



JONATHAN BRAY



Waters isn't willing to go with the flow

Lee Waters, the deputy minister for climate change in Wales, is supporting bold changes rather than 'responsible' inertia

▶ Small countries can do big things on transport - look at the public transport paradise of Switzerland. And when Rhodri Morgan was in his pomp in the early years of the Welsh Assembly it felt like Wales was about to forge its own path. But without that drive from the top, there was a sense that there had been a retreat into the governmental comfort zone of caution and 'responsible' inertia. Not any longer. A freeze on road building, modal shift targets, talk of road user charging; whilst other parts of the UK are studiously deferring and avoiding the tough decisions dictated by the climate crisis - Wales is starting to take them on.

The man leading the charge on transport is Lee Waters - the deputy minister for climate change in Wales - who I recently interviewed as part of our series of lunchtime Urban Transport Next events and on who this article is based.

The first indication that something significant was changing in Wales was the Welsh Government defying the UK Government to cancel the M4 Relief Road. Lee said: "Just as important is what happened next. The South East Wales Transport Commission, led by Lord Terry Burns, former permanent secretary of the Treasury, produced a report that looked at alternatives to tackling congestion without building a motorway and that has just been endorsed by Sir Peter Hendy and his Union Connectivity Review."

The M4 Relief Road decision has been followed by a wider moratorium and review of road building in Wales. Lee says this doesn't

mean there will never be another road built in Wales again but it's sending a signal to the system that Wales is not doing what has always been done - and that road building shouldn't be the default or the easy option. It's also part of a wider 'new path for Wales' transport strategy which aims to walk the walk as well as talk the talk on decarbonisation: "The strategy

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says the right things but what are we going to do about it? And that's why we have instituted the roads review, freezing all road building programmes, because unless the handbrake is applied the system will keep doing what the system did."

The transport strategy has some other eye catching elements - including targets for a reduction in car use and for increased modal share for public transport and active travel. Achieving this will require a public transport system that can respond to this opportunity.

On rail, Lee is unhappy that although the Welsh Government now controls rail services in Wales, they don't control spending on the majority of rail infrastructure. Lee says the UK Government is not giving Wales its fair share of spending on rail: "We have something like 12% of the track in the UK, 5% of the population and about 2% of the rail spend."

However, the South Wales Metro is an exception where a remarkable transformation is now underway on both trains and tracks: "I think what is really innovative for us is the tram-combination. It will be on road in bits of Cardiff. It will start to really shift perceptions as to what public service is, what it looks like, how attractive it is."

It has always struck me that the Valleys are a prime example of the case for fully integrated public transport where bus services could feed into railheads which can provide rapid linear services into the heart of the cities in South Wales. Lee agrees. "To get truly joined up,



Lee Waters became deputy minister for climate change in Wales last May



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integrated transport we need franchising. We don't yet have that. We will be introducing a white paper next year. And a Bill to pass Welsh legislation to create a franchising system in Wales so we can move towards one timetable, one ticket, one fare. That is a crucial part of making sure the Metro achieves its potential.”

He goes on: “I do think the commercial bus industry has been very effective at kicking sand in our eyes in developing these various different partnership models which essentially are designed to buy time and to keep the status quo. But the status quo is broken. So, having seen the difficulties Manchester have been having in implementing this, and how long they have taken, and that they have more resource than most of our authorities, it has made us realise we need to take a different path. So, before the election we were going down the partnership model route and now we are changing direction... we are now co-producing with Welsh local authorities a different model where we use Transport for Wales as a centre for strategic expertise... but we co-produce, genuinely, with local authorities how that works in practice.”

He continued: “Through that different approach hopefully we can get action faster than some of us have been able to do through the current legislation.”

There's more to come on roads too - including a default 20mph speed limit for residential roads, a big shift to active travel and, intriguingly, the strategy also talks of establishing a framework for equitable road user charging. On active travel he says that progress so far has been a 'curate's egg'. He namechecks Cardiff as somewhere that “has showed bold leadership, reallocating space from cars into active travel, putting resources of their own in”.

He continues: “We are going to reward boldness so if Cardiff has got ambition... then we will overfund Cardiff and defund somebody else... and I hope that will show an example to others.”

On road user charging, he says: “I am bold, not stupid, so what I am not going to do is something that is counterproductive, so it is all about the timing. So, my feeling is we need to put in place first some of the changes which show there is a practical alternative to the car.”

Lee is a student of politics and of how things get done. He's seen it from all angles. “I viewed



An agenda of change: Lee Waters is backing the South Wales Metro, a default 20mph speed limit for residential roads and a big shift to active travel



Metro

the ring from different seats in the auditorium as a political speech writer, political journalist, campaigner, as a policy wonk, as a back bench member of the parliament and now as a minister. It is fascinating comparing those different points of view and understanding how to make the system move.”

He quotes Nye Bevan on how the coattails of power are always disappearing round the corner. He says: “Having chased the coattails of power constantly I am privileged to have the chance to be the transport minister in Wales but clearly I don't hold all the levers.”

He's well aware of the potential for backlash. “We have seen through the anti-vax movement there are going to be at least 20% of people who are going to be obdurately opposed to this, as there always is. I was struck by some clip I saw on YouTube the other day - vox pops about when seatbelts were introduced in America. The stuff people were coming up with, was exactly what people are saying on vaccinations today. We are getting it about 20 mile an hour speed limits as well. This feeling of authority taking away their liberties and freedoms and telling them what to do. That cannot be dismissed or minimised as a political

force or be capitulated to, but we cannot ignore it.”

Alongside that, there's the capability, capacity and enthusiasm of officialdom throughout Wales to pursue such a radical agenda, and the attitude and influence of a UK Government which Lee says is stuck in the road building past.

He says he finds the job “exhausting” but “having just come back from COP, the science is terrifying. Transport accounts for 17% of emissions. Transport has been given a free ride for too long in playing its part in bringing those emissions down. That has got to change”.

At the end of the interview, I ask Lee whether he really can change the way Wales travels? “I don't know but I am going to give it a bloody good try.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.