

## BOOK REVIEW

**Roads, Runways and Resistance: From Newbury Bypass to Extinction Rebellion, by Melia Steve, 2021. Pluto Press, London, £16.99, ISBN (paperback):**

Steve Melia offers readers a chance to peer behind the scenes of thirty years of UK transport policy making and crucially, the protests that formed in response to it. Beginning with the notorious Roads to Prosperity programme of the Thatcher Government, the 'biggest road building programme since the romans' the book draws from a wide selection of interview material. In addition to the author's own experience as both a government advisor and protestor, this period is brought to life with the recollections of key figures in government, the civil service and the various protest movements that sprung up to oppose mega-projects such as the expansion of Heathrow Airport or the new high-speed rail project HS2. It is a story that also includes and, in many ways begins with smaller road building schemes like the Newbury Bypass or Twyford Down. Their smaller scale belies their significance in sparking a wave of protest that led to them becoming part of the UK political history of the early 1990s. Extensive media coverage of the protests appears to have contributed to a shift in the public discourse with the projects becoming symbolic of public dissatisfaction with one feature of transport policy; the notion that congestion can be addressed simply by building more roads. The book poses an apposite question of the limits to (in this case transport) infrastructure and the need to manage demand rather than just expand the capacity of infrastructure systems. This is one of the features of the book that reaches beyond the relatively narrow 'transport world' (Melia, 2019) and UK policy circles in which it is located. The other timely question it raises is the role of protest, campaigning and lobbying in altering policy and the public perception of the needs for certain types of infrastructure. The book is organised chronologically and one of its strengths is the way it shifts back and forth between the worlds of policy and protest. Whilst the author makes no secret of where his own sympathies lie the coverage of protest is not restricted to opposition to policies and projects on environmental grounds. The first four chapters cover the resumption of a large-scale programme of roadbuilding under the Thatcher government (1979-1990) and the protests in North London, Twyford Down and Newbury in response. The assumed connection between economic growth and expanding road infrastructure that drove the 'Roads to Prosperity' programme had by the end of Major government (1990-1997) fallen foul of a mix of acceptance of the limits to this approach and recession. The latter being more significant, in this case at least, in reducing the willingness of government to invest in large infrastructure projects. This sets the scene for a new approach from an incoming Labour government (1997-2010) and their mixed success at integrated transport planning covered in chapter five. Chapter six covers the blockades of fuel refineries by farmers and road hauliers in 2000 in protest against rising fuel costs. These may have been relatively short-lived and at the time their significance was only in the way they effectively closed off the imposition of fuel duties as a policy instrument for demand management in the UK. Nevertheless, from a contemporary perspective, in light of the gilets jaunes protests in France, it highlights the limitations of market mechanisms that impose costs that are felt disproportionately by groups dependent on access to infrastructure. Continuing in this vein, chapter seven charts the UK's only successful introduction of a congestion charge in London under the newly elected Mayor Ken Livingstone in 2003. Alongside this he describes how changes in communication technologies enabled a largely online campaign (the earlier fuel protests having been organised by mobile phones) against the wider roll out of road charging. Here again the political reality of opposition from vocal groups quickly eclipsed the short-lived appeal of congestion charging to policy-makers as another market-based solution to the problem of limited infrastructure capacity. Organised campaigning, as opposed to the direct action of road and fuel protests, is also covered in

chapter eight. Here he charts the relatively low key success of the Big Ask Campaign organised by a group of environmental charities which successfully lobbied the then Labour government resulting in the 2008 Climate Change Act; and its failure to include aviation and shipping in its CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets. The following chapters cover the megaprojects of Heathrow's third runway alongside HS2. The former having initially been ruled out by the then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron when in opposition, only, like large-scale roadbuilding, to return as government policy shifted. This shift in policy is another important theme. For those readers looking for more academic argument and theoretically informed empirical research the question of why is addressed directly in a paper that draws on the same material (Melia, 2019). This gives the author a chance to address in more detail why in similar economic circumstances, post-recession, the Conservative government of the 1990s chose to abandon road building whereas, as part of the Coalition government formed in 2010 they choose to embrace it, alongside the two megaprojects mentioned above. This is despite growing understanding amongst policy makers of the science and implications of climate change. The question of climate change, the role of transport infrastructure in increasing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and the personal sense of a disconnect between the evidence and policy sets the tone for the penultimate two chapters. Here Melia describes the way his own sense of frustration and foreboding at the looming climate crisis motivated his decision to engage in direct action. The chapters describe the origins of what would become Extinction Rebellion, a movement that grew out of the milieu of UK protests against road expansion in the 1990s and airport expansion in the 2000s. These chapters describe the successes and failures of a movement that has turned transport infrastructure into a site of protest along with the author's own experiences of taking part in and being arrested for that protest. The book concludes with a reflection on the different causal mechanisms, rational response, economic ideology and public opinion that shape and change policy in this area. It is the last of these, public opinion, that protest seems to be effective, in some cases, in shifting. With this in mind the author calls for a return to the protests of the 1990s targeting specific infrastructures, those most implicated in causing climate change. He disagrees with the more general approach, adopted by groups and individuals associated with Extinction Rebellion, of causing disruption by targeting the more everyday transport infrastructures of motorways and commuter trains as having diminishing returns and rising public support. For some readers the UK focus of the book may feel like looking into what is a relatively small world of UK transport professionals, academics, protesters, politicians, civil servants and NGOs. The detailed knowledge of that world is also the book's strength. When read alongside the author's academic work (Melia 2019), it is possible to draw wider lessons given that similar worlds (albeit with different actors in different configurations) are likely to shape policy and public debates in countries where public opinion and protest are able to directly influence policy. The personal anecdotes make for an entertaining overview of a period of recent history alive with, and influenced by, different narratives and individuals. The author's own experience adds a unique change of emotional register inviting the reader to reflect upon the limits of academia, advocacy and activism in response to a policy agenda seemingly bent on producing infrastructure that underpins 'business as usual' rather than engaging with the enormity of the climate crisis.

## Reference

Melia, S. 2019. "Why Did UK Governments Cut Road Building in the 1990s and Expand It after 2010?" *Transport Policy* 81 (July): 242–253.

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