



# Break the rules

Could traffic system reform offer a better future for our roads?  
One expert argues the case for throwing away the traffic rulebook

Words | **Martin Cassini**

Traffic system reform offers enormous scope for a transformation in road safety, congestion, quality of life and space, the economy and the environment. This case for reforming the UK system combines a critique of the current system with proposals for change based on a trust in human nature rather than an obsession with controlling it.

With 25,000 human beings killed or hurt on our roads every year, many of them children, and 4,000 premature deaths from poor air quality in London alone, the current system can hardly claim to be getting things right.

## Questioning traffic controls

We're supposed to accept traffic controls without question. A red light means stop. Crossing a red light is a criminal offence. But drivers approaching a green light are barreling through at speeds that can kill. Crossing a red light after checking there is no conflicting traffic means proceeding at a snail's pace, with heightened awareness. So is it safer to cross a red light slowly than a green light at speed?

Who is the better judge of when, or how fast or slow to go: you and me at the time and the place, or lights and limits fixed by absent regulators? Professor Frank McKenna, co-author of the Highway Code, says we must suppress certain behaviours so the system works. But life is about infinite variables. Shouldn't we devise a system that conforms to human nature?

I'd often thought that lights were badly timed, but it was in Cambridge in 2000 when I began to think they were unnecessary per se. As I breezed through a junction with none of the usual delay, I saw the lights were out of action. We complain about the traffic, and blame other drivers, but could it be traffic controls that are the problem?

## Road safety and the fatal flaw – priority

Our road safety problems are due to bad drivers, right? And congestion is due to the volume of traffic? Wrong! Our problems on the road stem from a system that is based on the anti-social, inefficient, dangerous rule of priority.

In other walks of life we take it in turns. Jumping a cashpoint queue is unthinkable, yet on the road we accept such anti-social behaviour without question. You're driving along a main road. Side road traffic is waiting to get out, pedestrians are waiting to cross. A mother with a buggy is stuck on a traffic island. Do you give way? Do you even notice them? Probably not, because the rule of priority tells you to ignore them.

Priority puts side road traffic and pedestrians at a dangerous disadvantage. It generates dangerous, conflicting speeds. Remove priority, and you remove the 'need' for lights and the need

for speed, enabling everyone to do what comes naturally: approach carefully and take it more or less in turns. Could it be that simple? It could.

But don't traffic lights ensure safety? Far from it. The latest safety audit from Westminster City Council shows that no less than 44% of personal injury accidents occurred at traffic lights. How many of the remaining 56% were due to priority? The statistics don't tell us.

Unspeakably, the current system puts the onus on children to beware of motorists. It could and of course should be the other way round.

Instead of dealing with the root cause of danger on the roads – priority – public money goes on systems of control of increasing sophistication and cost, the latest being pedestrian countdown. Why do we 'need' traffic lights? To break the priority streams of traffic so others can cross. Thus is most traffic control an exercise in self-defeat, a vain bid to solve the problem of priority.

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## Congestion and the environment

What's the one thing above all others that reduces average speeds? Stopping. How often are we stopped at red, with nothing moving, waiting for the lights to change? How many man-hours, days and years are lost in the mists of dead red time?

The electricity alone that powers our galaxy of 24-hour traffic lights produces 57,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> a year. Add the needless delay and the fourfold increase in fuel use and emissions from the stop/start drive cycle, and is it surprising that polar bears are running out of ice?

## Self-control – more civilised and efficient?

When lights are out of action does civility break down? No: as courtesy thrives, congestion dissolves. As a taxi driver in one of my videos says: “When lights are out of action, you just have to be a bit more careful on the junction, that's all.” It's ironic that when lights are out, the authorities post notices on their websites advising caution, implying that when lights are working, we can revert to norms of neglect.

When operating under self-control, not only are we deleting dead red time, we are more aware. My interest in avoiding collision with you mirrors your interest in avoiding collision with me.

### Priority versus equality

"Get out of my way!" yells priority as it denies infinite filtering opportunities and expressions of fellow feeling. "After you," says equality, as it stimulates empathy.

Once you realise the road network could be a level playing-field – where all road users are equals, where the onus is on the motorist to beware the vulnerable, where filter (more or less) in turn is the central, sociable rule – new vistas open up. Above all, children can go in safety.

On the BBC World Services's radio discussion programme, The Forum, novelist Tahmima Anam said that whenever society has focused on equality, we've made huge social progress. Among the examples she cited were the abolition of slavery and votes for women. Given equality on the roads, what could be achieved in terms of a safe, civilised public realm is unlimited.

What works on a micro scale also works on a macro. When traffic lights were off across London during power cuts in November 2007 and February 2008, did traffic grind to a halt? No. Free of lights that conjure congestion out of thin air, the traffic vanished into thin air. At multi-lane intersections at peak times, there is a case for part-time control. But it should be a last resort, not the first.

### Putting the ideas to the test

As UK traffic critic Kenneth Todd says, it shouldn't be for us to prove that traffic control is largely unnecessary. It's for the authorities to prove otherwise. But it's something they never do. So to demonstrate that self-control is more efficient and at least as safe as signal control, I needed a trial site. In 2004, I won the agreement of Brent traffic engineer, Antoine Aubert, to a trial at Staples Corner. It was blocked by Transport for London (TfL). Over the years, TfL has blocked many of my efforts – for example, in 2008 it refused to appear in my BBC TV *Newsnight* report.

Ironically, there is no legal requirement for priority or signals. Councils cannot

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(Clockwise from top) **The new version of Park Lane in Poynton; the traffic control-free space being created; Park lane before – showing vehicle and pedestrian interaction; Poynton's redesigned Fountain Place**



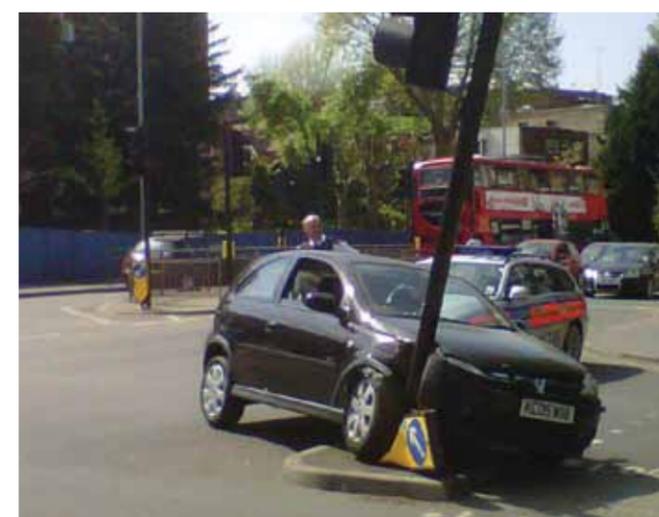
be sued if they switch off traffic lights and display lights-out signs. We could have all-way give-ways or filter-in-turn tomorrow. As road users, we have a duty to proceed with care. Under priority, of course, that duty is forgotten. It re-emerges when, free of controls that distort our human nature, we rediscover common cause with other road users.

In 2009, I heard of a signal failure resulting in less congestion in the west country town of Portishead. Councillor David Pasley showed my video "The case for a no-lights trial", to the Chamber. On the spot, 26 of the 27 councillors agreed to a trial.

It began on 14 September 2009, and went permanent 18 months later after monitoring by SKM Colin Buchanan showed that journey times had fallen by more than half with no loss of pedestrian safety, despite a return from back-street rat-runs and greater numbers using the now free-flowing main route.

Portishead is a microcosm of how the future without traffic lights could look. The joyful results that deregulation can bring can be seen in the video I made to document the trial. I invited Portishead to be the first UK town to go traffic light-free. Less progressive councillors were in charge and they declined. They even took a step back by introducing mini-roundabouts at the trial site.

The accolade for the stand-out scheme involving deregulation and redesign goes to Poynton, a village at a major crossroads in Cheshire. For decades, the community was divided by a hodge-podge of multi-lane roads, traffic lights, bollards, traffic islands and dominant traffic. In a scheme promoted by Councillor Howard Murray and designed by Ben Hamilton-Baillie, the wasteland has been transformed. The lights have gone. All approaches are now single lanes, doubling pedestrian space and communicating a sense of place.



(Above) **Accident scene at a set of traffic lights**  
(Left) **Mishaps at junctions are rife on UK roads**

### The Poynton Paradox

Six months since completion, the Poynton scheme – with no traffic lights or special speed limits – is seeing lower speeds, less congestion and no accidents. After decades of division by traffic (mis)management, the community is reunited and thriving again.

### The issue of speed

Since London's Exhibition Road became shared space with no road markings, a man was hit by a truck (he was not seriously injured). Officials hoped the 20mph limit would cut accidents by 30%. Now there are calls for the limit to be reduced to 5mph.

"Speed kills!" goes the cry. No, it's inappropriate speed that kills. Instead of driving by numbers, we should drive according to context. If pedestrians are near, let us proceed at walking pace. As a perfect trade-off, when the road is clear, let us choose our own speed. UK road charity

Brake would claim that freedom to exercise our own judgement is a licence to drive carelessly. On the contrary, it's a blueprint for driving with *true* care and attention.

You can't legislate for 'maniacs', so why hobble the majority with one-size-fits-all rules devised to catch hypothetical deviants?

### Cost of control and scope for cuts

Astonishingly, the total cost of traffic (mis)management is unknown. It's an area the National Audit Office has never looked at. The DfT doesn't even know the number of traffic signals in the UK. We do know that ex-mayor Ken Livingstone imposed 1,800 new sets of lights on London, even at minute crossings such as Eastcastle Street/Berwick Street, conjuring congestion where there was none before. Each set costs £150,000 excluding maintenance and upgrades.

After seeing my video in April 2009, Westminster City Council agreed with TfL

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and the GLA to remove 145 sets – something of a drop in the ocean. Also they fail to communicate the bigger picture, hence opposition from vulnerable road user groups such as the blind.

Once greeted with disbelief, these reforming ideas are gaining ground, but many authorities still resist reform. In Reading, a £750,000 signal scheme at Shinfield Road made matters worse. Traffic chief Pat Baxter commissioned TRL to assess 17 other proposals. Where on the list was the filter-in-turn proposal that we submitted two years earlier, which worked wonders at a similar junction in Portishead? Nowhere. Does the relationship between council officials and equipment salesmen warrant investigation? Why, despite evidence from myself and Kenneth Todd, did the Transport Select Committee, in its recent report, *Out of the Jam*, fail even to mention traffic lights as a cause of congestion?

If you accept that traffic control is largely counterproductive, you will see it as a rich source of kind cuts. Through savings in staff, equipment, technology, journey time, accident and health costs, the potential for annual savings is no less than £50 billion.

Deregulation is not enough on its own. Other essential requirements include: a change in culture from priority to equality; roadway redesign to express an inclusive, social context instead of an exclusive, traffic engineering one; legal reform to make drivers liable for accidents with pedestrians or cyclists unless they can prove a reckless act; an advanced driving test to include cycling proficiency.

Roads fit for people. Fit for children. Not a speed camera or traffic light in sight. Drivers watching the road, aware of pedestrians, giving way, smiling. Is this a dream?

No. To realise this vision of a safe, civilised public realm, we need to level the playing-field with roadway redesign and culture change, then let human nature take its cooperative course. ■

*Martin Cassini is a video producer and campaigner for traffic system reform*