

## Car-Free Days And Car-Free Day Haters: Pros, Cons and Some Lessons of Experience

In the case of something as challenging to make work as a "car-free day", it's worth bearing in mind that there is something of a deep history there and that if we are to advance the sustainability agenda, at whatever level we might chose, it's a good idea to have learned the lessons of the past. Let me see if I can run over a few of the most salient of them in a few paragraphs without being unnecessarily boring.

### No Lark - A Serious Business

The organization of a car-free day that has any meaning is no simple public relations gesture. For most people in most places - adults with jobs that they want to hold on to, business people whose very survival in what is already a difficult and uncertain situation for many, families with children who have to get to school safely and on time, mayors and other public officials whose constituency expects that there job is to make their lives better - the tissue of the transport system is central to the organization of their daily lives. It is no casual thing, no pleasantry, no bagatelle. It is - and I chose my words carefully here - a metabolism, an extremely complex, quasi-chaotic system that lends itself to casual monkeying no more than the body and life of someone you hold dear.

People depend on it for their well being and even their survival -- so if we are going to try to introduce some change, even for a single day, we must do this in a mature and fully informed manner. Part of this is to ensure that an appropriate information and consultative process can be set up in each place that wishes to give this a try. And this requires TIME!

### Who Hates Car-free Days?

After more than a decade of trying to convince people by word and example that a car-free day can be a good idea for a town, city or a neighborhood, one of the most striking things we have been able to observe as we and others try to go from concept to concrete experience (as it were) is that the world out there divides pretty sharply into four main camps or attitudes: those who never heard of it (the vast majority), those who have and don't care (next largest group), those who have and like it, and those who have and think it's a rotten idea.

It's this last group that I'd like to spill some ink about this morning. As often happens in life we have a choice. If we ignore or try to bulldoze them, they become part of the problem. But if we take the time and trouble to work with them, they can be an important part of the solution.

Car-Free Day haters themselves tend to be identifiable in several guises and for several reasons. Let me rundown this list quickly, before getting to the group to which I would like specifically to comment this morning.

But before we get into the heat of the action, let me put our cars (sic.) on the table. If you wish to do something about the cars/cities/people impasses that we face, it is important to have a balanced, mature attitude about these matters. Here are three basic truths that we need to be able to deal with.

## CAR-FREE DAYS AND CAR-FREE DAY HATERS

- The first is that for a great many people in the affluent North cars are perceived and accepted as the best way to get around for just about any purpose in their daily lives. Not only that, they vote with their wheels. But here's the rub.
- The second and far more subtle truth is that even at best (for them) private owner-driven cars offer first class mobility services only to a growing minority of people in our societies (and we have the statistics to back that up).
- Third and last, there are definitely places in the world where they work less well than in others -- and chief among these heavily built up areas such as cities.

And against this fairly structured and pretty easy to understand background, we proposed many years ago that one way for people in any give place to improve their understanding of this situation is to take all the cars off the street for a typical day and have a collective look at how their city might be able to work in a no-car or a low-car environment. The reason for doing this, of course, is not to have a no-car party for those who happen to like this kind of idea, but to engage a profound process of public participation, observation and debate, which ideally will lead to some specific, concrete ideas for changes and improvements of various sorts.

Now here's the second rub. We live in a pluralistic democracy, which means that not necessarily everyone agrees with you and me when it comes to cars and the ways in which we use them. Under these circumstances it becomes important that we know absolutely who we are (and this includes car warts and all) -- and at the same time are willing to listen carefully to those who do not agree with us.

After all, those who hate the idea of a car-free day are not necessarily thoughtless monsters. Like us they are citizens, workers, voters, parents and active participants in our pluralistic democracies, and it would be quite stupid of us not to try to understand what it is they object to. Worse than stupid, it would be counter-productive -- since the record shows that they have some important things to say, and further that at the end of the day we are going to need if not all of them, most of them on our side.

So now on to our short list of four important groups of people who may not agree with us and our great idea:

### 1. Politicians and Policy Makers:

This is a tricky group and, as we all know, tend to be almost entirely change-averse -- unless they think there are some votes in it (which is rarely the case). There are of course exceptions to this rule, but the word (exceptions) says it all.

Now these good people tend to have two strategies for dealing with any car free day proposal that might surge out of their mad electorate. The first and most frequent is to ignore it as long as possible. A second - and this, a recent phenomenon that we have been seeing here in Europe of late - consists of going along with it in a "reasonable manner". This usually means a very reduced effort lasting just a few hours and which is cloistered in small section of the city in a way that, above all, manages to avoid conflict.

There is a third political/administrative group that publicly says approximately this: "It is our view that these car-free days such as we see them being practiced in most places are poorly thought out ideas that can be greatly disruptive of our cities and their activities, so we want nothing to do with them." The mayor of Stockholm, to name but

one, made precisely such a statement within weeks of awarding the Stockholm Prize for Environment to the joint car-free day effort of The Commons and the City of Bogotá.

We have two quick points to make in this respect. The first is that the good Mayor is absolutely correct: a car-free day, got right and as we understand it, is indeed a highly disruptive to a city. Making a city work for people is a serious business, and if one is going to try a radical pattern break, it is necessary to do this with the level of commitment, public support and resources that are appropriate to the challenge.

The second important point is that the mayor of Stockholm is not alone in his point of view. Our considerable feedback indicates that is the majority de facto position among politicians around the world. This is the stark reality is what we must be prepared to confront and deal with. And let's not forget, almost all of them are smart and much the greater part are devoted public servants. They are also the guys who are still there as sitting targets once the smoke of the last car-free day has blown away and everyone else has disappeared into the woodwork.

## 2. Traffic and Transport Planners:

By and large these professionals are not at all in favor of a car-free day. It makes a lot of work for them, and as often as not under circumstances in which they do not have the resources needed to do their end of the job properly. Often as not car-free day people tend to underestimate the importance of the technical aspects of planning such a day and getting it right. This is a major oversight on our part.

On the other hand, if we can figure out ways to give these key technical partners the resources, time and broad public support they need to make it work, these people can make a great contribution, to even the most demanding of Days.

## 3. Local Commerce:

This is simple. They are almost always against. And if you think it over from their perspective - which as social activists who would like to be successful we really must - there is every reason for them to take this position. Car-free days, as we all know, are targeted above all at the crowded central cores of any given place. And that's where the stores are.

But what about giving them a break. Let's put their fears and objections into perspective. Most of these business people in central areas are not doing all that well. At a time where out of town commerce, hyperstores, and huge malls are increasingly getting all of the business (and, by the way, the public support and traffic), these businesses in the center are under considerable financial pressure.

And if in their mind they see as one of the major problems they face being that of insufficient access of people to their stores (and most people, remember, only get to most places with their cars) the very idea of a "car-free day" is pure anathema. "Car-free" to them immediately interprets to "customer-free". In their minds what they understand it that there is a need for the center is to be able to accommodate more cars and not fewer. What they need is more parking, easier and faster car access to the downtown area - and here are the car-free day people asking for the exact opposite.

The lesson of experience is that car-free day organizers have to make every effort of which they are capable to consult, educate and bring in the local business people into their projects. This is not mean task, but fortunately if the car free people are willing and able to do their homework there are some great ways to do this. But it requires, patience, diplomacy, knowledge and hard work to get right. (Are you sure you are ready for that challenge?)

4. Owner/Drivers:

As Pogo put it so trenchantly half a century ago: "I have met the enemy and it's us".

Anyone who uses their car every day for all those good reasons that we have for doing so, is likely to find the concept of organizing themselves and their families for a day without a car a real problem. Of course if the day is a Sunday, a holiday or in the middle of a snowstorm, then it is relatively less of a psychological and organizational shock and inconvenience. But then the object of a real car-free day is to create a situation in which people see their city and themselves in a very different life situation. As the mayor of Bogotá put it in their long and hard campaign in support of their Day: "Let us together on this day see and imagine another and very different city".

The typical owner/driver (such as your author and passing guide here) is then faced with the unfamiliar task of organizing personal and family life under entirely different conditions for that one and, let's face it, pretty inconvenient day. Some will do so willingly and happily, others less so. If there is the option of a safe bike ride, run or good public transport, the transition is not so difficult. But in how many places is that the case?

To close out this perhaps not brief enough essay, let's review three points about this important target group.

- First, they need help in organizing the transition, if only for the Day. This puts real pressure on the organizers - which in turn means that they must have the resources and be willing to take on this important responsibility.
- Second, if the Day is to succeed for these people it is going to require a bit of time and thinking on this part. What we can see from those few car-free days that have really succeeded thus far, the key here appears to be a lively public dialog in the weeks leading up to the day. And here the active participation of the media is critical.
- The third point about this important group, however, is a bit more subtle and is one that has not been getting the attention that it deserves in most places. And this is to see if we can make the point about what it actually means for a person to be "car-free". Think about that: I make this change and then I become "car-free", freed of everything that is associated with having a *car-full* life.

If anything, our major mistake until now over this last dozen years of trying has perhaps been that we have dwelt too much on the concept, specifically, of a "car free DAY". Hmm. Is that really that we are trying to get to? Is it the DAY that is so important? Or is it something else?

Is not the ultimate objective not just that one day, but the place, the human environment? Is not indeed the most important objective of a car-free day to pave the way to create car-free PLACES in those special situations where for reasons of geometry, environment, safety, health and conviviality, systems based on large numbers of private cars shipping about in close proximity to each other and to the people of that place, may not be the best way to get that particular job done? We think so, and we further take the position that any car-free day that does not advance this objective in some way is not really much of an accomplishment.

### Being Car-Free?

Behind all of this is the concept of being car-free in the most personal of all ways. If I for example in my personal life am able to be car-free, what does that mean in point of fact? Well, first of all it means that I am personally spared a considerable economic burden -- which works out to anywhere from five to ten thousand dollars a year depending on what we count and where and how you live.

Then there is the matter of time. If you have a car-free life, that usually means that you somehow have managed to organize your and your family's lives within a far tighter physical radius than before. And this saving of distance usually translates to savings of time, almost always considerable. This means time for yourself, for your family and for your community. One of the more common calculations shows that people with car-based lives often spend something on the order of three hours a day in their vehicles, which quickly converts to a thousand hours each year or not all that far from a hundred waking days to spend perhaps in better ways?

But what about the impact on yourself in your daily life? Have you ever observed yourself closely when you are behind the wheel? Are you the same considerate, responsible, reflective person you are when playing with your children or talking to a neighbor or a friend? What about your behavior when traffic conditions deteriorate? What about the anxiety that begins to gnaw at you when you suddenly realize that you are running late? What about the level of aggressive behavior that follows that? And bearing in mind that you are steering a ton or so of at best only semi-controlled mayhem, imagine all the awful things that leads to as the harried driver hits the accelerator and not the brakes.

This is the final and most important wrinkle that is behind the car-free day concept, at least as I understand it. Do I really want to be that person who lives a car-full life under these circumstances? If so, that means that my car is more important than the rest of life. And the lives of others.

Where to from here?

Well for most of us in the rich North, wherever that might be as far as being car-free is concerned, the answer in this real world in which we live in is probably: no where fast! There are all kinds of reasons for this.

First of course, there is zero possibility that most of us will ever even consider giving up our cars unless there is a first class alternative available to us. If it's as good as or better than a car, taking everything into account, many of us will be willing to make the move. But if the alternative is walking in the rain to reach a bus that shows up late if at all, don't hold your breath. And in most of our cities that is the only alternative today.

If I am a saint or a genius or live in Zurich – or too poor or otherwise unable to drive – I may find myself able to organize a car-free life. But for the rest of us, if we are going to be able to do it, then we are going to have to build it.

The things that have been going on for the last few years in Bogotá Colombia provide us with some interesting clues in this context (see <http://ecoplan.org/votebogota2000/> for details). Let me close out this essay by sharing with you several of them:

1. The city is taking its first step by making it clear to its citizens that their city, anyway, is not one of those places that is going to be able to build a transport system which is at once mainly car-based and at the same time, efficient, clean, safe, and fair. They have come to the understanding that in their city at least they have no choice. They either have to find ways to get the cars – or most of them most of the time --- out of the traffic stream -- or the whole urban tissue is simply going to fall apart.
2. The second is to find a mechanism that will allow them to do this. And that mechanism is a basic pincers movement of which the first pincer is their referendum-approved policy that has found a way to take something on the order of 5-8% of the cars out of the traffic stream in peak hours over each of the next 15 years.
3. But you can't take the cars out unless you have some awfully attractive things to offer in their place. And here Bogotá is pulling out all the stops with major investments in hundreds of kilometers of cycle paths for daily transport purposes, provisions (for the first time) for walking at transport, a cost-effective new public transit system (the Transmilenio express busway system), and a radial new policy to reform and expand the quality and quantity of transport services offered by smaller carriers, including small bus systems, taxis, and a whole range of new intermediate transport arrangements.

Let's see now... we get the cars out, we put the alternative systems in, and is that all? No, there are the two vital ingredients without which this can never work. The first is the absolute necessity of having a very strong, solid social and political consensus behind any such ambitious retrofit program. And the second is TIME!

Both cities and people need time to adapt to new ways of doing things. And the amount of time that is actually required in these cases stretches way beyond the horizons that usually dominate the political debate and decision process. In Bogotá, the city's leaders, and eventually the citizens, have decided that it is going to take something like a decade and a half for them to make the adaptations that are needed to create the city they want. With their referendum of 26 October they have now built this into the law.

The question remains for the rest of us now is, how do you go about getting such a strong public base for such a remarkable overhaul of the city? Well, the first step is to begin thinking about it. Openly and in public.

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Earth Car Free Day 2001 will take place on April 19th. Your town, city, neighborhood, group, company, school and family are invited to join, try it, and observe and discuss the results. Further information for those interested in organizing or participating can be had at <http://ecoplan.org/carfreeday/EarthCFD/>