



People for Proper Policing in North Wales

There's more to roads than safety...A transport policy with the sole aim to cut deaths to zero - where's the vision in that? *Ironic, isn't it? I spend my whole life complaining of the lack of vision in modern transport planning - then they finally come up with one, and it's called 'Vision Zero'.* by Timandra Harkness

Vision Zero aspires to a road system where nobody is ever killed or permanently maimed. It was adopted by the Swedish Government in 1997 as the basis for its Road Traffic Safety Bill, and is now being floated as an option for Britain. In one sense, it's truly visionary, daring to set a goal that seems completely unrealistic, but would undoubtedly be welcomed by everybody (except a few would-be suicides or amputation freaks). Supporters compare the annual death toll on the roads of the developed world to a 'plague' (1), arguing that the thousands of deaths and serious injuries would be regarded as a public health crisis if they were due to disease.

It's true that as the mass killers of the past, infectious diseases and infant mortality, have been brought under control, deaths in road traffic accidents (RTAs) have moved to the top of the 'causes of death' league in many age groups, in developed and developing countries alike. However, advances in road safety, vehicle design and medical care mean that RTA casualties continue to fall every year. Since road deaths in the UK peaked in the mid 1960s at nearly 8,000 per year, they have fallen steadily to less than half that number - 3,508 in 2003, according to Department for Transport figures (2). Over the same period, the amount of traffic on the roads (that is, total kilometres travelled by motor vehicles) trebled.

But is a steady fall good enough? Lauchlan McIntosh of the Australian Automobile Association compares the road system with the mining industry, citing the massive improvements in mining safety over recent years as an example of what can be achieved. If we can expect to be safe at work, the argument goes, should we not expect to get home safely as well?

Some of Vision Zero is refreshingly rational. Noting that the unprotected human body can't usually withstand impacts at more than 30 miles per hour (mph), for example, the Swedish government's strategy is to separate pedestrians from traffic moving faster than that speed - or where pedestrians, cyclists and cars cannot be separated, to limit traffic speeds to 30 mph.

Nor does Zero Vision expect zero accidents. 'Since people sometimes make mistakes, it is impossible to avoid traffic accidents altogether', says the Swedish policy document. Instead, the focus is on limiting the human costs of accidents by shifting the primary responsibility for safety on to the state and away from fallible individual drivers.

John Whitelegg of the Stockholm Environment Institute has been doing some research on behalf of the British government to see whether Vision Zero should be adopted in the UK (3). The report goes to the Department for Transport this week, and should be published in the next month or so. Whitelegg says that the focus groups were 'massively enthusiastic' about the policy. Most people knew somebody, or knew of somebody, who had been killed on the roads, and felt, in his words, that 'we shouldn't be accepting it'.

Interestingly, the study that Whitelegg describes as 'an audit of the Swedish experience' does not look at how Vision Zero might be practically implemented in the UK. Instead, it analyses Sweden's political experience and reports the findings of a series of British focus groups. Thus, the positives that he lists to me include 'a burst of enthusiasm for road safety' and a sense of optimism about the possibility of 'a massive reduction, hopefully to zero' in deaths and injuries. The negatives he describes as a 'hard-headed' attitude that elimination of risk was impossible - 'not so much a feeling that "this is not the right thing to do", as "this is simply not achievable"'.

Whitelegg is too scrupulous to speculate on what changes we might see if Vision Zero became a reality, but he is prepared to describe what the Swedes did - they came down hard on speeding and anti-social driving; improved facilities for pedestrians and cyclists; and tackled alcohol and substance abuse. Key parts of their strategy range from road engineering measures - minimising the dangers of running off the road by removing trees from the roadside, or erecting barriers that absorb the impact - to encouraging seatbelt use and training professional drivers in emergency First Aid. So what impact has it had on Sweden's road casualties?

Sweden's road safety record is among the best in the European Union (EU), second only to Malta in lowest number of road deaths per million of population. **Since adopting Vision Zero in 1997 it has reduced casualties still further, from 61 deaths per million to 59. But the UK is not far behind - 64 deaths per million in 1997 are down to 62 in 2003.** What's more, **Sweden's rate of improvement was better before it adopted Vision Zero (29 per cent in the six years preceding the programme as opposed to just three per cent in the six years following its introduction).**

Show me perspex tubes above the road for cyclists, and I'll call that visionary

Arguably, Sweden is so far ahead of most other countries that it's running out of places to make changes, but it does suggest that adopting Vision Zero is more about being seen to do something than about transforming the reality of road safety. Whitelegg admits that, to a great extent, the Swedes have simply made explicit the assumptions behind most transport policies.

He also tells me that falling casualty figures are not reflected in public perception, citing 'the feeling that the road environment isn't safe' among his focus groups. In fact, he argues that one reason for falling deaths among pedestrians and cyclists is precisely due to parents taking their children off the streets. But should we be tackling public fears by placing them at the top of the agenda?

Motorcycle News picked up on Vision Zero when one of the policy's architects, Claes Tingvall, was honest enough to say that zero casualties would never be achieved while people rode motorcycles (4). In reality, the UK government has published a policy on motorcycling that recognises it as a key part of the transport system, so it's unlikely that bikers would ever be made illegal for their own safety.

But it brings out a key contradiction in the Vision Zero approach. While nobody's in favour of deaths and injuries on the roads, all of us are prepared to accept some level of risk, both for ourselves as individuals, and for us as a society. Collectively, we embrace the benefits of mobility that private motor transport brings, even though we may differ about what constitutes an acceptable degree of danger. And, for millions of vehicle kilometres, we have enough personal responsibility and enough give-and-take to make sure everyone arrives safely, even when they make mistakes.

The weakness of Vision Zero is that it focuses entirely on the negative aspects of the transport system. Enshrining safety as a sacred goal will lead, not to visionary progress but to placing limits on progress. Alongside commonsense measures, Swedish proposals include placing barriers down the centre of rural roads, eliminating both head-on collisions and any chance of overtaking a beet lorry that's doing 15 mph in open countryside. Urban proposals include narrowing roads at bus stops, so that all traffic will stop until passengers have finished getting on and off. Ironically, they call this a traffic-calming measure, and before you shake your head at those quirky Swedes, this very idea is already being proposed in Greenwich, London.

The Intelligent Transportation Society of America has adopted a slightly different version of Vision Zero (5). It calls for zero fatalities, zero delays - 'a future where people and goods are transported without delay, injury, or fatality, by integrated systems that are built and operated to be safe, cost-effective, efficient and secure'. It aims to use technology to keep traffic flowing with minimal danger and minimal inconvenience. Suddenly, the scope of the Swedish Vision Zero starts to look rather limited.

John Whitelegg is a rational researcher. He cites to me his favourite example of taking statistical epidemiology too far - that road casualties could be slashed, probably halved, by locking up all children until the age of 21. Nobody is proposing that we entirely abandon the social freedoms that road transport brings.

But neither are they proposing any real progress towards the transport system we all deserve. Show me a highway automated to keep a safe distance between vehicles travelling at 100 mph and I'll get excited. Show me vehicles that run clean in town and cheap in the countryside, an airborne freight system and perspex tubes above the road for cyclists, and I'll call that visionary. But Vision Zero really is no vision at all.