

Star
Comment

Bold, unifying
leadership

IT WAS a speech of Brezhnevian length, but Jeremy Corbyn's address to the Labour Party conference yesterday matched quantity with quality.

The Labour leader was confident, bold and unifying. He was right to brandish the grisly Grenfell Tower catastrophe as the supreme symbol of a "failed and broken" capitalist system. He confirmed the kind of policies on state investment, public ownership, equal rights, dignity, democracy and peace that strike fear into Britain's greedy, corrupt and costly ruling class.

These are the policies which won an additional three million votes in June's general election, despite two years of the most vicious media campaign against a Labour Party leader in modern British history.

That campaign continues, more subtly in some quarters, with renewed emphasis placed on the hugely exaggerated question of anti-semitism in the party and on the economic turmoil that might follow a Labour victory.

In the gutter press, however, it's business as usual, especially after Corbyn's speech fingered the multimillionaire tax dodgers who own most of it.

On the very day that he singled out the hysterical campaign of personalised vilification run by the Daily Mail in the run-up to polling day, that paper carried an extraordinary cartoon by Mac, alias Stanley McMurtry. It depicted two giant tattooed thugs with baseball bats behind their backs, towering above a timid and elderly bespectacled delegate and telling him: "We couldn't help but notice, comrade. You didn't clap and cheer the last time our glorious leader's name was mentioned."

It was a vile caricature based on the prolifically peddled lie that Corbyn's supporters are a fanatical, adulterous gang of thugs responsible for a new reign of terror in the Labour Party. As such, it follows in the tradition of Lord Rothermere's Daily Mail and Julius Streicher's Der Sturmer in the 1930s.



The good news is that most people never get to see the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, the Sun or the other tabloid hate-sheets that pollute political life in Britain. Among those that do, a degree of immunity appears to be developing.

More and more people want to hear for themselves what Jeremy Corbyn, shadow chancellor John McDonnell and the Labour team have to say in response to their own hopes, fears and concerns.

They wonder why one of the wealthiest countries in the world seemingly cannot afford decent and reasonably priced housing, public services, utilities and public transport for all; why there is so little investment in productive industry and our economic and social infrastructure; and why so much poverty afflicts children, students, workers and pensioners while those at the top are coining it in virtually tax-free.

Labour's left leadership is helping people to join the dots, make the connections and see the big picture. The contrast between private wealth and public squalor can no longer be concealed beneath the celebrity gossip, monarchist propaganda, online gambling and unreal television spewed out daily by the monopoly mass media.

By taking to the streets, shopping centres and social media, Corbyn and his team are cutting through the smog to show that another kind of society is both necessary and possible.

But three points must be borne in mind if Britain is to take its own road to socialism.

First, extraparliamentary campaigning will ultimately determine whether this minority Tory regime will be replaced by a left government. Second, sovereignty must reside in the people, which means the EU referendum result has to be implemented, not least so that a left-led Labour government is free to carry out its radical policies.

Third, Britain's ruthless ruling class will fight tooth and nail against any significant encroachments upon its wealth and power: building the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the trade unions and mass campaigning movements is now becoming as urgent as it is vital.

TRANSPORT

We must put the century of the car to an end



An over-reliance on cars is destroying our environment and damaging our health. Our streets need radical change if we're ever to stop this, writes ROB WELLS

IT IS thankfully now accepted that if we are to stand any chance of tackling climate change we must change the way we move people and goods around.

Most talk has been about replacing petrol and diesel cars with electric. Even our Tory government — whose ministers have never encountered a deposit of fossil fuel they didn't want to dig up and set on fire — has set a date from which the sale of new oil-burning cars will be banned. Never mind that it's the hopelessly and meaninglessly far away year of 2040.

We have to stop burning oil because it's killing the planet. And that will kill us and our entire species. But the certainty of swapping our oil cars for electric cars as the next logical step for transport neatly somersaults over a flaming Cheddar Gorge full of problems.

But it isn't the only path open to us; a different one can help us tackle not only the climate crisis but also many health and social problems. Environmental expert Alan Simpson wrote in these pages in July that "sustainability has to turn economics [and its obsession with GDP growth] on its head, putting work, wellbeing, security and inclusion at the centre."

In the same way that we can't just install a few gigawatts of renewable power and call it a day, we must think differently and, crucially, have the political courage to pursue an alternative strategy that upends most of a century of transport orthodoxy.

We are certainly barreling towards an electric-car future: France also wants to halt oil-car sales from 2040, India and bits of Germany 2030, Norway 2025. People will buy electric instead of petrol and diesel; they plug in at home instead of filling up at a garage. Simple, done.

This doesn't quite work though. For one, manufacturing a new car emits roughly as much CO2 as what comes out of the exhaust during its lifetime usage. And the equivalent to the per-mile emissions varies depending on how clean the electricity grid is; in



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Britain most power is from burning gas, with some coal, nuclear and wind.

It is also going to take a lot of electricity if we switch en masse to electric cars. It's difficult to comprehend the huge amount of energy used by cars because they use a separate, somewhat obscured form of distribution — petrol stations.

National Grid warned this summer that, even under optimistic estimates, charging the expected number of electric cars in 2030 will use up all of the power from the under-construction Hinkley Point C nuclear plant. And it could be more than double the plant's capacity — and this is the most expensive single object ever constructed on the planet.

Electric cars still add to air pollution — small particulate matter from tyre and brake pad wear which is damaging to health.

But the real problem is not the kind of motors we run on our roads — it's the fact that the private car is the dominant mode of transport. We live in a car-dependent society, with people in many communities often legitimately having no other option. Since the 1950s Britain has very deliberately planned and provided for private car use and our streets and our society reflect that.

Car-dependence is killing us. Partly through pollution, which shortens lives to the point that it's equivalent to

40,000 excess deaths a year. Partly through the 1,800 people killed and 22,000 seriously injured each year in car crashes. But mainly by eliminating physical activity from people's day-to-day lives.

In Britain more than half of adults don't do the recommended 150 minutes of "moderate" activity (hoovering, mowing the lawn, walking at 3mph) or 75 minutes of "vigorous" activity (jogging, swimming, cycling briskly) a week. Six million middle-aged people walk for less than 10 minutes at a go a month.

The effects on our health are huge. Inactivity is the fourth largest cause of disease and disability and contributes to one in six deaths from any cause. Worldwide, sedentary lives and resulting illnesses kill 5.3 million people a year. NHS England boss Simon Stevens has called growing obesity — inextricably but complexly linked to inactivity — "a slow-motion car crash in terms of avoidable illness and rising healthcare costs."

The direct cost to the NHS is well over £1 billion a year, and wider economic costs from sickness and early death £6.5bn. Then there are costs as we live longer but in worse health — the Barnet "graph of doom" shows that within 10 years the rising cost of adult

social care will leave the north London council with literally no money to spend on any other services (save statutory children's services).

But fitting exercise into already busy days is hard, which is where transport comes in — getting about under our own steam and taking advantage of the "miracle pill" that is physical activity.

With the government focus for the past 60 years on the private car as the way to get about, it's no surprise that 62 per cent of trips and 78 per cent of distance travelled in Britain is by car.

Over two-thirds of journeys are shorter than five miles — a distance that, given the right conditions, could be easily cycled in less than half an hour. Yet more than seven in 10 journeys between one and five miles long are done by car.

The domination of the car for even short journeys also provides the answer for why more people don't walk or cycle — it is unpleasant almost everywhere in Britain.

Fifty-nine per cent of people think the roads are too dangerous for them to cycle on. This is what's known as subjective safety: the risk of being hurt is lower than perceived — though still far too high — but people feel unsafe and are put off.

Thankfully we know what the answer is: taking road space away from cars and providing protected cycleways, such as the ones that opened last year in central London, John Dobson Street in Newcastle, and bits and pieces in Brighton, Leicester and elsewhere. Or the ones you see everywhere in the Netherlands.

We know they work and people like using them — bikes now make up the majority of vehicles during rush hour on London's Blackfriars Bridge, in just one lane of space. Or take Seville in



GIVING OUR STREETS BACK TO PEOPLE: (Clockwise from top left) A traffic jam on the A46, the school run in Gouda, a junction in Amsterdam, a mum cycles with her kids, children wait at traffic lights, and a family in the morning rush



southern Spain, which built about 80 miles of protected cycleways and turned fewer than 5,000 cycle journeys a day in 2006 into 72,000 in 2012 — going from a 0.5 per cent share of trips to 7 per cent.

Cycleways turn bikes from a hobby for the fit and the brave into a quick, cheap and easy way to get around for everyone. In the Netherlands three-quarters of children cycle to school — able to get around independently in complete safety.

The same applies for older people, where having an easy and safe way to get about keeps up people's health and decreases their social isolation. The

director of the Dutch Cyclists Union tells Peter Walker in his book *Bike Nation* that while people tend to drive less from their mid-seventies as they feel less confident, they then cycle more.

Not for nothing do people refer to the conditions as fit for eight to 80-year-olds (and beyond).

For disabled people too, cycling can be a good way to travel independently as well as keeping healthy, as *Wheels for Wellbeing* has made crystal clear. People with impaired mobility often find it easier than walking and many use a cycle as a mobility aid.

We must alter our streets before we can reap the benefits of this — the road layouts we've inherited from the 1970s just don't cut it. As a nice bonus we can start to make our towns more pleasant places to be, reclaiming space for people rather than cars.

Won't this cause traffic chaos? No. You can move about seven times as

many people on bikes as in cars in the same amount of space, and reducing the space for cars causes some of the traffic to evaporate, instead of taking different roads.

Doing this is going to cost money — particularly if we adopt a national plan to make these benefits available in every community, as we should. But it will cost substantially less than building roads, as the government is doing despite the evidence against being clear on all fronts.

A mile of top-notch cycleway costs about £2-3m. That's 26 times cheaper per mile than the M4 bypass and 79 times cheaper than Crossrail.

Labour's pledge to spend £10 per person per year on cycling infrastructure is a start — but it is just a start. The Netherlands already has a comprehensive network but still spends about £25 per head.

Public health experts have long called for 10 per cent of transport budgets to be immediately allocated to walking and cycling.

In the long run it could save us a good deal: £17.2 trillion worldwide by 2050 if just 14 per cent of urban journeys are done by bike by then — less than what is achieved today in the Netherlands and Denmark.

That figure does not even include the money saved through improved health, which would be substantial. And that is from cycling alone. The same UC Davis study shows that cycling alongside improvements in public transport and a decline in private car use would save the world £97.7trn by 2050 in comparison to continuing as we are now.

Such a scenario would also halve the carbon emissions of the business-as-usual case, putting us firmly on track to avoid utterly catastrophic climate change.

Electric cars do have a role to play in our future — but we must be aware of the associated risks to our health and the environment of widespread private motor use, and choose a more ambitious path that can transform our communities for the better.