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SPEED INCREASE PANDERS TO MINORITY DIE-HARDS ONLY - GOVERNMENT MUST APPLY THE BRAKES

Government proposals to raise motorway speed limits would please a vocal minority of just one in five voters, according to Dr Jillian Anable, senior transport research expert at the University of Aberdeen.

Speaking to policy makers at the annual Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) Westminster Lecture in London last night (30 November), Dr Anable warned that Government ignores the vast majority at its peril when aiming to change travel behaviour. She outlined some key traits that distinguish the wide range of types of drivers - and non-drivers - and explained that attempting to "nudge" the population into driving responsibly or using other forms of transport will fail with many types.

"The vocal minority who seek a higher speed limit on motorways are the **Die-Hards**: passionate and knowledgeable about cars in general, and with a strong emotional and physical attachment to their own car. These drivers - predominantly but not exclusively male - believe they are superior drivers, and that their car reflects their status, intelligence and wealth. Any restrictions on their driving - such as car parking regulations and charges, pedestrian and cyclist priorities, or speed limits - are seen as infringements of their freedom," she said. "Such drivers believe that climate change is not their responsibility and are not willing to use any alternative forms of transport.

"The macho attitude of the Die-Hards is heavily ingrained in our culture, through advertising, film, sport and music, so appears disproportionately represented. In fact, more than half of all drivers travel at speeds of around 70mph or lower on motorways, and if the speed limit were to be raised, many would feel pressurised into driving faster.

"Speed differentials would also increase if the speed limit was set at 80 mph," says Dr Anable. "Lorries and buses would travel at much lower speeds, causing bunching and sudden braking and increasing the risk of collisions. This would lead to slower journeys overall.

"What gets overlooked is that one in four households does not use a car, and while they may not have a strong view on speed limits, they are paying for any investment in the road network, for the cost of crashes, and paying the environmental cost.

"If you include the fact that only certain people can afford to drive the safest cars at the higher speeds which uses around 20% more fuel, this is a policy for the most wealthy."

Dr Anable suggests that "proposals to raise the motorway speed limit are in line with this Government's desire to relax regulation and enable people to make better choices for themselves. Unfortunately in this case, they are going against evidence that shows that the vast majority do not want to driver faster or be put under any extra pressure to do so."

There are many examples like this in transport policy where the evidence shows that some form of regulation to restrict or eliminate choice is the fairest and most effective way to achieve outcomes which, in the end, benefit everyone.

Other road-user types identified by Dr Anable are:

Car Complacents who make up a slightly larger group (21 per cent).

“These people are highly dependent on their car and not keen to reduce their use – but everything simply washes over them: congestion, environment, even car ownership – nothing is of great interest. Many also own bikes but rarely use them,” she said. “This group is very hard to shift to adopt alternative travel modes unless the options are on the doorstep and the cost savings are compelling.”

Malcontented Motorists, who make up 18 per cent of the adult population, have the highest car dependency of all groups, but find driving increasingly stressful. This group deplores congestion, declining driving standards and the prospect of increased speeds on motorways, and would like to drive less, but firmly believes that alternative modes of travel do not exist.

Aspiring Environmentalists (16 per cent) rarely use their car and wish to use it less. Their interest in environmental issues and their tendency to use other transport types make them open to “nudging” into alternative modes.

Car Sceptics (9 per cent) have given up using their car, and enjoy using public transport and cycling – but they see the practical benefits of car club membership or hiring a car for holidays.

Reluctant Riders (7 per cent) do not own a car but would prefer to have greater access to a car and use one when they have a chance as passengers. They are not motivated by environmental issues, and would be interested in a car club for occasional travel.

Car Aspirers make up 9 per cent. “These people use the bus – but don’t want to. They want a car and don’t really care about environmental issues. Car club membership may be the answer for this group,” she said.

Ends

Notes to editors

Dr Anable’s comments are from her lecture “More Haste, Less Speed”, delivered at Church House Conference Centre. Copies of the lecture will be available once the text has been finalised and designed for printed publication. The Westminster Lecture on Transport Safety is an annual event, bringing together policy makers and practitioners from across the transport safety sector.

The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) is a registered charity and an associate Parliamentary Group. Its charitable objective is “To protect human life through the promotion of transport safety for the public benefit”.

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