

J. MICHAEL THOMSON
1928 – 2010

Devastating critic of motorways in London

J. M. Thomson, transport economist and expert on cities, was an influential and original thinker who is acknowledged by his peers as the man who exposed the folly of trying to build our way out of city traffic congestion. Bold but invasive plans to build a network of 6 and 8 lane motorways in London presented Thomson with his first major challenge as a transport economist. His intellectual and intuitive approach to city transport led to him to question, and subsequently to campaign against roads that would have destroyed much of London as we know it.

The ring and radial motorways proposed in the Greater London Council's first development plan (1967) were designed to convert London, at astronomic cost, into a motor age city. They would have destroyed 20,000 homes and caused huge environmental damage, so the plans caused a storm of protest.

Thomson's contribution was made through the London Amenity and Transport Association (LATA), a grouping of some sixty local societies from all over London founded in 1967 with Thomson, then a Research Fellow at the London School of Economics, as its first chairman. LATA was not set up to combat the motorway plans but quickly realised that it had to take a view on them. It therefore set up a committee of ten experts chaired by Thomson to examine these plans. Their report 'Motorways in London' (Duckworth, 1969), which is still regarded as a seminal work, was very critical especially of the inner motorways. In 1971 Thomson acted as the principal witness for LATA and the London Motorway Action Group - headed by Douglas Jay, MP for Battersea North - at the subsequent public inquiry into the GLC's plans.

Thomson demonstrated that not only were the motorways hugely destructive, but also that as a solution to London's transport problems they would be counterproductive. By generating more and longer car journeys, the motorways would result in more congestion, not less. By encouraging more car travel, the role of public transport would be undermined. Thomson argued that it was necessary to address all deficiencies in the quality of travel, not just for motorists, but also for pedestrians, cyclists and bus and rail travellers. In this he was far ahead of his time.

The objectors won only partial victory at the inquiry, but energetic lobbying of the Labour party, which was then in opposition at the GLC, led to Labour withdrawing the plans after regaining control in 1973. Although the public outcry and cost were uppermost in changing Labour's mind, Thomson's arguments helped the GLC's politicians to override their own highway engineers.

If urban traffic problems cannot be solved by roadbuilding, then attention naturally turns to management of existing space, and here, too, Thomson was a leading protagonist. Earlier in his career, while at the Ministry's research

wing, the Road Research Laboratory, Thomson acted as Secretary of an expert panel on pay-as-you-drive road pricing. The 'Smeed Report' of 1964, which Thomson drafted, showed that 'practical pricing methods could probably be devised'. Various Transport Ministers have shied away from road charging but all subsequent schemes, from Singapore to Central London, had the benefit of this early analysis.

While some other prominent transport economists continued, and even continue to this day, to focus almost exclusively on road pricing, Thomson started to explore the potential of other, often more practical, approaches. In 1972, whilst working at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris he produced 'Methods of Traffic Limitation in Urban Areas', which identified 35 separate measures that could be adopted, almost all of which had been applied somewhere in the world.

In 1977, after a world tour, he published 'Great Cities and Their Traffic' (Gollanz). In it he noted that choosing a transport strategy is 'a choice of way of life...a choice that may affect different sections of the population very differently...(and thus) a highly political question.' In what is still a valued textbook, he sought to make clear the nature of that choice.

Having established himself as a global transport authority, at the age of 48 he started working as an independent consultant. He was retained by Halcrow Fox working on projects in Manila, Surabaya, Bangkok, Taipei, Amman, Colombo, Bogotá, Mauritius and China. He worked on the 1990 study of Mass Rapid Transit in Developing Countries that established the economic rationale for investment in urban rail systems. He worked on his own account in Lima, Russia and elsewhere.

Thomson's approach started with an intuitive understanding, based on profound observation, of how a city works. Only with such an understanding could plans suited to the particular city be formulated. The plans must then be tested and, where appropriate, refined and modified by quantitative means, but mathematical models could never provide the initial inspiration. Thomson thus occupies a prominent place in the development of modern transport thinking.

Thomson died at home on 4th May after a short illness. He is survived by his second wife Wendy and his daughters Calvia, Pippa, and Lydia.

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