

gridlock nation — and the neoliberal solution



Liz Truss lasted all of 50 days as Prime Minister and Kwasi Kwarteng just 38 days as Chancellor of the Exchequer and, as a result, we have survived a very near miss with the libertarian right wing of the Conservative Party. Rishi Sunak has since taken over, but it is interesting to speculate what might have been, particularly in terms of the likely impact of the libertarians on transport and city planning. Somehow, the ideologues had taken control of the Conservative Party and were ruling the country, as voted in by 80,000 Conservative Party members.

Let's consider what we might have missed. The wider vision for governing is found in a co-authored book from a luminary group of MP authors—Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab, Chris Skidmore, and Liz Truss—*Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity* (2012).¹ This is a book about letting the market rip, into areas not previously seen—in other words a manifesto for destructive economic liberalism. It's an approach that blames our problems on the State, red tape and the planning system, and demonises employees in Britain as 'among the worst idlers in the world'. The strategy would include income tax cuts, preferably for the higher-income groups, and corporation tax cuts alongside dramatic reductions in public expenditure as part of a 'slim state'.

Alongside, Kwasi Kwarteng co-authored a further book, *Gridlock Nation*.² This has a similar premise, and gives the perceived wisdom as applied to transport, outlining a perspective on the ills of transport and the future of transport—with neoliberalism again as the saviour.

It must be perversely fascinating to work in the Department for Transport when these kinds of politicians gain control. How do the civil servants steer the politicians away from this sort of neoliberal nonsense? Or do they simply delay, and wait until the politicians are found out and quietly disappear?

Gridlock Nation starts badly, and it only gets worse:

'The good news is that [the transport problem] can be solved, using nothing more than ordinary economics and a little bit of common sense. During this book, we'll see how we can make our roads flow freely again, stop pouring so much money into our railways, and make flying a pleasure again.'

The main argument is that transport planning, and any form of urban planning, is bad for transport—and that, by default, the market is good. Entrepreneurial innovation has gone missing, and government planners have failed to keep up with wider changes in society: 'The failure of 'Planners' [they are treated to a proper noun...] has left a legacy of congestion, expensive travel and misery for travellers.' Intriguingly, in an envisioned dystopian future 'traffic jams [will] frequently last for days on end'.

Apparently the 'biggest myth of all is that transport only prospers when planned effectively by government bureaucrats'. This is equated to 'government control and Stalinist-style long term planning'. There is:

'no need for a new generation of Planners to dictate what transport we can and can't use. Cars need not be the environmental catastrophe that Planners pretend. Indeed, you can keep your foreign holiday, and save the environment at the same time.'

The urbanist planners are demonised most—since those who prefer public transport and city living and seek to plan the shape of cities are mistaken. We should simply 'free up regulation, planning and local authorities to allow a far wider degree of experimentation'.

The prescription is to 'free transport from the planning and regulation that currently hold it back'; we can instead rely on collections of individuals to make their own free choices to achieve their own ends, and this will work out for the greater good:

'Set free from an official strategy, inventors are likely to devise many ideas that we could never predict beforehand [...] government planners only need to concern themselves with what levels of



Clifford Harper

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carbon we wish to have and what price we need to place on carbon to ensure these levels.'

Everything else can be left to the hands of the market. There is blind faith in the free market to somehow deliver the new forms of transport for us and for the results to be consistent with public policy goals.

More generally, 'growth is good. It brings us wealth, happiness, health and greater freedom'. This is where the Trussian 'anti-growth coalition' nonsense comes from—and it is carefully attached to increased mobility. New roads and runways will automatically lead to growth—the causal link is not considered or

demonstrated. Further, there is no appreciation of distribution; that increased growth, wealth and mobility might be very unfairly distributed.

Future advances in vehicle technologies—including electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles and self-driving, even flying, cars—will help to increase mobility relative to demand and solve the climate change problem: 'Hard-working visionaries are building prototype cars that drive themselves, transit systems that offer the flexibility of cars, a vast array of new ways to move around our cities, and even holiday in space.'

The visions of Elon Musk have been singularly swallowed.

It is only the rigidities brought on by the Planners that are holding us back: 'It is becoming increasingly obvious that the question is no longer if the technology will work, but when it will.' Self-driving cars will allow us to drive much faster; they will be used on the streets and even the Underground network in London. Apparently, we will be able to order our own pod, travelling to a particular destination, using the Piccadilly and Central lines. We may even have a Maglev tunnel under the Atlantic, connecting the UK to the US, with trains 'reaching a spectacular 4,000 mph, travelling from New York to London in around an hour'.

'The long twentieth century experiment with state control of our transport seems to be coming to an end.' The problems of congestion, climate change and innovation can be solved if only we can move away from the Planners' view: 'a vast, bureaucratic thirty-year mission to move us away from our cars onto state-owned buses and transit'. Instead, we simply open up transport to the market. We can set the carbon price at the right level and then allow the market to do the work of economic calculation, and entrepreneurs to 'dazzle us with new ideas and possibilities'.

'Transport infrastructure is likely to be given little funding... Urban planning will be given fewer resources still, as there is little appreciation of the benefits of planning for new neighbourhoods in a co-ordinated and integrated fashion. If so, there will be little progress against the great public policy goals of climate change and social equity'

Well, what can we say? How on earth do these people get anywhere near positions of power? The book cherry-picks unauthoritative references to cobble together an incoherent argument. It is poorly researched tosh—and nothing more. The ironic point from the last few weeks is that Kwasi Kwarteng and Liz Truss only failed in their mission as they neglected to propose a cut in public expenditure alongside the suggested tax cuts.

The City does not mind distributional unevenness in incomes, by person or spatially, or even a pitiful understanding of transport and city planning. But it does like an attempt to balance the financial books. Rishi Sunak will have noted this—and what we are likely to see now are the proposed heavy cuts in public expenditure, followed by tax cuts at a later date, most likely before a general election.

This means that transport infrastructure is likely to be given little funding, certainly for public transport, walking and cycling projects. Watch out HS2; but maybe the highways splurge will continue. Urban planning will be given fewer resources still, as there is little appreciation of the benefits of planning for new neighbourhoods in a co-ordinated and integrated fashion. If so, there will be little progress against the great public policy goals of climate change and social equity.

We will not see pods on the Piccadilly line. But neoliberal public policy is still likely to be in operation—just a little more subtle in application.

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Notes

- 1 K Kwarteng, P Patel, D Raab, C Skidmore and E Truss: *Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012
- 2 J Dupont and K Kwarteng: *Gridlock Nation*. Biteback Publishing, 2011