

[No war on motorists? Tell that to the world outside Central London](#) [1]

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Left wing think tank wants higher taxes? is a bit of a 'dog bites man' story, but the IPPR's call of higher fuel duty was spiced up by some eye-catching facts about the costs of getting about. Contrary to popular perception, they found that the price of motoring has fallen slightly in real terms in the last ten years. Ipso facto, they conclude, [the 'war on motorists' is a myth](#) [3]. 'Compared to users of public transport,' says the think tank's associate director, Will Straw, ['there is no war on motorists](#) [4].'

This rather depends on how you define a war and who you think is the aggressor. A [breakdown of the figures](#) [5] (see graph below) reveals that bus and train passengers have seen fares increase well above the rate of inflation since 1987, but the costs of taxing, insuring and fueling a car have gone up by even more. If average motoring costs have not risen in real terms, it is thanks to the impressive decline in the cost of buying a vehicle which has consistently beaten inflation and is now lower in both real terms and 'quite remarkably' also lower in nominal terms (as of 2010). Globalisation, a genuinely competitive free market and a relative lack of state interference have reduced prices and brought some rare good cheer to drivers.

The same cannot be said of the other costs shown, all of which are dictated by the state (in the case of fuel duty and car tax), or by cartels (OPEC), or by the half-state/half-cartel hybrid of the public transport industry. Fuel and car taxes have gone through the roof by any standard, and while motorists could be forgiven for viewing cheaper cars as a small mercy to take their minds off the looting, the IPPR sees it as justification for taking a little more.

There is no doubt that the pockets of bus and rail passengers have also been systematically picked over the past 25 years, but as high as the prices of bus and train tickets are, they do not represent the true cost of public transport. Local public transport was subsidised by the taxpayer to the tune of almost £5 billion in

2010/11, and close to £8 billion was taken from the public purse to spend on the railways (IPPR, p. 14). No government has yet come to terms with the fundamental problem that public transport is inherently expensive and can only be sustained by forcing those who don't use it to cough up while making their customers pay twice.

The IPPR helpfully points out that motorists can reduce their expenditure by driving less. As a piece of advice, this is rather like telling commuters to save money by not travelling at peak times; technically true so long as one ignores the essential nature of the journey. They appear to be of the belief that motoring is still the preserve of wealthy Mr Toads, pootling around for fun on a Sunday afternoon, whereas private cars are by some distance the nation's primary mode of transport.

This metropolitan bias is in evidence when the report notes that 25 per cent of the population do not have access to a car. The IPPR describes this figure as 'surprisingly low'. Out here in The Provinces, we might regard it as surprisingly high. A look at the numbers reveals just how marginal public transport is to much of the population outside central London. Nationally, the average household spends £21.60 a week on petrol, diesel and motor oils, but only £2.80 a week on rail and tube fares. The average household spends more on spare parts and accessories for their cars or vans (£1.80) than they do on bus and coach tickets (£1.50). To put it still more starkly, [we spend more money on lease cars than we do on bus journeys](#) [6]. As should be obvious, this is not because bus and train fares are especially cheap, but because the average household is considerably less likely to buy them than they are to fill up their tank. (If all these figures seem low, it is because many people use only public OR private transport, and some may not use either very much.)

For the majority of the population who rely on their cars to get about, the miracle of consumer capitalism has alleviated the pain of escalating taxes by providing cheaper vehicles, but it strains credibility to suggest that they enjoy favoured status in government policy. Whether one looks at fuel tax, car tax, bus fares or train tickets, no one escapes from the squeeze. I would be tempted to say that war is being waged on us all were it not for the fact that the cost of motoring is kept artificially high while the cost of public transport is kept artificially low thanks to the way it is subsidised by everyone?motorist, cyclist and pedestrian?whether we like it or not.

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