

Cycling in the House

Lord Berkeley, secretary to the All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group, made the journey to Oxford to speak to Cyclox, the city's cycle campaign group, about parliamentarians' attitudes to cycle provision and cycle promotion. Jonathan Ives reports.

Lord Berkeley had spent the day in London at a conference, Love London Go Dutch, that was exploring the Dutch model of cycling provision and the potential application of this Dutch approach to London. Explaining that this conference had been the focal point of a week of cycling policy debate in London, Berkeley confessed that he was still shaking his head at having being told that he was not able to ride his bike to get to it. According to the officer on duty in Dean's Yard, it was obvious that all the available room on the road had been taken up by cars and that someone on a bike would have to get off and walk.

Certain police officers aside, Berkeley said that there was evidence that the UK was beginning to learn from the Dutch experience of promoting and enabling cycling as an essential element of transport policy. There is government money for investment in cycling but a lot of local authorities and organisations find that they cannot spend it because other things are in the way, often as a result of the arcane and highly complex world of road design. The suggestion that 2% of the highways budget should be spent on cycling is finding increasing support and transport minister Norman Baker, who includes cycling within his brief and was speaking at the Love London Go Dutch conference, is a proponent of cycling promotion.

Lord Berkeley spoke warmly of Norman Baker's work, describing him as "the conscience of the Department of Transport", but he was less convinced of the potential for other government policies to deliver effective change for cycle-friendly transport. Localism, a major strand of government policy, does not work and the new planning regulations will not work, Berkeley observed. The fight between the prime minister and the mayor of London for the primacy of the Tory party is bringing an increase in spending on cycling as Cameron tries to outdo Johnson on popular initiatives but this is largely confined to London. However, there is hope that such enthusiasm for two wheels in the face of the traditionally all-powerful four-wheeled lobby will spread.

The All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group is certainly trying to do its bit, counting some 120 MPs as members. The group's recent work has included a campaign – unnecessarily protracted, in Berkeley's view – to give bikes equal status to cars in the House of Lords car park but regular initiatives, such as the annual parliamentary bike ride and trips to view examples of good practice, serve to generate publicity for cycling and encourage more parliamentarians to become interested. The group holds monthly meetings, which include attendees from within and outwith parliament, and has recently had a discussion with the Danish ambassador on the concept of shared space.

One area of transport policy that provokes interest and frustration in equal measure is the interface between cycling and rail travel. The All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group is a supporter of the annual Cycle Rail Award competition, organised by the Association of Train Operating Companies, and all but one of the train operating companies now enter the competition. Berkeley was confident that such integrated travel concepts will be among the themes of an inquiry into cycling that the all-party group is holding soon. Based on the model of a select committee inquiry, this cycling inquiry will call for evidence in November, interview interested parties and draw up a report to government that will recommend action.

There are clearly a range of measures that are necessary and desirable to encourage people to take up their bikes as an everyday mode of transport, Berkeley suggested. The inquiry will explore these but they are likely to include safety issues, segregation of traffic and the concentration of cycle provision on

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towns and cities. The Department of Health is coming to the conclusion that exercise is one of the keys to combating obesity – the UK is second in the world obesity league table behind the USA – but can the Department of Transport and the Department of Health work together? If they can, Berkeley said, we could really get somewhere.

The key, he suggested, is to keep the profile of cycling as high as possible. There has been positive growth recently, both in profile and bike use, and some useful allies in the campaign to promote cycling. The Times campaign on cycle safety has been positive and even the City of London, the worst of London local authorities in terms of cycle provision and facilities, is facing pressure from some very senior figures in the banking community who cycle to work and want their journeys made easier and safer. The all-party group's inquiry, which will be titled Get Britain Cycling, will attempt to build on all such developments to devise a strategy for local and central government for the next three or four years.

Questions from the floor demonstrated the range of issues affecting the promotion of cycling as transport but also the enthusiasm and knowledge of those keen to be part of what could be a transport revolution if the UK is able to go Dutch.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of The Leisure Review and a member of Cyclox.

Details of the All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group inquiry can be found at allpartycycling.org

Details of the Love London Go Dutch conference at <http://lcc.org.uk>

Details of Cyclox at www.cyclox.org/

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