

wedge issues, winning votes, and car drivers



There are two major political events looming in the UK, and they are leading to an interesting turn in tactics by the Conservative Party, incidentally trailing badly in the polls for both. The London mayoral election will be held in May 2024 and the UK general election at the latest by January 2025 (the current electoral rules are that a general election has to be held at most five years after the preceding election). A tactic that we see emerging in contemporary political strategy in the UK, drawing on decades of practice from the US, is to create 'wedge issues'. These are topics with a controversial and divisive nature, typically with a populist theme. The aim is to attract voters from the opposition or to raise an issue of internal dissent that may help to reduce support for the opposition, including through disillusionment.

There are famous examples from the US involving immigration, minimum wage levels, same-sex marriage, abortion, and stem cell research. The general approach is to raise the wedge issue with the opposition voters and then align with the dissenting faction.¹ This strategy explains some of the recent actions of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. In his Conservative Party conference speech in October, he cancelled the northern section of the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail link, from Birmingham to Manchester, on an already-curtailed project. The given rationale was rising costs and lengthening timeframes, with the cancellation estimated as saving £36 billion, to be spent on 'hundreds of new transport projects in the North and Midlands'. These are not fully specified, but an initial list included highway capacity improvements and 'the resurfacing of roads across the country'.

HS2 has many detractors, and is massively over budget, rising from an initial estimate of £37.5 billion to the latest estimate of £100 billion plus. It has been in planning for years and is running late. It is a complex project to deliver, not least in the face of

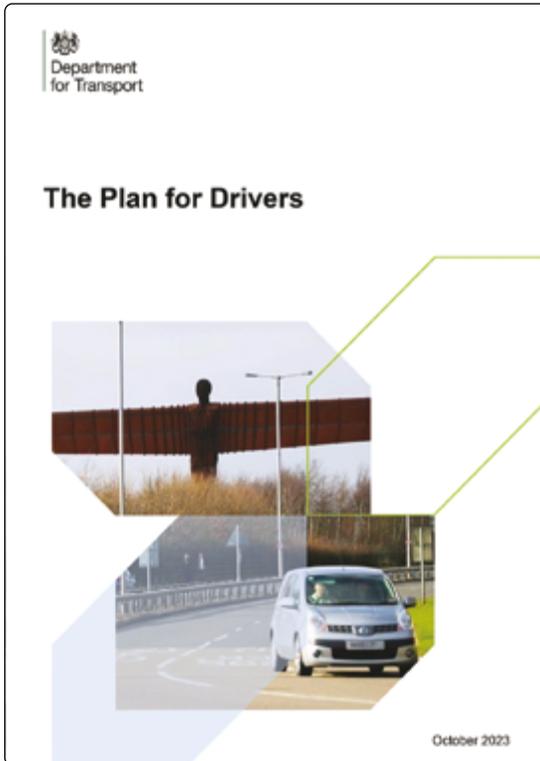
changing political priorities over time, hence the difficulties in project management. Indeed, much of the cost overrun can be attributed to dithering national politics, introducing various reviews, delays and changes in specifications.

But, in the end, electrified high-speed rail (HSR) is the only way to reduce long-distance car travel and short-haul air. It will need to be built, at some stage, to contribute to reduced transport carbon dioxide emissions. Ask most commentators in France, Spain, Japan, China or elsewhere with HSR systems, and usually they are seen as useful tools to reduce the environmental impact of long-distance travel, while improving connectivity between distant urban centres.

Most likely, there will need to be further HSR networks across northern England and to the South West and Wales, alongside tram and suburban rail schemes in the major cities and regions. It is much cheaper and more effective, in terms of the planning and engineering resources required, to build these projects consequentially, and to progress incrementally and consistently from today. The announcement from Rishi Sunak, however, was not concerned with these issues. It was simply an attempt to attract the potential interest of the owners of nearly 40 million vehicles registered in the UK.² What a wonderful wedge issue: perhaps many of these drivers will not support public transport investment, particularly when the route will not impact them and they are unlikely to use it?

This also explains the rather odd collection of further exhibits from the transport world—relating to the London Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) expansion, low-traffic neighbourhoods, 20 mph speed limits and 15-minute cities. The Department for Transport has raised all of these in their rather preposterous *The Plan for Drivers*,³ presumably at the request of the governing party. All are introduced as potential wedge issues, as environmental interventions that might upset the car driver.

Moving to the London mayoral election, a leaflet popped through my letterbox last week. It was from the Conservative mayoral candidate for London, Susan Hall. The context is that the Conservatives have selected a seemingly weak candidate, with no chance of beating the Labour candidate and incumbent Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.



The Plan for Drivers and the campaign against the ULEZ expansion—the aim is to attract voters from the opposition who may prefer driving their cars relative to a range of environmental interventions that are aimed at reducing car travel

However, the same strategies are being followed, with Susan Hall actually a well practised populist candidate, with a history of pursuing wedge politics.

She is campaigning on two fronts. The first is to stop ULEZ, in the hope that some voters are not interested in climate change and will prefer to drive their cars and vans than to protect the environment, or indeed improve air quality and health. The second is the old Tory trope of safety on the streets. Susan Hall also has a record of ‘liking’ tweets on X/Twitter quoting Enoch Powell—‘It’s never too late to save your county’ and ‘It’s never too late to get London back’.⁴ She has similarly described the Notting Hill Carnival as ‘dangerous’ and that the black population has ‘a problem with crime’.⁵

This is dog-whistle politics (named after ultrasonic dog whistles, which are audible to dogs, but not humans). The idea is to raise issues attractive to some voters, hoping that others will not hear or will overlook them. Susan Hall’s X/Twitter account has been reported to have ‘apparent endorsements of Donald Trump, including his claim that he lost the presidential election in 2020 to Joe Biden because of voter fraud’.⁶ Susan Hall and her campaign team

have tried to back-pedal, explaining that these are not her real views, only a ‘like’ of other views, and that she ‘engages with many people on Twitter without endorsing them’.⁶

Well, I suggest that she knows what she is doing, positioning her populist campaign in the hope of raising the hackles of the owners of 2.6 million registered cars in London, alongside attracting a few racist bigots.

On the ULEZ expansion, Susan Hall states, in her promotion leaflet, that ‘for too long, we’ve had a mayor who ignores us’, that the ‘Conservative candidate for Mayor of London is on our side’ (underlined), and that ‘I’ll scrap the ULEZ expansion on day one’ (mentioned twice, in case you missed the first instance).

There seems to be little regulation of what goes into political brochures—there is no need for balance, such as a requirement to mention climate change and social equity when discussing ULEZ or other transport interventions. ULEZ is actually not ‘ultra’ at all—it sets an incredibly low bar, with only very polluting vehicles being charged (an estimated 10% of the vehicle fleet). If you have an old, large

diesel car, then it will affect you—but these are major contributors to transport carbon dioxide emissions. If you have bought a petrol car in the last 10 years, you can probably still drive it throughout London.

This is a race to the bottom to misinform, using an emerging range of issues, many centred on the car driver, seeking to convince enough people to change their suggested voting behaviours. Many transport planners and urban planners are aghast at these developments. But, of course, that is part of the strategy.

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The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 DS Hillygus and TG Shields: 'Wedge issues in presidential campaigns'. In DS Hillygus and TG Shields (Eds): *The Persuadable Voter. Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns*. Princeton University Press, 2009
- 2 *Vehicle Licensing Statistics: 2021 Quarter 2 (Apr-Jun)*. Statistical Release. Department for Transport, Sept. 2021. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6152cf1ce90e077a2e2adc86/vehicle-licensing-statistics-april-to-june-2021.pdf>
- 3 *The Plan for Drivers*. Department for Transport, Oct. 2023. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651fe3022548ca000dddee82/the-plan-for-drivers.pdf>
- 4 F Ridler: 'Susan Hall: Tory London mayoral candidate liked tweets praising Enoch Powell'. *Sky News*, 15 Sept. 2023. <https://news.sky.com/story/susan-hall-tory-london-mayoral-candidate-liked-tweets-praising-enoch-powell-12961850#:~:text=Ms%20Hall%20was%20chosen%20by,leader%20at%20Mayor%27s%20Question%20Time>
- 5 P Walker: 'Tory London mayor candidate liked tweets praising Enoch Powell'. *The Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2023. www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/15/conservative-london-mayor-candidate-susan-hall-liked-tweets-praising-enoch-powell
- 6 J Franks: 'Susan Hall: Who is the Tory London mayoral candidate taking on Sadiq Khan?'. *Sky News*, 19 Jul. 2023. <https://news.sky.com/story/who-is-susan-hall-the-hair-salon-owner-and-london-mayor-hopeful-who-says-sadiq-khan-fears-her-most-12900878>