

## THE IDEOLOGICAL WAR ON PUBLIC TRANSIT

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Calgarians' desire for less traffic congestion does not translate into a full-blown repudiation of the need for more and better public transportation. Nor is car-dependence more democratic.

Si les Calgariens souhaitent voir diminuer la congestion routière, on ne peut en conclure qu'ils soient réfractaires aux investissements dans les transports publics. Ni que ce choix des pouvoirs publics constitue un affront à la démocratie.

The provocative title of David Seymour's recent article in *Policy Options* (November-December 2013) was "Urban planners vs. democracy." This title exposed the flawed logic of his broadside against what he sees as a nefarious municipal focus on developing and expanding "expensive public transit systems."

Buttressed only by flimsy poll data showing frustration with traffic congestion in Calgary (who knew!), Seymour proffers some lofty, though erroneous, claims about how the focus of the "all-knowing urban planning profession" subverts democracy in Canada's biggest cities. Seymour sings the merits of "self-driving cars," "intelligent transportation" and other cosmetic technological upgrades, but offers little more than a facile defence of the status quo, absent any serious treatment of the critiques of modern car-dependence and its profound social and ecological consequences.

Before dispensing with Seymour's unfounded conclusions drawn from meagre data, it is important to put his piece in context. Seymour is a senior fellow in municipal governance for the Manning Foundation, the charitable arm of the decidedly right-wing Manning Centre. Eager to roll back the perceived political advantage of progressives on city councils across the country, the well-heeled foundation funds research and the development of training for right-wing political operatives and campaigners. Perhaps buoyed by the electoral success of Rob Ford and his championing of the car-owning suburbanite in Toronto, Seymour joins a growing chorus of right-wing voices that use the "ideologically driven war on the car" as a wedge issue to foment distrust of public services and of a broader community ethic.

Seymour's central argument is that the preoccupation with public transit in Canadian cities comes at the expense of what urbanite Canadians truly want:

a better-functioning road network for their cars. Let's put aside, for the moment, that Seymour curiously relies on one poll from one city to substantiate his argument. Mobility, he tells us, is the primary concern of Calgarians. After all, infrastructure, traffic and roads were mentioned "as the top priority" by 29 percent of respondents in the City of Calgary's Citizen Satisfaction Survey. You read correctly: 29 percent.

In contrast, only 18 percent of Calgarians indicated public transit as their top priority. Hardly conclusive, these results may provide some measure of evidence that Calgarians want to "drive through their cities on roads that are not potholed and at speeds not smothered to a near-halt by traffic congestion." But is it really proof that public transit investments are being made against the will of urban-dwelling Canadians?

It's difficult to understand how Seymour draws the conclusions he does from Calgary, where a staggering 87 percent of the population lives in the suburbs, a poster child for the ill effects of suburban sprawl. Still, less than a

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third of Calgarians named traffic and roads as their top priority — a rather low number when one considers the fact that 77 percent of Calgarians get to work by car.

Moreover, wanting to deal with less traffic congestion is a rather understandable reaction for anyone suffering through heavy daily congestion on their commute. There is plenty of research to demonstrate that long commutes place immense strain on mental health and well-being, and even that they encourage political disengagement. From that vantage point, wanting less traffic congestion and a better road network seems common sense.

But it does not, as Seymour argues, prove the public's "obvious preference to drive" (not to mention that the supposed "preference" is more like a privilege that accrues far more to the wealthy). Wanting less congestion and increased mobility does not preclude one from also favouring improved access to public transit or the opportunity to live in a higher-density neighbourhood where walking and cycling are options. These kinds of comparisons and considerations, however, are not explored in Seymour's piece.

Overall, Seymour seems little interested in entertaining any arguments that question his celebration of the car. For example, he argues that Calgary's transportation policy is an affront to free choice, one that "seeks to mould decisions about where [people] choose to live around the kinds of transport that the City prefers to provide." Here, Seymour simply naturalizes the status quo, completely ignoring the historical processes and powerful interests that have ensured car-dominated urban development. It is as if the ubiquity of the car happened in a more or less autonomous, haphazard manner.

As scholars like University of Ottawa political scientist Matthew Patterson have shown, low-density, car-oriented suburbs have been produced mostly by planning and the politics underpinning it. In most North American cities, for example, the

interests of property developers have driven urban development and urban sprawl. Developers buy up large tracts of farmland around cities and towns, at low rural prices, lobby heavily to get them zoned for residential construction and realize enormous profits as they turn them into low-density suburbs.

Moreover, developers are significant financial contributors to municipal politicians' electoral campaigns and lobby to ensure that councils remain favourable to their interests. Automobile interests have lobbied hard since the 1920s to undermine public transit investments. At times, they have simply bought up streetcar and bus companies and, over time, shut them down. More generally, they manage to work with the property developers to ensure that urban development is organized around this stable relationship between the car and the suburb. Generous developer subsidies were, in fact, a major campaign issue in the recent Calgary civic elections — subsidies Mayor Naheed Nenshi promised to eliminate in the interest of building a more sustainable city.

Another major plank in Seymour's argument relates to the cost of public transit, which he implies Canadians neither want nor can afford. This overlooks the substantial municipal and provincial investment of public money into road construction and maintenance. Provision for the car remains dominant in public spending priorities for transport. Of course, Seymour ignores entirely the massive subsidy to the car every time a road is built, widened or repaved, or even has its snow cleared.

Perhaps most damning to Seymour's argument are the social and ecological concerns that go unaddressed. Mass car use is at the root of a spectrum of ecological problems such as urban air pollution, resource depletion, climate change, soil degradation and loss of agricultural land. These problems have significant impacts on human health, are immensely costly to taxpayers and, most importantly, are a substantial contributor to the

unsustainable trajectory of contemporary economies.

Seymour's solution to pressing social and environmental concerns, to the extent he offers one, is to put faith in a "host of technological and entrepreneurial developments" that "promise to make road infrastructure more efficient [and] reduce transport emissions and energy consumption." His deference to the modernization of cars and car technology shows a failure to understand that increased eco-efficiency, while improving upon the status quo, does not necessarily lead to an overall reduction in environmental degradation. Nor does his solution challenge the logic of the consumption and waste generation patterns associated with car-dependence.

This weak treatment of environmental concerns is remarkable in light of the seriousness of the climate crisis and the direct impacts that extreme weather have recently had on Calgary. Free from any constraints or

higher-order ethical considerations, Seymour effectively glosses over the most important challenges associated with urban sprawl, like pollution, disappearing arable land and a host of others.

There is "no such thing as society," Margaret Thatcher famously remarked. She saw only the collection of atomized individuals. Seymour's argument for doubling down on car-dependence can be seen as an iteration of this kind of crude reverence for hyperindividualism, a reverence that today is a hallmark of the right-wing ideology that rejects out of hand the collective exercise inherent in public transit planning. His defence of the car must be seen in light of this rather narrow, empty conceptualization of society, one that blinds our vision of what a truly sustainable urban community might one day look like. ■

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