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Final

**Politics of and policies for future urban transport
Introduction to 3rd FUT conference, Göteborg, April 2-5**

Dear friends and colleagues,

Good morning everyone!

Let me start with a remark: “in theory there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice there is”. This, I believe, is especially true for urban transport, which is not only complicated but also complex.

This complexity can be also captured in the distinction between two other phrases: Politics Of Urban Transport and Policies For Urban Transport. The key words are the prepositions. Politics Of ... and Policies For....

These prepositions indicate that “politics of urban transport” is about description while “policies for urban transport” is about prescription.

Policies are or should be about best practices. Policies can be taught. Policies can be turned into textbooks, PhD’s, papers, journals, management seminars, consultancies and so on. Somewhat flippantly, policies are commodified thinking within set boxes. One excellent summary of policies for urban transport is the World Bank report “Cities on the Move”. This report illustrates that we know quite a lot – except how to turn knowledge into practice.

So the politics of urban transport enters through the back door, so to speak. As the remaining, unexplained factor. Politics relates to policies much the same way as leadership relates to management. Peter Drucker, the man who invented the theory of management and this without ever taking a course in management, once said that while management is about doing things the right way leadership is about doing the right things.

The same thing goes for politics and policy. Policy is about doing things the right way and politics is about doing the right things.

From this difference follows another difference which has to do with the nature of academic knowledge. Politics cannot be taught. It can, however, be learnt.

The best books about leadership in general and politics in particular are, in my view, biographies. Not autobiographies but scholarly written biographies where paths taken are discussed against paths not taken. The counterfactual is always there, the way it is in real life just as the present becomes the past.

We sorely lack good biographies of mayors in particular and urban leadership in general. Perhaps one of the most important Centres of Excellence that the Volvo Research Foundation could establish would be a centre of Excellence for the study of political leadership in urban transport.

I mentioned a very good summary of what is known about the policies for urban transport – the World Bank study “Cities on the Move”. Let me mention another book that has made a deep impression on me: Bent Flyvbjerg’s “making social science matter”. Flyvbjerg’s interest

is in power. Who has it, uses it and for what purpose. His field of study is urban design and urban transport.

A third book which also made an impression on me was the second book written by a person who by now has written three books. The first is about the emerging cultural map of the US and Canada. The third book is about what it means to be human, given advances in genetics, robotics, nanotechnologies and the like.

You can gather from this that Joel Garreau, the author of this the third one of my favourite books, has an eclectic mind. He looks at things from the outside. This book is called *Edge City* and describes how the urban landscape – well, sort of - emerges. It does not develop in any coherent or planned sense. It emerges out of something that perhaps could be called an ecology of power. Some of the power centres are private, others are public. Each centre has its own policy, some of which are grounded in academic disciplines such as transport planning, sewage water systems, road construction, real estate development, modal split models, land use planning, garden architecture or whatever. Each centre is a professional box, defined by best practices. The urban landscape emerges as every box strives to achieve its own best practice against what all the other boxes are trying to achieve according to their best practices. The urban landscape that emerges is the evolving sum total of individual boxes adapting to the best practices of each other. Let us look on centres of power – and thus also professions – as species in a Darwinian sense. That centre of power shapes the landscape that is the most adept at adapting to the adaptations that all the other centres are pursuing. In some ecologies the land developers are the fittest. In other ecologies the construction companies or the Chambers of Commerce. And in some, perhaps, the elected leaders.

Three books, three insights. The World Bank study on Cities on the Move, Bent Flyvbjerg's book "making social science matter", and Joel Garreau's book Edge City. And a big hole in the middle: no scholar biographies of mayors and urban leadership.

Let me leave the descriptive and turn to the prescriptive. Well, at least mildly prescriptive. I am going to turn to the social group which I think needs to be understood by, catered for and targeted by urban leaders - and thus also policy analysts.

This group is the urban middle class. I will come back to why.

First, some comments on sustainable urban transport.

We all agree that urban transport should be a means to an end – sustainable cities. Now, cities do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in relations to each other and in relation to what in German is called the Hinterland.

Cities have to be competitive. We know fairly well what this means: cities have to be attractive to people and businesses from other cities and they have to be attractive to their own population. The transport system has to add to this competitiveness.

The transport system should be evaluated according to three criteria:

- Economic efficiency
- Social inclusiveness
- Environment quality.

The key question is the extent to which these criteria are mutually supportive or not.

The traditional economic text book would probably argue that there is no such thing as a free lunch, and therefore social inclusion has to be bought at the cost of economic efficiency. And perhaps this is true inside the box of economics.

I am going to argue, however, that the three criteria are not that exclusive and that the extent to which they are mutually supportive in fact is an important area for academic studies. Here, I see a great need for prescriptive policy studies based on clear sets of values.

Take an example outside the transport field: sewage treatment. All cities need sewage treatment, and the quality of sewage treatment is probably as good an indicator of the quality of urban governance and competitiveness as any other indicator. It is a commonly accepted fact of urban health and epidemiology that sewage systems have to be inclusive. Even if, in theory, the very rich could buy their own local systems there is a public health need and thus, in competitive cities, a policy for ensuring that all inhabitants are linked to sewage systems. Thus the sewage system – and the professions who determine what the best practice is – is an inclusive system. Social inclusiveness, environment quality and economic efficiency go hand in hand.

My next example is primary education. Civilized people agree that primary education should be freely available to every child, regardless of the income of their parents. I do not have to make the case for the relationship between education and economic efficiency – it is a widely studied area in development economics. Let me just make one comment. Many years ago I

read an article about a French sociologist, Emmanuel Todd, who stated that the single best predictor for economic development in the late 19th century in Europe was the degree of literacy in the late 18th century. Inferior education casts long shadows.

My key argument is another one. The quality of the primary education for the poor depends on the stake of the middle classes in the system. All benefit from a universal education system. If it is divided according to class, the middle class will look out for itself. An inclusive education system with high enough quality is to the benefit of all and, in all likelihood, economically much more efficient. An inclusive education system adds to competitiveness. This is the theory of the universal welfare system developed by Beveridge and others after the war. The First World War brought universal franchise to Europe and the Second World War brought the universal welfare state.

Now to urban transport.

My argument is that an urban transport system should be inclusive and that all benefit from this. And in large cities the public transport system has to be good enough to win the political support of the middle class.

A good public transport system at affordable and thus partially subsidised prices is necessary for all those that cannot afford a private car. A good public transport system gives people with low incomes access to large labour markets and thus possibilities to increase their income. Such a transport system is also of value for those of us with higher income, dependent as we are on services provided by people with lower incomes than we ourselves have. How should all these persons be able to serve us in our restaurants, cafés, hospitals, dry cleaners, day care

centres, homes for our elderly parents (and for us as well) without a good public transport system? This, I suggest, should be a fruitful area of policy studies and thus of commodified consultancy reports.

All this suggest that a good public transport system will require strong political leadership exerted over years and decades. Therefore a clear majority of the urban population has to have a stake in the system.

Which brings us back to the middle class. The middle class here consists of all those that can afford cars and that make up a substantial part of the taxation base – and thus of the financial base for the subsidies of the public transport system.

We do not have to bother with the upper classes or the very rich. By definition they are not numerable enough to create grid-lock in the streets. But the middle class is. If the middle class decides to use their cars daily the quality of everything deteriorates. The public transport will be under-funded, unsafe, of low quality, irregular and shut out those without cars from a larger labour market. The transport system and thus the city will not be inclusive but exclusive.

Thus the role of urban leadership. The quality of this leadership is defined by the capacity to identify an adequately funded public transport system with the enlightened self interest of the middle classes.

There is, of course, any number of interesting case studies here. Take Stockholm and Göteborg. The former is a larger city and has a much higher share of public transport. There

are, I believe, two reasons. First, the public transport system was established before the middle class bought cars. Second, the geography is such that a large expansion of roads would affect also the areas where the middle class lives.

I believe that the main reason why European cities have reasonably good public transport systems is exactly this – the city centres and the public transport system were established long before those 1950's when the middle class at last could afford to buy cars.

So, looking towards the future of urban transport and the possibility of a sustainable transport system I would focus on one specific and one generic aspect:.

- First, the path dependency of urban transport. Technologies such as shoes, bicycles, cars, buses, metros and railways are generic. The mixes are not. Perhaps there is a European path, with some outliers in older cities in North America. And then there is a uniquely North American path, with outliers in Australia. There appears to be a Latin American path and possibly also at least three different Asian paths: a Chinese one, an Indian one and a south-east Asian one. And perhaps a Korean-Japanese one. But why is this so? I suggest a deeper analysis of leadership, jurisdiction and the role of the middle class might help to give us some understanding of path dependency.
- Second, the generic solution to it all. There is only one way forward – making the middle classes accept that congestion charges are in their own enlightened self-interest. The generic technology is there. We are waiting for the specifics – for leadership.

So the next few months will be rather important. If the Stockholm referendum on the congestion charges on the third Sunday this September is affirmative, a major breakthrough will have been achieved. If the congestion charges are dismissed, some ten years will have been lost. So much for leadership.

Thank you for your attention