



Track record

Steven Norris is a former transport minister who oversaw London's transport network and rail privatisation. He twice stood for mayor of London and has been on the board of a number of leading transport companies. For 14 years he has been President of ITS (UK)

INTERVIEW BY PAUL HUTTON



Firstly, a Tory from Liverpool - how did that happen?

That's because I had a great break in life,

which was the Liverpool Institute High School, it was one of the classic Northern Grammar Schools, it was one of the best schools in the country. When I got an open exhibition to Oxford, they didn't have a half holiday because every year my school got half a dozen Oxbridge entrances. Our generation

Steven Norris was born in Liverpool in 1945, elected as an MP in 1983 and stood down in 1997, running for London mayor in 2000 and 2004

could do that, and I could bore you rigid talking about what real social mobility is about. I don't know yet of a greater engine of social mobility than a good education.

I was lucky enough after Oxford, I went to work in the City and then began working for myself and I made some money. But when I stood for parliament it was because in the days of Harold Wilson if you had done well for yourself as a result of which you were a taxpayer and not a benefit recipient, and in those days I was

fit and healthy and never went near a doctor, I didn't have any children, didn't go near the education system, I paid my road tax, my taxes and national insurance so was a massive contributor and I was treated like a pariah, because I'd had the temerity to do well for myself and I thought "hang on a minute, this is crazy". I've always thought from the outset you never make the poor richer by making the rich poorer. I passionately believe if you keep the rate of tax low, you'll actually take more taxes.



So I was a natural Conservative. A Tory from Liverpool. It's not quite illegal, rare, but I suspect quietly there are a lot more of us than you might imagine.

Q So when you say working for yourself, was transport involved in that?

Not particularly, I was involved with the Ford Motor Company and they taught me business management, and I bought and sold garage businesses. I wasn't a used car dealer, I was somebody who bought and sold companies and I enjoyed that and I had a couple of VW dealerships for a decade or more but my real interest in transportation policy did develop in the five years I was a minister when I came across a fascinating field.

But it does help to have business experience. I'd already been running my business for 15, 20 years by then and I believe that for MPs a second occupation should be mandatory, let alone desirable. I think MPs who have never done anything but politics are rarely firing on all cylinders, it's hard to see how they can be.

Q Well, I think you could say "MPs who have never done anything but politics are rare" these days...

Well maybe coming from a business background to some of the problems that we encounter in the transport world is a useful start. Also I found it a really genuinely fascinating area. We were at the start of the technological revolution, we were at the end of predict and provide, never a good model for looking at road development, we had to find something different. We were right at the start of the renaissance of the railway - I was the only minister who saw privatisation of the railways through from start to finish.

Privatisation of airports, airlines was going on while I was there and I found it fascinating. But if you said to me what made it special, it was the absence of idiotic party political arguments.

Arguments around transport, of which there are many, are arguments around how you can best do the job right, not left and right.



“ Twenty years ago you couldn't see technology, now it's everywhere ”

We'd already got over the idea of privatisation and it's been interesting that in the 13 years of Labour government not one single bit of that has been repealed and although Labour talks about renationalising railways, Ed Miliband has made it clear that that's not actually on the agenda. I should think not. Now given that that's out of the way we can all talk about how we're going to get a better railway, we're going to deliver better bus services, more information to passengers.

I'm a passionate believer that in the 21st century we have to rethink travel patterns. As somebody who owns four cars in two countries, I still use the tube and bus to get to work. Why? Not because I'm a better person, or because I'm trying to make a statement but because it's more convenient, less expensive, more reliable. Who wouldn't?

That's going to be the norm in big cities, and getting us from our car-based culture to where we are now has been the biggest journey of the last 20 years. Bludgeoning

people isn't going to do it, and trying to portray motorists as pariahs won't do it because motorists are voters and pedestrians and cyclists too, but giving people more attractive alternatives is how you do it and that's what's been a prominent feature of the last decade.

Q How does it work as a politician that you suddenly get given a ministerial role, surrounded by people in the department who know all about the subject and you've got to tell them what to do?

One example would be the Jubilee Line extension which was blindingly clear we were going to have to do. And the treasury argument was "we haven't got the money" and my argument was "we can't afford not to do it". And I think history has borne me out and I'm very passionate about that.

I remember them saying "but Minister it doesn't go anywhere where anybody lives" and I said "no, that's the point, but they will when you build it. I know you're going to unlock the whole of Docklands, you're going to transform Docklands, transform Stratford and you're going to transform the areas in between. And all of that has happened. Now I don't think I was a genius, or some futuristic seer, I think that was always blindingly obvious but you had to bludgeon your way through the treasury and use the techniques you'd use in private business.

I think where the question is interesting is that you go into a department - I'd spent time in the Home Office, DTI and Environment - and I'm thinking "what's with this?" and, well you listen, you read the brief, you should know what your party wants to deliver and whilst you're doing that there are the day-to-day things that come across your desk that you have to say yes or no to, because that doesn't stop.

My attitude was that if I don't understand this I want you to explain this to me, tell me what the issues are and the great thing I discovered is that the vast majority of civil servants are extremely dedicated bright people who do not want to





force you to their agenda or to subvert what the Government wants to do, they just want to make the thing happen. But if they think that a piece of policy doesn't work, they'll tell you and they'll tell you why. I love that kind of environment.

Q Anything administrative rather than policy that you particularly remember being groundbreaking?

Deciding to scrap predict and provide was quite a step because it was what the department believed in. The department, not Tories or Labour, had since time immemorial believed that the only political debate was how much can you build and when you couldn't build as much as people wanted, you pointed to other priorities and the opposition would say you weren't building enough, that was the only politics there was in transport, whereas saying predict and provide is wrong because you'll never feed the beast enough and you've got to think of managing the need for travel rather than predicting economic growth and trying to satisfy demand - that was a much more intense issue.

Q I heard recently that when you were involved in Government, a public transport initiative's cost benefit analysis included a loss in fuel duty - that sounds insane! How do you battle that sort of ingrained logic?

Any normal person who saw that

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would say “that's nonsense”, but it's true that if I build a piece of public transport infrastructure which will cost £x million, it will raise some revenue through fares but it's fair to say those passengers will not be using petrol to drive their cars and therefore the fuel duty will no longer be collected.

Of course the issue is “does society and the economy actually demand that this disbenefit is ignored” and the answer is of course it does. We're actively planning to get to the stage where we no longer have fuel duty to collect because the whole aim of policy is to get rid of fossil fuel.

Now if somebody's going to say it's wrong to pursue green policy because we make so much money flogging fossil fuel, well you know what reception they'll get. It's like saying “why don't we lower the tax on tobacco because we'll get more revenue and we'll kill more people early so we don't have to care for them on the NHS?” Because if you follow that utterly logical stream I

Long-term vision: Norris maintained the Jubilee Line wasn't worth the £3bn it cost to build - but that it would become worth up to 10 times that with development

think it's called *reductio ad absurdum*, reducing the principle until you realise it's just plain stupid.

So you just had to point to the wider benefits and say cost benefit analysis had to be treated as an interesting, relevant view of a project but not the yes-no. And that's what we achieved at that time.

And I think it's worth saying that when Doug Ogilvy gave his farewell speech as chairman of HS2 he said, “I don't think there is a cost-benefit analysis which is adequate to express the cost and benefits of high speed rail because it's a 100 year exercise because the cost is great but the impact is even greater and that impact may not be what we predict because life never is what we predict.” Look at the Jubilee, it wasn't worth the three billion it cost to build, it's been worth 20, 30 billion in less than 15 years.

Q But that's where you have the whole problem with the long-term timescales of transport, I remember there was a bypass near where I grew up where they built a single lane each way to save money in the short term, only to have to build another road later. And the fact projects have such a long life span, yet politics is a five-year cycle, must really show up in transport.

It's probably true. We went through a period of quite savage reductions in public spending, necessary





incidentally, but during those times when there is limited funds available the temptation is to go for what's called TALC - Technically Acceptable Lowest Cost - so once a bid is deemed technically acceptable you take the lowest price, but what that excludes is any sense of value and that's the issue the single lane is all about, short term thinking ignoring value, whole cost of ownership about where you will funnel future growth. That's an example of getting the cost benefit analysis wrong.

Q Let's move on to the mayoralty. You twice stood for mayor of London, now transport has been one of the really high profile things both mayors have been known for - congestion charge, more buses, Boris Bikes - what's been good about two mayors' policies and what would you have done differently?

I did supervise London's transport system for five years and what I realised was we needed strong intervention from a guiding force and I was very strongly in favour of an elected mayor to replace the GLC - the GLC was rightly abolished because it was a monstrosity but wrongly we assumed you needed nothing to replace it, and I've been a strong supporter of the mayoralty ever since. Of course I didn't want to lose either of the elections I stood at and of course I think I could have done the job better than either of the mayors we've had but that's the arrogance of any politician!

I think more to the point you can demonstrate that the most important job the mayor does is around transport and you can demonstrate having a mayoralty has allowed us to deliver things on a city-wide basis. And that's very difficult to deliver without there being a strong mayoral presence. Most obvious of these will be expanding the bus network, putting the funding into that, the timetable systems and the apps that TfL can operate, the contracting system, all of that has been a really important step forward. The night buses, a weekend all-night tube system, all of that comes from the political pressure exercised by the mayors.



Capital plans: Norris during one of his two candidacies for London mayor

I'm actually attracted to the Nottingham idea where you charge workplace parking instead. So those who have to drive don't have to pay, but those who perhaps need to be driving but choose to do so because they can park at work will have to pay, and therefore may make a different choice.

Q Among your many roles, you're president of ITS UK - do you wish you were a minister now, rather than when ITS was so new?

I think most of the ministers I've met have been perfectly well aware how technology has been centre stage. I think some of the things I was wary about I've been proved wrong. I was worried about hard shoulder running, concerned there would be serious accidents but the managed motorway project is well developed and I was unduly cautious. I think with all new technologies there will be trial and error but ITS is now at the centre and remember Alasdair Darling, who I had a lot of time for when he was Transport Secretary, produced a white paper that said 20 years ago you couldn't see technology, now it's everywhere. It's the basis of policy, even the congestion charge is an ITS project. ANPR, the way we tax vehicles, manage traffic, take tolls, all this is second nature.

Q You're in your 70th year now, how much longer are you going to be doing all this? When will you decide to lie on a beach instead? (He smiles) When the phone stops ringing, and not until!

“The congestion charge I always disagreed with, and I think history has proved me right”

The congestion charge I always disagreed with, and I think history has proved me right in that I always said it'd have a temporary impact but it would be eroded by time and familiarity and both those things have happened. People just pay it, grudgingly or willingly but they do it. But it was certainly a brave thing to do, and I admired the fact he did it even when his own side people it would be unpopular. He did it because he thought it was the right thing to do and even though I thought it was wrong my objection wasn't just because he'd said it was a good idea.