

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (continued)

Britain's road safety performance: are we as sunny as we think?

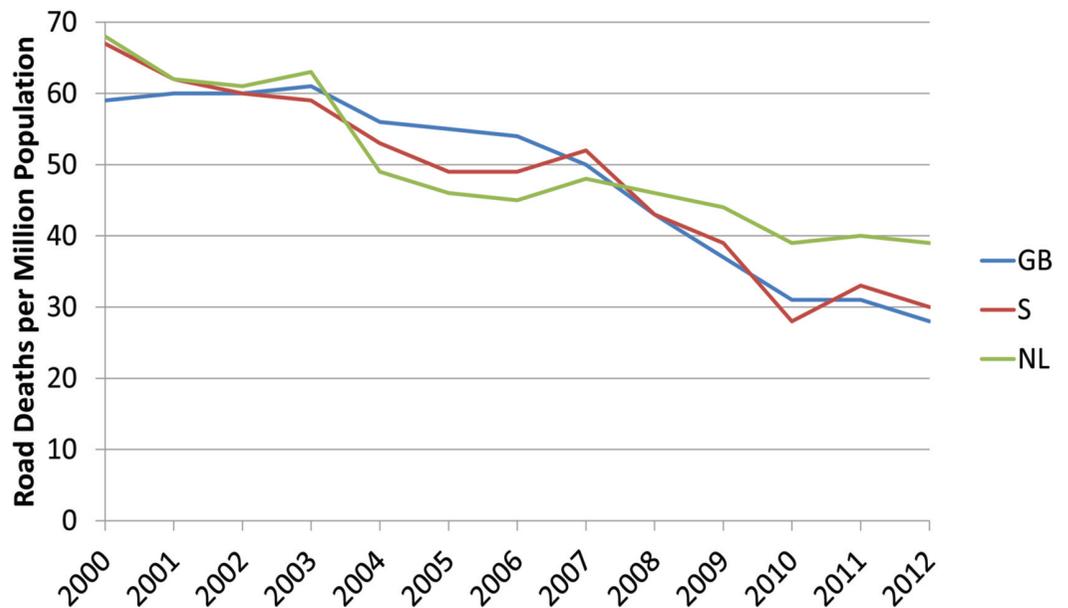
The three countries in the world that do best in terms of road safety performance — Sweden, the UK and the Netherlands — are collectively termed the SUNflower countries based on the fact that their initial letters spell SUN. The name was first applied in a report from SWOV by Matthijs Koonstra and others in 2002 entitled *SUNflower: a comparative study of the development of road safety in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands*. Since then, these countries have continued to perform rather well with Great Britain often ranking as the best in the world. The International Transport Forum's *Road Safety Annual Report 2013* rates the UK as a top performer and the *Daily Mail* proudly announced on 10 September 2010 that Britain was first in the world in road deaths per 100,000 population. Even the Americans are envious as evidenced by a recent report from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute with the title *Why is road safety in the U.S. not on par with Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands?*

It is also noteworthy that, we along with the other SUN countries, have continued to improve over the years. The accompanying chart shows road deaths per million population for the three countries from 2000 onwards. It can be seen that all three have improved, but in the last few years Great Britain and Sweden have improved considerably more than the Netherlands, and that, compared to Sweden, British performance has been one of steady gains.

But are we really as good as we claim to be? We are continually being told that we don't exercise enough and that we should walk and cycle more. The latest pronouncement was a 2013 report from the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support stating that being more active – moderate physical exercise for just 150 minutes a week – could save 37,000 lives a year. It can be argued that our comparative lack of exercise and disdain for walking and cycling makes the country look good in terms of road safety performance. For travel on foot or by bicycle is far more dangerous than travel in a car. That is why we talk about "vulnerable" modes.

So how would our national performance look if the average Brit had the modal split of the average Swede or Dutch person? I have done a little bit of rooting around in the travel statistics of the three countries in order to answer this question. My assumption is that the British safety performance stays as it is in 2012, but that we travel as much or as little as the Swedes and Dutch.

So first of all, let's become Swedes. Per head of pop-



ulation, they walk about 1.6 times as much as we do and cycle 2.6 times as far each year. On average, they motorcycle just a little more than we do and travel by car a little less (approximately 91 percent of our car travel). The average Swedish truck travels somewhat less than the average British truck (true for both light and heavy trucks), but the average Swedish bus covers twice the annual mileage of a British bus. If we then adjust the British fatalities to each group of road users by the ratio of Swedish to British travel, we end up with considerably more pedestrian and cyclist deaths than we have now: 1,002 a year as compared with 538 now. Our overall number of road deaths per million population increases from 28 to 34, which puts us well behind Sweden, Denmark and Norway. So it does appear to be true that our reluctance to walk and cycle makes us look unduly good.

Then we can do the same calculation and become Dutch. The Dutch walk about the same amount as we do, but it's no surprise that they cycle far more – on average 10.9 times as much. We cycle 85km per person per year and they cycle 923km a year. But – and this was more of a surprise to me – they motorcycle far more than we do: 8.8 times as much per person. Admittedly in the Dutch case that is mainly on mopeds and scooters whereas we tend to ride big bikes. But any kind of motorcycle use is inherently risky. If we adjust

only for motorised vehicle travel by vehicle with four or more wheels and for walking and cycling (and ignore the difference in motorcycling), then the British performance in road deaths per million population falls from 28 to 46. That puts our performance below that of the Netherlands itself as well as below that of Ireland, Spain, Germany and Japan.

If we include the motorcycle travel in the calculation, then we come out far worse. We are now at 87 road deaths per million population which is equal in performance to Latvia. So from being top, we have moved to being one of the worst in the EU.

This exercise should stop us from being so self-congratulatory. If we aspire to being best in the world, then we should have world-leading safety performance in the vulnerable modes too.

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Oliver Carsten is chairing the UK Road Safety summit: the way ahead on 27 March in London, organised by PACTS (the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety) and Landor Links. For details see https://www.transportxtra.com/shop/events_conferences/?id=371

Politicians can't break free from our car culture

Your editorial "Road critics go unheard" (*LTT* 07 Mar) notes that many professional bodies and academics are questioning the renewed interest in increasing inter-urban road capacity but asks: "...if their arguments are so sound, why do ministers not seem to be listening?"

During my career as a transport professional (and I guess of just about everybody reading *LTT*) there have been many well-argued reasons put forward for reducing dependence on car use and associated modes such as road freight.

The shorter list of motor traffic exacerbated problems includes congestion; emissions (whether noxious, noise, or greenhouse gas varieties); destruction of rural and urban environments through road building; dependence on the vagaries of oil production; danger to other road users; loss of local community; reduction of children's independent mobility; health disbenefits for those not engaged in 'active travel'; the massive costs of road building; and subsidy to the motor manufacturing industry etc, etc. There is a long list of criticisms of contemporary car culture and the institu-

tions that back it up.

Yet successive governments have resolutely persisted with 'predict-and-provide' and business as usual whatever the warnings of all manner of concerned professionals and academics.

To give just one example of the fanatic commitment towards increased motorisation: the last decade or so has seen median earners priced out of property ownership in the South East, and massive increase in costs for those renting. There are also all sorts of other well-publicised costs of living that have risen. Yet, despite there being little chance of these costs significantly declining, and the cost of motoring being lower than it was when New Labour last came to power, the last Opposition transport spokesperson voiced a commitment towards even cheaper motoring!

We are in the grip of a car culture that not only assumes increased car dependency as given, but excludes any significant attempts to have a real alternative. This is not just due to the power of the motor manufacturers, or even the oil companies (are they likely to support a world with less fuel burned?) but a deeper cultural issue. Essentially, unless the sense of entitlement assumed by motorists is properly questioned, no real progress on road building or anything else can be expected.

Transport professionals are kidding themselves if they base their arguments on belief systems such as cost-benefit analysis that underpin the system we now have. And they are kidding themselves if indeed they think that any form of argument will work that sidesteps fundamental features of car culture. Until they become car culture sceptics, it will be business as usual.

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Council's 20mph impact study is meaningless

If the London Borough of Merton and TMS Consultancy do not know that 1 to 1.5 road casualties a month over one year is too little data to be statistically significant they should be fired and replaced by someone – perhaps a work-experience youngster? – who does ('Merton researches 20mph limits' *LTT* 07 Mar).

That consultants want another equally useless such exercise should surprise no one, whether taxpayers

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