

BACK TO BUSINESS



MACROSCOPE
RICHARD HARRIS

Clogged-up thinking is not helping to solve traffic crisis

Our city is becoming harder and harder to get around. There are solutions to the problem, but it needs the political will to find them



A free parking space in Statue Square for my parents' antiquated Austin 1300 was getting hard to find by the early 1970s. When I had my own car in the 1980s, I became an expert at legal on-street parking on Lockhart Road and off-street parking in the waste sites around Central. These had disappeared by the 1990s as the police enforced parking discipline and designated car parks became the go-to place.

Now you can park in Central again, just like the 1970s. Around lunchtime last week, stationary vehicles occupied a whole lane down Ice House Street; were stacked up in Chater Road and Edinburgh Place; all along Jackson Road (two deep); and seven were crammed into a single layby in Lower Albert Road. There is usually a driver snoozing inside, waiting to pick up mistress from shopping, or master from work; keeping the engine running in the unlikely event of our otherwise highly visible men in blue, becoming visible.

The plan area of a Toyota Alphard – a popular parker, if perhaps one of the most disgustingly uncool vehicles ever designed – is 96 sq ft. Let's assume another 75 per cent to allow for parking manoeuvres. The opportunity cost of casual parking by each uncool chauffeur-driven Alphard in our busy thoroughfares (taking a notional rental per month of HK\$100 per sq ft) is therefore over HK\$200,000 per annum per car. The ultra cool Tesla Model S, also a popular obstructor, costs the taxpayer and the travelling public 15 per cent more.

The chauffeur owners, who game the rest of society by

saving HK\$6,000 per month for a space in a legitimate car park, are ironically among the top few per cent of the very wealthiest in Hong Kong. In the annals of bad behaviour, it equates to dog fouling, or leaving cigarette butts in the street.

This is only part of the cost, for according to a recent *Post* analysis, the speed of Central traffic in just the last five years has fallen by a whopping 25 per cent. In parts of Sheung Wan it is really quicker to walk. To remain an effective global business centre, we have to be able to get around our own city.

We have a traffic crisis of the like unseen since the 1980s. The



It takes huge amounts of time, long debates and money to build a white elephant

Colonial administration took aggressive measures, ensuring strict police enforcement to keep roads free of obstructions. Enforcement fines, a high first registration tax, and an annual examination test raised the cost of driving closer to the cost on society.

But it is also unfair to make private vehicles a rich man's toy, as those disabled or living in isolated areas may need a car, so a cost-effective road-building programme was undertaken in the 1980s. Flyovers and underpasses appeared as the government reacted to

bottlenecks. Once one blockage was cleared, it moved elsewhere. Eventually the choke points were minimised – for a while. Small-scale road improvements are a very inexpensive way to increase economic productivity.

The government has been spending heavily on grandiose road projects like the HK\$200 billion bridge to Zhuhai – that would have paid for a multitude of road widenings, flyovers and underpasses. It takes huge amounts of administrative time, long debates, and money to build a white elephant; meanwhile Stubbs Road will become all but impassible once traffic from the old Lingnan College site begins to flow.

The announcement last week of higher parking fines will make little difference. The first proposed increase since 1994 to just HK\$480 will mean that parking ticket fine inflation will have been a measly 1.8 per cent per year. Mere inflation would have taken a parking ticket to HK\$525; Hong Kong house price inflation to HK\$700.

Electronic Road Pricing was discussed and dismissed in the 1980 and 1990s for good reason because Hong Kong's geography does not suit such a penalty zone. It turns the heart of a city into a ghost town – better a honking Central than an oasis of quiet. Also commercial drivers will whine and get undeserved exemptions. If the government wants a blue-sky option they could fund research into driverless cars – they are coming and Hong Kong is a uniquely ideal test bed.

As always, the solutions to traffic congestion are not hard to formulate. We have the money. It just depends whether our policymakers want to take action – or perhaps it is their chauffeurs who are clogging up Central.

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