

*NB: the opinions in this note are the author's own personal views, not those of the RAC Foundation*

### **Positioning road safety in the DfT and government**

I am conscious that my largely visual, animated slides don't make for a good 'take away' so here is a note of the key things I wanted to get across, based on David Davis's invitation to speak on the above subject.

I first worked on road safety as Private Secretary to Parliamentary Under Secretary, now Sir Peter, Bottomley in the late 1980s, shortly after Nick Ross's seminal TV documentary and the creation of the road safety targets as a rallying point.



Peter had been advised by the head of Comms in the Department that his job was to get out there and promote the road safety message, which he did, very effectively. Whatever stage he was on, whatever subject he was due to speak about, road safety would always get a mention – I'll come back to his 'mantra' later on, meantime here's Peter at a Hells Angels rally in Kent – I think that's well up there with Steve Ladyman on Top Gear.

I think it is also relevant that Peter was supported by an enthusiastic team of civil servants, including the Senior Civil Servants, such as David Worskett, who later became a director of the Royal Automobile Club, and June Bridgeman, the Departmental director and a formidable character who took a very direct and personal interest in the issue. I think it also helped, rather than hindered, that on road safety the Secretary of State was happy to let Peter get on with it. There are times when upping the ministerial *ante* helps, and times when it doesn't - in this case Peter was the single, highly visible champion for the cause.

Since the 1980s ministerial interest in road safety has waxed and waned over the years, and to some extent paid the price of how wide a portfolio the responsible junior minister held. Let's remember, even within transport, even within roads and traffic, there is a huge number of issues to contend with, many of which might be more eye-catching to parliamentarians, constituents, and a story-hungry media, like driverless cars, electric cars, or the bigger issues of the moment, such as climate change and cutting carbon, air quality, or even the rocketing price of petrol.

Let's also try to put road safety in proportion to the policy environment as it might be seen from Number 10 or the Treasury. The latest government figures suggest that there were 170 covid-related deaths last week. On average in the UK we have 450 cancer deaths per day. ONS stats show that we're averaging 5,700 suicides a year in England and Wales. And at least, despite some well-recognised environmental challenges, road transport, by car, truck, cycle and van, brings positive benefits – benefits we don't want to lose. I don't want to carry on taking lateral flow tests and wearing a face mask – I can't see any upside to the coronavirus. But I don't want to give up driving.

Every unnecessary death is a tragedy, but if you were the Prime Minister where would you be putting your energy? What is your special adviser of transport saying to you – my guess is that with Andrew Gilligan it's possibly something about buses, maybe something about trains, and probably something about cycling. If I based my view on media coverage alone I might reasonably conclude that the single biggest issue in transport policy today is when we'll be able to fly away on holiday again.

Where does road safety fit in the DfT firmament? We can draw some stark comparisons with the attitude to safety on rail and in aviation. Norman Baker spoke about the way the media coverage tends to demote the toll of road casualties to being little more than wallpaper. The last 'spectacular' event I can recall is the M5 crash in 2011 which was thought to be related to a mix of fog and bonfire smoke. But was it the KSIs that caused the headlines, or the novelty that they were the result of an unfortunate firework party gone wrong?

We can also observe that responsibility for road safety in its various forms is scattered far and wide across the DfT estate – I am rusty on the acronyms, but I think I can see RULIS, IVS, DVSA, DVLA, VCA, Highways England, Strategic Roads, Active Travel, the list goes on. Maybe you're thinking that all this effort should be brigaded into one 'dream team', in one place, with one clear mission? No me. In my view – in my experience – you can put all the relevant people into one outfit and still not have them talk to each other. And in any case we're talking here about parts of teams, parts of jobs. Do we want to strip road safety thinking out of other teams? Surely not. The answer here, I think, is about co-ordination and communication, not re-organisation within the DfT, save for one, very important, caveat...

There was plenty of good stuff in the 2019 Road Safety Statement, but at the same time I would pause on the fact that it contained 74 specific actions. That is a lot of actions to get your arms around. Perhaps the problem with getting road safety further up the agenda is that we've plucked the low hanging fruit, we have, globally, high levels of seat-belt wearing, low levels of drink driving, our cars are massively safer – to occupants and those outside – that Norman Baker's Triumph Herald. Airbags, crumple zones, no more sharp edges or bonnet mascots to cut pedestrians to pieces. Maybe the fact is that we're in a realm of working across many, maybe far more than 70, issues, none of which qualifies for silver bullet status, but not headline-making material either.

Which is why I am so keen on the idea of creating a Road Collision Investigation Branch in some form. Because I think the key task facing us is analytical. We need to keep asking the 'why?' questions:

- why did this crash happen?

    - why did this driver behave this way on this day?

        - why did this person's employer think it was appropriate to ask them to do a 14 hour driving shift two-days running?

            - why isn't there more responsibility – and accountability – placed on employers?

...and so on.

We don't need to abandon safe system thinking, but I believe that we do need to embrace whole system thinking if we're to understand what motivates people to behave as they do and design effective interventions.

I do find myself wondering whether the mass of tech built in to the modern car may help in two ways. First, by bringing to an end the age of anonymity – if no-one can see who you are then do you feel any social pressure to behave responsibly, whether that's by sticking to the speed limit or not throwing your rubbish out of the car window for someone else to deal with? With modern in car telemetry it's becoming increasingly likely that we can find out how you were driving immediately before a crash. We can see your driving style in the previous months. And with in car cameras we can see you. Second, because all that data is being generated and held somewhere, waiting to be analysed.

But data only gets us so far. The most advanced telemetry fitted to any car on earth didn't stop Red Bull and Mercedes disagreeing as to the cause of the Hamilton-Verstappen crash at the British Grand Prix. Further, the existence of data is one thing, investigators' ability to access it is quite another, which is why, in part, the work of the Law Commissions on driverless technology is so important, because it includes a close look at what data should be generated, recorded and shared. If I have a plea it is that we don't restrict this thinking to the driverless realm.

So what about targets, then? Targets for road safety bit the dust with the bonfire of targets that had grown out of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit from 1997 and, in the view of the incoming coalition Government of 2010, had sprawled across Whitehall with some unfortunate unintended consequences. Our road safety target pre-dated all that, but the cull was to be complete.

Subsequently I have asked myself whether I think having a casualty reduction target is such a good thing, as opposed to a simpler ambition to do better, year-by-year. I am, to be honest, still on the fence on this one. Maybe the Road Investment Strategy and the accompanying slew of performance metrics for Highways England reveals a softening of the antipathy to targetry as we head into the 2020s – and did I not see Sir Michael Barber, founding head of the PMDU, being appointed to carry out a review of the Government's effectiveness earlier this year?

Anyway, I had a go at finding the origin of the bumper-sticker quote 'what gets measured gets managed'. The nearest to the original I could find was this quote from Lord Kelvin:

*"I often say that when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the stage of science, whatever the matter may be."*

When I think of numbers, I think of Peter Bottomley's mantra, which still gets to me over thirty years later:

*"Every day, twelve times a day, a police officer has to knock on someone's door and tell them that their husband or wife or son or daughter isn't coming home. Surely this has to stop?"*

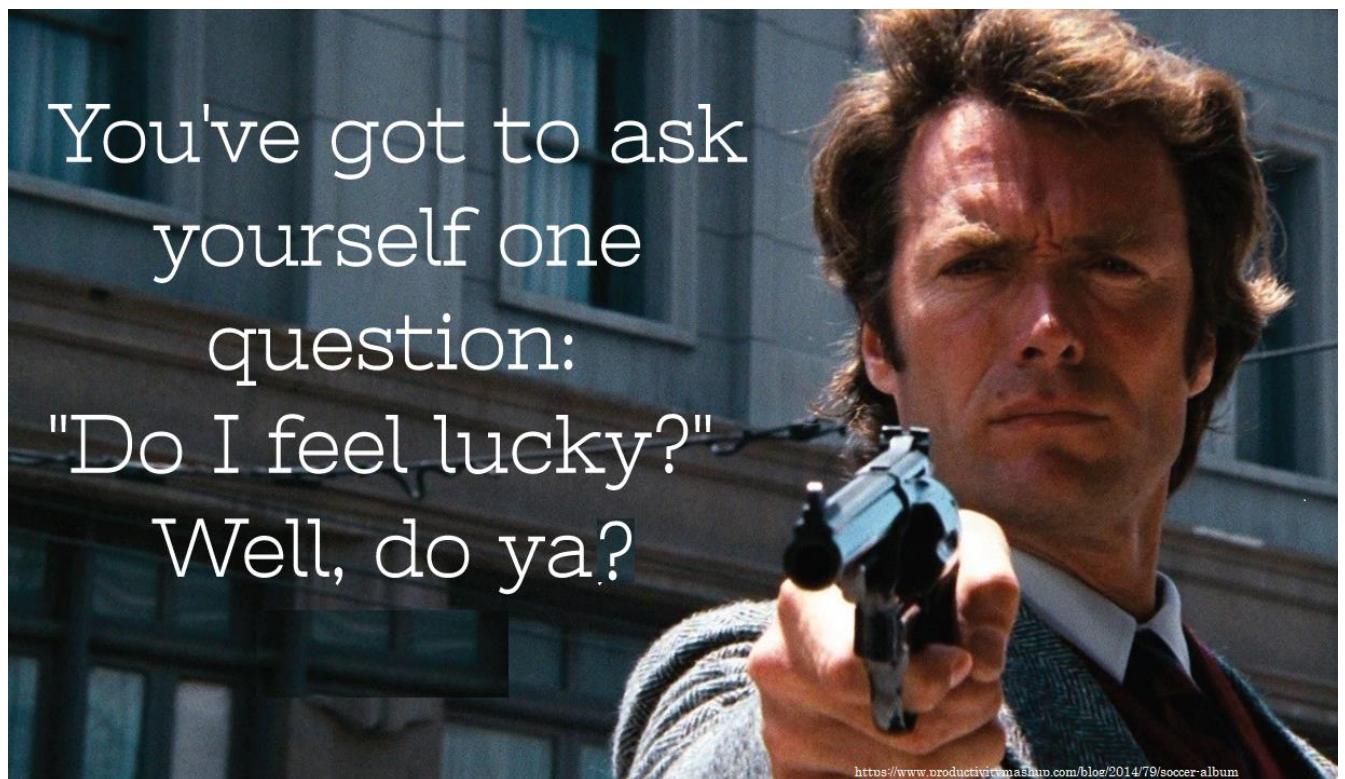
Last year – the last full year of RCGB stats – that knock on the door only happened on average four times a day. ‘Only’. It is terrific that we’ve got from 12 down to 4, but it wouldn’t feel like ‘only’ four if it was your front door.

Maybe we need a new mantra.

At heart I’m more of a wordsmith than a numbers man, I confess, still I’ve been thinking, since the workshop ended, about what that mantra might be, because much of our discussion was about how road users, particularly drivers, perceive risk – the risk they pose to themselves and the risk to others.

The fact is the vast majority of road trips don’t end in tragedy, most are mundane, dull, just part of everyday life. They don’t feel risky at all. But for some people today, some unlucky people, that risk will become all too real.

So maybe we could steal a phrase from another, I accept slightly ancient cultural icon and put to drivers Clint Eastwood’s question as memorably posed in character by policeman Harry Callaghan:



SG

22/7/2021