

JONATHAN BRAY



Party conferences and a crunch-point

The big issues were debated at this year's lively party conferences, but there are huge questions to be answered on transport policy

► It felt like the fallow Covid period has reinvigorated party conferences as institutions that before felt like they were in a slow decline. As the equivalent of Glastonbury for the party faithful, they were far busier and buzzier than I was expecting.

The Conservative party conference was a sign of how far the government has moved right into local transport's territory with 'levelling up' the buzz phrase that nobody could resist saying as many times as possible as at many fringe meetings at possible. Levelling up is still a very baggy concept onto which all sorts of asks, ideas and wishes can be projected. However we are told that more definition will come when the spending review is published. In the meantime levelling up minister, Neil O'Brien defined it on twitter (and on the fringes) as:

- empowering local leaders and communities;
- growing the private sector and boosting living standards, particularly where they're lower;
- spreading opportunity and improving public services, particularly where they're lacking;
- and restoring local pride.

All of which is a good fit with the need to invest in and support public transport and active travel - and devolve more decisions over its future. With climate being the other big theme of the Conservative party conference there is a big opportunity to ensure central government funding decisions reflect these priorities. There is now a whiff of the 1970s Heath era for economic policy

- with regional development and industrial policies to the fore. Privatisation and deregulation is no longer an aim in itself (as we have now seen on both recent rail and bus policy). Again a helpful context for the goal of putting public transport networks back together as well as the ideal of a longer term approach to local transport funding.

If you look at the big radical changes (that were unforced by events) on local transport in recent times, none of them originated from the Department for Transport and all of them came from a big hitter in another more influential part of government. So, the last big round of devolution and effective bus franchising powers came from George Osborne when he was at HMT and the radical recent bus and active travel strategies came from Number 10. Michael Gove's new brief (which covers local government, levelling up and inter-departmental working is therefore very interesting), as if he wanted to he could do something similarly significant. Although we will have to wait and see as he kept his powder dry at the party conference.

Another notable feature of this year's

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conferences was the influence exerted over them by mayors. Different mayors have defined themselves in different high profile and characteristic ways as they have taken on the mantle (those that don't tend not to last). They do this in different ways, from Ben Houchen in Tees Valley focussed on delivering some big regionally significant projects (like the transformation of the former Redcar steelworks site and the turnaround of the local airport) to Andy Burnham setting out a timetable for when a fully integrated local public transport can be delivered. But overall there's a sense now that the mayoralties have found their feet, and as they roamed around the party conferences they also exerted a magnetic pull on the headlines and discourse that took place there.

The next big events for public transport are the spending review and the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow. The spending review will be a big test of whether there is going to be a significant recalibration of what the DfT does to align itself with the pressing need for both rapid decarbonisation and in realising the ambitious goals of the bus strategy. Or whether inter-city will continue to triumph over intra-city, with a significant share of capital funding still hoovered up by the monstrosity which is the £27bn national roads programme.

The other big question is to what extent the spending review will enable existing public transport networks to be maintained (through continuing to fill the funding gap left by depleted patronage due to Covid) as a base on which to build the aspirations of the bus strategy. It certainly feels very tight at the moment (particularly for those with responsibilities for light rail systems where HMT are saying there is no possibility of more money post-April).

Meanwhile our world is also being rocked by two additional phenomena. Firstly, cracks are showing in the just-in-time global supply chain and the shaky illusion that we could always get what we needed at declining cost whenever we needed. Stranded containers, empty shelves and soaring energy prices are prime indicators of this. Secondly, aging workforces, and workforces who can get jobs they either prefer or can get more money doing (or both), are leading to higher wages and driver shortages. All exacerbated by the persistent inability of DVSA to get its act



A vision of Greater Manchester's fully integrated, championed by mayor Andy Burnham

together. These two trends could both increase the cost of standing still in terms of levels of public transport provision - and further eat into available funding for improvements.

Everything is also made more complex by the fact that we don't know yet what the new baseline is for public transport demand and whether the trends we are seeing now are transient or permanent. The danger for us all in this situation is that we are locked into a debate about whether we want more or less than we had before in terms of public transport provision, rather than taking a fresh look at just what kind of public transport system we need post-Covid but in a decarbonising world.

And therefore what are the main objectives for that public transport system. For example, should we shift from an office rush hour driven network to networks that provide a more consistent service across more hours given leisure appears to be where new markets are to be had? Should urban public transport be seen as a universal low fare utility to provide access

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for all to support levelling up goals? Or should it focus on providing a premium product to attract cash rich, time poor motorists with an alternative they are prepared to use?

In the mixer too now is the pressing need to ensure that the organisations that provide public transport should better reflect the diversity of the areas they serve both in the decisions they take and the people they employ. The easy bit is keeping up with the cycle of awareness days on twitter with suitable corporate tweets and vinyling-up buses and trains. More challenging is to take a long hard look at the data we collect, the way we consult, the planning tools we use to determine the service we provide and thus who it serves and who it doesn't. Something that has been sharply exposed by two recent

events that we have got behind: the *Gender on the Agenda* events that Landor are running and that we are sponsoring, and the last *Urban Transport Next* event that we ran on child-friendly decision-making on transport.

Fairness, climate and responding to post-Covid changes in where people want to be when, are the three factors that should be shaping some new thinking about what urban public transport is for. If we don't get hemmed in by dealing with one short term funding challenge after another - and with local government now in the budget setting process for 22/23- we have already arrived at another crunch point. ■

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.