

# Bus lanes: We need statesmen, not vote-seeking politicians

Don't groan! Please read on. But I have to warn you I am going to write about bus lanes again – a subject that bores many of you and must make you wonder if I really am in my dotage.

But it is a topic that provokes very strong feelings and I get more private correspondence on this subject than any other I write about.

The sight of Jenny Tonge, Susan Kramer and Councillor Shas Sheehan waving a poster announcing "Kew says no to new Kew Bridge bus lane" has triggered my latest outburst – but even more poignant was a letter from a lady living in The Avenue who also disagreed with me and put forward some thoughtful counter arguments.

She pointed out that she like me is childless but entirely shares my concern for the sort of environment the next generation will have to cope with.

She supports congestion charging and cannot wait for road pricing as a deterrent.

She also uses buses regularly and is glad to see them given priority.

Her concern is that although the lane got buses over the bridge quicker, their overall journey time was no faster because it was canceled out by delays in Kew Road.

"I am all for bus lanes if it improves the speed and reliability of the buses, but I don't see how a repeat of those arrangements will achieve this result," she wrote.

Points well made in a factual fashion and they probably reflect exactly the concern of the Lib Dem who waved the poster. Her instincts are as green as mine, but from close observation she has concluded that this particular measure does not work and does no good.

My answer is to have patience and accept that sometimes to get long-term benefits we have to suffer short-term inconveniences.

And that what is important is that we establish once and for all that public

transport is going to get priority everywhere – whether it be in the West End, on the way to the airport or on the capital's bridges.

Of course, a rethink of the old bus lane arrangements is necessary – but it needs to be more radical, not less. Lanes on both side of the bridge would make a big difference. Going towards Chiswick the 65 would have a tremendous boost if it had a priority track.

And in any case, the point of bus lanes is not simply to promote buses but to deter unnecessary car journeys, to make people question whether they really need to take their cars out at peak hours and what other options are open to them. If a bus containing 50 people only saves five minutes it is all worthwhile.

Yet how do you convince a general public who reacted with emotional fervour when the Government set up a consultation process on the internet on road pricing? Millions rejected the idea

out of hand.

We must recall that Ken Livingstone could never have experimented with congestion charging if he had heeded the media, his opponents and the general public, who were adamantly convinced London would grind to a halt.

And remind ourselves the bus lane would never have appeared on the M4 if knee-jerk public opinion had been the deciding factor.

Susan Kramer, Jenny Tonge and Serge Lourie feel they must listen to their constituents. But I ask them if Leicester Square would ever have been pedestrianised if traders and taxi drivers had had their way in the 70s?

On bigger historical issues, we know that if Parliament had heeded the mob, slavery would never have been abolished, capital punishment would be still with us and homosexuality would be illegal.

Nothing can be done to introduce more carterways on the South Circular stretch

of the Mortlake Road or Clifford Avenue or indeed, on Kew Road. And if it were possible it would just push the pinch points somewhere else. This is true in residential areas all over London. So we have to use sticks and not carrots.

We need statesmen, not vote-seeking politicians, to sort out this mess. The message must go out loud and clear that public transport is underused, that buses and trains can take many more children to schools, shoppers to supermarkets and office workers to their employment.

Only when motorists find that the going is hard, expensive and inconvenient will habits change. Unpopular bus lanes that may seem to bring limited advantage are an essential ingredient.

It will take courageous elected members to bring this message home. The Lib Dem have the best record – but are they and their colleagues in other parties who pay lip service to green issues prepared to stand up and have their votes counted?