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Transport for whom? [1]

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In this month's Reason Magazine (whose parent, the Reason Foundation, is now home to our own Tom Clougherty [3]), Tim Cavanaugh writes that rail screws the poor [4]:

> *Since 2009 the MTA has added eight miles of train service, at a capital cost of about $2 billion. These new trains, the Expo Line and an extension of the east-county Gold Line, carry a total of about 39,000 people a day.*
>
> *In the meantime, the cash-strapped authority radically reduced bus service twice: It cut bus lines by 4 percent in 2010 and 12 percent in 2011. These cuts were made even though buses move more than four times as many Angelenos as trains do. In 2009 MTA buses carried about 1.2 million riders a day. Multiplying that by 16 percent, we can estimate more than 180,000 people had their service canceled while fewer than 40,000 had service introduced.*
>
> *Not surprisingly, the result is that fewer people are using mass transit overall in Los Angeles than in 2009 (about 5 percent fewer, according to MTA statistics).This is a continuation of a long-term trend. Since the MTA began rail construction in 1985, more than 80 miles of railroads have been built, but mass transit ridership as a percentage of county population is lower than it was in 1985....*
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> *Bus riders are overwhelmingly poor and working class. As a regular rider I can attest that often the only English spoken on an L.A. bus is the robotic voice that announces upcoming stops Bus riders are overwhelmingly poor and working class. As a regular rider I can attest that often the only English spoken on an L.A. bus is the robotic voice that announces upcoming stops.*

This rings some bells here in London, where the government is cutting back on bus funding [5] while driving £100m into suburban rail [6] and a whopping £16bn into Crossrail (not to mention the money-sink that is HS2, though that may be being kicked into the long grass). While Crossrail will serve the East as well as the West, it's hard not to wonder if we're going to see exactly the same thing here as happened in L.A..

This may be unsurprising ? the 'donut voters' in London's suburbs are the key swing votes in London's elections, and bus services are less useful for them than train lines into the capital. There's not much to say, in this case. Politics is politics. But maybe that's the point: government, especially local government, doesn't always act with the needs of the bottom in mind. Votes and politicians' pride can matter, and it's a risky endeavour to entrust the interests of the bottom to the whims of the voting majority, who may simply be ignorant of the importance of, say, bus routes instead of suburban rail.

The UK's experience with bus deregulation has, so far, been mixed, but certainly not a failure. If the government is going to follow L.A.'s lead, the best alternative might be to take these decisions out of the hands of government altogether, and try to create an environment where it's possible for private firms to compete and try to offer something for everyone.

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