A TOOLBOX FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND URBAN SANITY

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CYCLE FRIENDS!

"A toolbox for an environmental and urban sanity ...". The following presentation has been placed in the economics section of this conference. Let me say at once that I'm not an economist, I'm an architect by education making a living as a consultant, giving good advice on matters of outdoor signs and advertising in the public space as seen through an architect's eyes. I'm also the president of the Norwegian Cyclists' Association - member of the board of the European Cyclists' Federation and a year round cyclist for more than 20 years.

However – as most people - I also deal with economic matters in real life and ask questions few seem able – or willing – to answer. Some of us write down our thoughts and may even get them published in the newspapers' opinion pages. This presentation is based on such an article we wrote about four years ago, published in one of the leading Norwegian newspapers. I was full of hope and expectations that the bold ideas brought forth would create a major public debate. It met with resounding – silence. To my disappointment, naturally. The article never stirred enough interest to get our thoughts scrutinized by economists, environmentalists, politicians, decision makers - to stay corrected, or be hailed as having brought the questions of environmental degradation a bit closer to solution. So I'm bringing the subject matter before you. And as a non-economist I promise a presentation free of charts, graphs, statistics, figures and formulas – no scientific jargon.

In most seminars and conferences on cycling and the benefits of cycling it seems to me that there's an over representation of papers on 1) the benefits of cycling, 2) what can be done to accommodate for increased cycling and 3) what's being done – in other words: focusing on the "carrots" and "how good we are".

We know why we should bicycle and we know why we do. Why don't all the others?

Time for the "whip".

For years we have been flooded with political nonsense about the climate change and means to combat the threats to mankind, such as climate quotas and "solutions" through technological development without getting to the heart of the challenges. These means seem to be carefully chosen so as to justify business as usual – and the preservation of our own contaminating and resources squandering consumer attitudes and ways of life.

ASSUMPTIONS:

This presentation assumes that

1. **the threat of the climate crisis within the next 100 years is real,**
2. **it's partly man made, and**
3. **it's still possible to do something about it and reverse the trend.**

From the public rhetoric it may appear that our politicians share these assumptions. It's politically correct to be genuinely concerned with the matters and even hopeful in finding their solutions. We hear talks about the urgent need to limit the rise in global temperature to 2C by drastically reducing CO2 emissions, achieved through "sustainable development",

national “moon landings” - like gigantic plans for CO2 cleaning of one of Norway’s new gas refineries, promises of (over-)compliance with the Kyoto Protocol and “environmentally friendly” measures of all kinds. The tools to achieve this include voluntary climate quotas, technological revolutions, and an “environmental” gasoline tax of less than one cent/l (the automotive interests soon got over this scare).

CHALLENGES:

Occasionally there’s some discussion about the real objectives: in the political jargon it’s an easy matter to have lofty goals on the macro level, and at the same time being rather unclear when it comes to specific actions on the micro level. The distinction between reductions in absolute levels and reduced growth rates is blurred – obliterated! – by political, noncommittal hogwash.

This has been going on for so many years now, that we can observe reality and compare. This is clearly seen in matters of transportation. In Norway – the country of ice blue waters and streams and an abundance of world known salmon and trout - we import frozen trout from Peru. In the country of enormous fishing resources at its door step we ship our fish to China for processing and import it back for consumption. In Norway, the country of granite and rocks, we import stone from India to cover the Oslo City Hall square - and marble from Italy for our new Opera House. Products transported half way around the globe at enormous environmental costs to society – while out pricing local products.

Despite the obvious need to reduce motorized traffic we see our national leaders and politicians spend huge amounts on new, bigger and better roads in and around urban centers. It’s a paradox to observe the planning of a highway going into Oslo which will be able to accommodate 50% more cars while generating 20% more traffic locally than just a few years ago – and not even being able to alleviate the rush hour congestion. This gigantic project is simply a billion kroner investment which will let even more cars be packed together in exactly the same traffic jams as before. It becomes even more absurd that this enterprise with the huge increase in traffic is marketed as “environmentally friendly”.

Norway is the country with just about the highest levels of air traffic per head – anywhere. The climate change crisis hasn’t spurred air travel a bit, and all major airports have been expanded and/or will be developed to be able to handle the projected and planned sky rocketing increase in demand for air transportation. This is also advertized as being “environmentally friendly” – mainly due to expected technology for more efficient engines. The money is not going to refurbish the national rail system to a sufficient degree to be able to compete effectively with motorized traffic and transportation, such as automobiles, air and semitrailers. – Or to really environmentally friendly infrastructure for that matter – like comprehensive and continuous bike roads.

The health effect of this is well documented: From being a country with a healthy and active population – indulging in all kinds of outdoor activities as an everyday way of living - we now see a clear trend towards increased inactivity, especially among the young. Growing obesity is becoming a national health problem – something we used to think was only an American or German issue.

TRANSPORTATION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL RHETORIC:

Before I go on I want to call attention to the fact that – in itself – no motorized modes of transportation can be called "environmentally friendly", despite the rhetoric to the contrary. The expected, increasing demand – and thus the perceived need – for such modes of transportation constitute an even greater burden on the environment. Automobile and air emissions are used to assess the degree of "eco-friendliness". (This became stunningly apparent when Mercedes Benz a couple of years ago ran a television commercial saying bluntly that "there's no such thing as an environmentally friendly automobile" – the ad was short lived, despite being the only really true message I've ever seen on commercial television).

And this is not the only perspective when we try to grasp the serious situation the World is in with regard to pollution, energy consumption and carbon footprint. In urban centers increased automobile traffic is in itself an environmental problem: there's literally not enough room to let every person continue to drive his own car to work or to the nearby supermarket, regardless of how "environmentally friendly" the cars might be. Also the roads needed for the increased number of motorists are an environmental problem as they occupy more and more land, create sizeable barriers in cities and the countryside, destroying local environments and recreational areas and preventing the population access to them.

In addition: added congestion is in itself a safety problem: a cyclist or pedestrian will find little comfort in being hit by a car with little or no detrimental emissions. Even electric cars – as many seen as the future of motorized traffic will in Norway only be possible by starting coal burning power plants in Denmark for the production of more electricity. – Did we ask the Danes how they feel about dumping the pollution in their lap?

THE TOOLBOX:

The main challenge today and in the foreseeable future is, therefore, not to play these games with superficial symbolic politics to please the automobile industry and miniscule measures that will not deter the politicians their chances of reelection. It seems to me that politicians and decision makers lack a viable, operative, functional toolbox – an overall, comprehensive and main framework that they and the population can understand and relate to – to a degree where it's also accepted.

I have a modest example here:

1. **We need to reduce the absolute – not only the *increased* – need for transportation, both locally, regionally and globally,**
2. **We need to move – *shift* – modes of transportation away from environmentally damaging to less environmentally damaging modes of transportation.**

This will be the toolbox for actions and measures to deal with the gigantic challenges the world is facing – the reference with which all actions are measured and evaluated.

This can only be achieved if also the least environmentally damaging alternatives at the same time are the most attractive for most people. This might appear to be so obvious and thus is easily taken for granted, but today this is definitely not the case. Needless to say, motorized transportation is by most people seen as a common good, and a measure of how many view and rate "quality of life". With increased welfare and higher incomes we travel more, transport ourselves and goods and products to a degree which the world has never seen before.

And we do this because we can afford to: the cost of motorized transportation has decreased dramatically compared with only a few years ago. Naturally low airfares induce increased travel. Low prices on energy encourage increased demand for goods and services and are seen as something preferable. A random increase in the price on energy will by most be seen as an unfriendly reduction in – an infringement of – how people feel everyday life to be.

This can be observed every morning and afternoon on major roads leading in and out of the big cities in Norway: The roads are packed with cars, trucks, and semitrailers; all jammed in endless and slow moving lines, and the motorists are willing to pay this price. Strangely enough this situation is conceived as preferable to alternative modes of transportation, partly because the alternatives are thought of as being less attractive, i.e. the infrastructure may not be good enough, the convenience factor underestimated, the price is considered to be too high. It appears to be quite obvious that there are hidden costs somewhere in this picture and that the real costs of motorized transportation are not part of the equation when measuring "convenience" or "quality of life".

TRANSPORTATION AND EXTERNALITIES:

In this context and with the examples that I've mentioned it's clear to me that all motorized modes of transportation are subsidized (or under priced), both relatively and absolutely. Air traffic over long distances is obviously subsidized, air travel over medium long distances is subsidized relative to less environmentally damaging modes of transportation (such as rail and bus), and the use of automobiles is subsidized relative to all other motorized modes of transportation. This means that the prices do not reflect the real and total cost of the environmental damage caused by the specific mode of transportation.

This view is supported by a report from the International Center for Technology Assessment: "The Real Price of Gasoline" (1998), giving us a hint about the magnitudes we're facing. The report divides the external costs of gasoline usage into five primary areas:

(1) Tax Subsidization of the Oil Industry; (2) Government Program Subsidies; (3) Protection Costs Involved in Oil Shipment and Motor Vehicle Services; (4) Environmental, Health, and Social Costs of Gasoline Usage; and (5) Other Important Externalities of Motor Vehicle Use.

The authors indicate a real gas price of between 6 and 15 dollars per gallon to reflect the externalities (in 1998 Americans paid just a bit more than $1 per gallon). The result of the externalization of such a large portion of the real price of gasoline is that consumers have no idea how much fueling their cars actually costs them. When the price of gasoline is so drastically underestimated in the minds of drivers, it becomes difficult if not impossible to convince them to change their driving habits, accept alternative modes of transportation, or consider progressive residential and urban development strategies. The authors go on to suggest certain measures which would mean that consumers will see the entire cost of burning gasoline reflected in the price they pay at the pump. Drivers faced with the cost of their gasoline usage up front may have a more difficult time ignoring the harmful effects that their addiction to automobiles and the internal combustion engine have on national security, the environment, their health, and their quality of life.

What the real costs of air travel will be in such a model is unclear, but Ryan Air's frequent offers of € 10 for trips within Europe will surely be something of the past. And perhaps this will change the focus on alternative modes of transportation – or the need for motorized transportation all together.

Alternatives to Motorized Transportation:

While on the subject of alternative modes of transportation - where does the bicycle enter the picture?

- **The bicycle is the only mode of transportation which actively contributes to better health.**
- **The bicycle is the only mode of transportation which is not a burden on the environment, and**
- **The bicycle is the only mode of transportation which most effectively can improve access in and around urban centers.**

Naturally the bicycle cannot replace air and rail traffic across continents and countries. But most of the transportation activities do not take place over such long distances. Incredibly enough: about 50% of all automobile trips are less than 5 km! Increased use of the bicycle is therefore a very current and relevant solution to the transportation and environmental challenges the politicians face and tell us they wish to find a solution to. It is obvious that much of – perhaps most of! – the local automobile use can be replaced by the bicycle (or simply walking). And herein we find the biggest potential to reduce the use of automobiles and the need for developing public transportation in areas with little available land.

One obstacle is that in Norway – and other countries - the bicycle is still viewed as *recreation*, not as a real and equal *mode of transportation*. If politicians and planners would accept the proper role of the bicycle in the total transportation picture, one would plan for and integrate roads for bicycling together with other roads, and thus establish a bicycle infrastructure good enough so that more people actually would find cycling preferable to other modes of transportation. Today many feel that when on a bicycle, they do so at the risk of their life, and this price is – understandably! – unacceptable.

Another obstacle is that – when faced with issues of transportation – politicians and decision makers are eager to talk warmly about bicycling – to and with other cyclists. But in all other contexts of transportation the solutions are found elsewhere, and the focus on cycling is no longer there. Our Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, is a prime (sic!) example, showing up on his bike, wearing a helmet, being the first to cycle down a newly built dedicated bike bridge and saying a few heartwarming words about cycling – while carrying on business as usual a few minutes later. During his administration the latest figures show that the modal split of cycling has decreased from 5 to 4%, despite the political rhetoric, some new bike specific infrastructure and a National Transportation Plan goal of increasing the share to 8% within 2019. Obviously we need to force the politicians' attention on cycling as a mode of transportation in all contexts of transportation planning and budgeting – all the time.

But how to achieve this?

Tools for an Environmental and Urban Sanity:

A toolbox is nothing without any tools to put into it, readily available to be used by politicians, planners and decision makers.

I suggest the following:

- **All modes of transportation should be subject to environmental assessment and all external costs should be exposed;**
- **All modes of transportation should be priced based on their real costs to society, including environmental damage and extrapolated health costs;**
- **The least environmentally damaging and energy demanding modes of transportation should be favored, clearly and consistently in all areas of planning and decision making;**
- **Ambitious goals and budgeting for dramatically increased bicycle use as part of the total traffic in and around urban centers should be established. These goals should act as guidelines for all transportation planning and in the distribution of the investments in infrastructure.**

This presentation will not attempt to assess how this can be implemented or the ramifications of such a model. However, for many years scientists have been working on and developing models for "cradle to grave" energy assessment of, for example, buildings and building materials, and economists have done similar research into externalities. So the tools are already available, also for assessing the consequences. It's important to note that I suggest to view this model as part of the price structure, as a real and extra cost of motorized transportation, not as another tax. Al Gore's solution was to rework the tax structure by shifting the focus away from taxing income and property to taxing environmental damage – intriguing enough – on the surface. But such a model will not necessarily touch the general tax level and thus reduce the absolute level of consumption in general, and transportation in particular. Also it'll bring environmental solutions into discredit simply by calling it a tax – who needs another tax?

By focusing on internalizing the external costs – the real costs – one can maintain existing tax structures and levels – and quarrel about them at election times, while keeping focus on the issues at hand and their solutions: reducing the absolute level of transportation and shifting the structure to less environmentally damaging modes by letting the prices of transportation reflect their real costs.

Obviously this is a comprehensive model on the macro level and will not give all the necessary answers. It'll be necessary to implement other measures on the micro level, such as toll rings or more specific congestion charges as implemented in Stockholm, or greatly reducing inner city and/or on street parking or speed calming measures – the tool box is big and should be filled with several tools that will work to achieve the tool box objectives.

In my country we have a tradition for discussing the conceived consequences of proposed ideas before sufficiently analyzing their internal value and contribution to a specific issue, often concluding up front with the notion that "this isn't possible – or it won't work" before the ideas are found inherently bad and thus should be rejected – or found interesting in their own right and worth further investigation. I realize that my proposed toolbox and the suggested tools will have ramifications on world economies, both locally, nationally and globally if carried out.

I also believe that the environmental challenges we all face require stern measures, bold stands and statesmanship. Will we be willing to pay the price without having an adequately explained model, an accepted tool box and understandable tools?

Will my proposed tool box and suggested tools be part of the answer to the challenges of today and the future – for an environmental and urban sanity?