorcar will disappear. It's in the nature of the beast, to go to fast and to pollute.

What about electric and hybrid vehicles? They sound environmentally friendly, and are presented as such by governments and even endorsed by many greens - but why speak of them before there's a real chance of mass production and selling?

The electric car is not a new concept; it's been around as long as the infernal combustion model. The only thing missing so far in the electric has been the same ability to accelerate and go fast, and a net to provide the reach and omnipresence as of the gasoline/diesel car.

To attain mass sales the electric must possess the allure of the gasoline/diesel car. And that will leave us with the problems of speeding and congestion and even pollution. Pollution in the urban environment? You may well ask. Just to mention a few - there's noise and the light and space pollution, asbestos from the brake linings and rubber particles from the tires, and electromagnetic fields.

Heavy investment will be needed for production and power points – and to develop sufficient capacity from a net that's already overcharged.

Green organisations and parties ought to care about all aspects of the car – or have concerns for them become limited to the reduction of a single greenhouse

gas? There's human, animal, and plant health, as well as the more abstract one of planet health.

We may guess at where the public money is headed – a good portion towards advertising (more green-wash, more

censorship of the media), more for lobbying, more for rewarding the directorship. Will we ever know?

Will anything that green organisations and parties say change the behaviour of politicians when engaging with the motorcar?

Harald B.Schäfer's words from the 80s are only too true – that the price of petrol today is what the price of bread was before the French Revolution.

He also said that the key to the environmental issue is transport. Meaning that this is the hard knot that, when once unpicked, all else might perhaps be accomplished with less grief and opposition.

Whatever the problems of speaking out might be for politicians, who seem trampled by the media into fearing many bad days in the papers if they do not act for the car - green organisations and parties need not keep silent, and ought to protest loudly enough to be heard in the media and by our politicians.

This is a forerunner of sorts to a study on the true cost of the car – that includes tax support, policing, the infrastructure, crime, the health service – where the first step must look at the direct forms of public support for the making of cars. Towards this everyone can help, by supplying information, either from the media or from other sources. (An appeal to whistleblowers)

- How much has been or will be handed to which companies by which states?
- In what form has aid been given, as loan or grant?
- What conditions, specifically, were stipulated?
- What is known of previous gifts or loans – and what came of them?

On gratitude, a fable from Aesop – 'The Farmer and the Snake'.

One frosty snowy winter a farmer found a snake under a hedge almost frozen to death with the cold.

He couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor stiff creature, so he took it home, put it on the hearth near the fire and went on about his business. Before very long there was such a shouting and screaming from his wife and children that he came running back to find out what was wrong.

There was the wretched ungrateful snake, hissing and chasing the farmer's wife and children all around the room.

"So!" said the farmer, "this is how you pay me back for being kind to you! Well then, take this little bit of help too", and he picked up a mattock and chopped the snake in two. The point – Returning evil for good is not the way to show your thanks.

The next time you hear a motorist complaining of being soaked, mention the enormous sums in support that is handed to the industry by all taxpayers – where everyone pays for the privileged choice of the driver, directly and indirectly – and that

includes paying with lives in fighting the wars for cheap oil.

Kurt Lesser is a Writer and a Photographer. Email him at
kurtlesser AT yahoo DOT fr

* * * * *

The above and more from the same publication is on the web:

World Transport Policy & Practice