Discursive barriers to sustainable urban transport in Auckland

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Introduction

The notion of sustainable urban transport encourages the use of walking, cycling and public transport. These modes of transport become successful through investment in their infrastructure and with the provision of frequent public transport services. However, the direction of transport planning in Auckland has been in the opposite direction; with heavy investment in roads combined with little investment in walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure. Transport planning literature documents the necessity of combining investment in and incentives to use sustainable transport with disinvestment in and disincentives to car use. Investment in all modes of transport will only make private transport more successful, leading to increased congestion. This is evident from the findings of the discussion paper released in 2007 that states “despite heavy investment in Auckland roads and public transport, traffic congestion is expected to remain a major problem” (MoT, 2007: 8).

The new focus of urban planning suggests that planners need to pay as much attention to the institutional obstructions as new solutions. The institutional field is complex and has different dimensions to be addressed. By establishing the ‘Super Council’ in Auckland, it is expected that institutional barriers to sustainable urban transport such as policies, planning and finance may be overcome. However, decision-maker’s perceptions of transport problems ultimately have the effect of favouring road transport solutions and need to be addressed. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the discursive barriers that are hindering the development and implementation of sustainable urban transport policies in Auckland.

Discourse and transport policy analysis

Discourses directly contribute towards how problems are perceived and approached (Hajer, 1995). Discourses have the potential to shape and justify decisions being made by institutions, and can embed themselves into the mindset of individuals as well as institutions.

At an individual level, it is believed that people act on the basis of myths and ideologies and then made choices accordingly (Denzau and North, 1994). Ideologies are a set of conceptual ideas developed from individual experience. Therefore, professional training and education in areas like planning and engineering play a significant role in the formation of ideologies, and also in sustaining currently dominant ideologies. The way in which individuals communicate these myths, dogmas and ideologies is fundamental to where they position themselves on topics. This contributes towards the emergence of dominant discourses over time.

Like individuals, institutions have developed their own myths, dogmas and ideologies that shape the choices they make and also the options they make available to the public. Institutions often can be viewed as having preferences for dealing with situations in ways that are in some cases short-sighted and which do not pay attention to alternative options. Institutions may justify their discourses by arguing that their practices could be changed but the individual and social rules dictating choice will
still be present, therefore, hindering any attempt that institutions may make towards achieving meaningful change.

In terms of discourses in urban transport planning, Vigar (2002) has identified two key discourses. First are the ‘non-traditionalists’ who believe that transport policy has been ‘hijacked’ by the road lobby (automobile, highway development and petroleum industries) in such a way that policy does not reflect underlying social rules and preferences. The opposing discourse suggests that the ‘current auto-oriented society is not the outgrowth of a political-industrial complex … but rather the realisation of societies underlying preferences’ (Gifford, 2003: 164). Therefore, the promotion and expansion of infrastructure (ultimately the provision of the car) is the only logical way forward.

Typically, institutions have focused on and promoted the second of these discourses; the dominant discourse emerging over time focusing on the provision of the private vehicle and its accompanying infrastructure (Gifford, 2003). In many ways, the private vehicle has been considered the ‘best’ transportation choice over other transport alternatives. As a result, this mode has become more heavily used, resulting in more funds becoming available to improve its use, making it further widely used. This prevalent discourse often results in transport documents, policies, strategies and practices that focus on reducing travel time and serving urban areas through roading investment; with consequently less interest and investment in alternative discourses of public transport and active modal choices (Low et al, 2005). Changing this discourse and its consequential policies is essential, yet transport policy in many countries remains resistant to change with transport professionals and politicians continually justifying ‘traditionalists’ discourse.

Discourses are relevant to policy analysis as they play an important role in how these institutional documents are worded and how their choices and preferences are justified. Policy discourses are a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices (Hajer, 1995). Therefore, the underlying discourses present in policy documents will show how the institutions approach situations and problems, how they justify themselves and their preferences, and how they choose to operate. As a result, policy analysis can reveal and uncover the dominant discourses operating within an organisation. One method identified for measuring discourse analysis is through the recognition of ‘storylines’. Storylines are ‘linguistic representations of issues that provide ways of holding ideas together and enable arguments to be transmitted among stakeholders or key institutions’ (Vigar, 2002: 17). Storylines can work to coordinate action for a particular modal choice in the transport sector and over time, these storylines become embedded in the mindset of individuals as well as institutions. This paper seeks to identify the storylines used in the Auckland region as a measure of discourse analysis. This is achieved by looking for and identifying the storylines used within transport planning and land use documents produced from 1955-2009 for the Auckland Region. Initially, more than one hundred transport and land use planning documents were identified; from those thirty have been reviewed to identify storylines in the Auckland region.

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Analysis of the transport and land use planning documents in Auckland identified four types of storylines used, reused, and reapplied overtime to justify Auckland’s transportation path. These storylines can be broadly categorised as economic, mobility, safety, and consumer storylines.

- Economic storylines focusing on road building as a prerequisite for successful industry and freight movement began to appear in the 1965 Transportation Plan, where it was considered that road building would lead to the ‘vigorous development of industry and commerce throughout the region’ (De Leuw, 1965: iv-v). Following this, both the 1983 and 1986 Auckland Regional Authority (ARA) transport plans justify the movement of goods vehicles by road, as it was considered essential for the region’s economic well-being. As a result, this
required the further investment and upgrading of the roading network. The 2006 State Highway Strategy expects freight to double by 2020 with roading networks expected to cater for this rather than rail. This again required additional road building and maintenance. Industry was again the driving force in the 2007 and 2008 Ten Year Plan’s, and the 2004 and 2008 Transport Strategies, where heavy funding for roading was justified by increased freight on the roading network. This was because heavy vehicle traffic requires stronger (and more costly) roading materials to be used in place of what was traditionally used.

- **Mobility storylines**, the limitations of rail are used to argue for roading development in the Region. Storylines focusing on the *strengths of private vehicles as a result of the limitations of rail services* emerged with the 1955 Master Plan. Here, rail was described as having a limited future in terms of the transportation needs of the city in favour of the construction of roads for private vehicle travel (Auckland Regional Planning Authority (ARPA), 1955). Cars offered a level of mobility that rail was unable to provide. This point was further reiterated in the 1965 Transportation Plan where rail was considered unable to cater for the public transport needs of the city. Instead, buses were considered the primary public transport option for Auckland alongside motorway developments. This however, required additional road building. The 1983 rail report supported the complete discontinuation of rail due to the advantages buses offered in comparison, with the 1999 Land Transport Strategy extending this argument, saying public transport was only there to make those mobile that could not access a private vehicle. With the 2002 Transport Strategy, mobility storylines turned a corner, focusing on public transport, walking and cycling to meet mobility goals. This was justified through the argument that international experience has shown that continued road building does not relieve congestion and improve mobility. However, the 2005 Land Transport Strategy goes back on this, believing rail to only be viable in extremely congested locations. Buses, instead, were expected to serve the city. This however, required continued road building.

- **Safety storylines**, when used, are *worded in a manner that promotes vehicle travel*. From the 1965 Transportation Plan onwards, any form of public transport project undertaken was justified in terms of the safety it provided to motorists by taking cars off the roads. The 1983 and 1986 Auckland Regional Authority’s plans went further suggesting that road building improved safety by making vehicle travel easier through an improved roading network. The 2002 Transport Strategy seemingly aims to reduce car dependency. However, this was expected to fail because the ‘concerns people have over safety and personal security affect their usage of these modes [walking, cycling and public transport] of transport’ (MoT, 2002: 19-20). Again, in the 2003 Ten Year Plan, road building was thought to be necessary in order to improve safety. This safety would be achieved through lowered emissions (from congestion relief) that would work to protect and promote public health. The 2006, 2007 and 2008 Ten Year Plans also argued that road building improved safety as additional passing lanes on congested roads meant that drivers would not attempt to pass unsafely while frustrated.

- **Consumer storylines** focus on public preference to justify road building. Road building focusing on providing for the car because that was what the *public preferred* emerged with the 1955 Master Plan. This was reiterated in the 1965 Transportation Plan, where it was argued that there were great demands for additional vehicle capacity on roads. The 1983 rail report also continued this storyline, justifying road building on the basis that people prefer to use their own vehicles rather than public transport; “the demand for public transport has been replaced by a requirement for upgraded roads and parking facilities” (ARA, 1983a: pp55). The preference for motor vehicles was again reiterated in the 2007/08 and 2008/09
Land Transport Programme’s. The 2008/09 programme takes a new “spin” on this, arguing that sustainable transport systems can only ever be achieved with a willing public.

In recent transport planning documents, an initial focus is placed on land use integration and multi-modal transport networks in accordance with both Resource Management Act and Local Government Act requirements. Therefore, it is more difficult to clearly see evidence for the preference of providing for roading and private vehicle travel. However, in-depth interviews with the key decision makers would be useful to get evidence of any discourse change in the next phase of the research.

Conclusion

The research shows the importance of discourse in the long term stability of the road development path in Auckland. The approach, based on discourse analysis, identifies storylines and provides a framework for looking at policy statements and planning documents to highlight how the current policy path can be understood and how change can be managed in future.

The discursive barriers present in transport planning in Auckland were made possible due to the existence of different storylines. The research has documented a notable shift in the storylines used to promote road development paradigm during the last fifty years. The shift ranges from economic growth to mobility, safety and consumer preferences. However, all these storylines have given priority to short term economic concerns while ignoring the ecological foundation of urban transport planning. In fact, these storylines promote a right and true solution for transport in Auckland based on road development. Therefore, the research concludes that language advances certain ideas, prompts certain values, defines certain roles and eventually proposes certain outcomes which shape overall knowledge and that these patterns of belief are ultimately hard to change.

References