

A 4x4 too far?
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The latest (and possibly last) budget from Gordon Brown was much-spun in advance as a budget for the environment, a time when at last we are rich enough to consider the future of the planet rather than our collective bank balance. Central to this message was the stance taken with respect to 4x4 vehicles, or at least to be accurate with respect to offering greater differentiation between those vehicles with high fuel consumption and those with lower fuel consumption by adjusting the Vehicle Excise Duty bands. OK, for most committed environmentalists this was not so much a budget for the environment as one of those pastel shades popular in the early 1990s: white with a hint of lime, maybe. Still, it did serve to reignite the 4x4 debate in the media.

4x4s. The Marmite™ of the automotive world. These cars need all that power and four-wheel traction just to surmount the piles of bile and loathing strewn in their way, they need the blacked-out glass just to protect the occupants from the otherwise withering looks of contempt.

The vehicle manufacturers and their representatives complain that this is not a debate conducted on rational terms, or that people are responding emotionally. Well, welcome to the world! It somehow escapes attention that cars have been sold on the basis of irrationality and emotion for generations (it's called brand marketing). Maybe the 'dream of the open road' has indeed been replaced by the 'dream of the open countryside', but either way it has always been a dream. In any case, it is hard to escape the linkages to class, wealth and power, not to mention the sheer psychological intimidation of the things, when debating 4x4s. The styling and design of these cars that says 'rugged' and 'resilient' to the brand managers, is precisely the styling and design that says 'scary' and 'aggressive' to so many people. Perhaps most profoundly, it is about the compromise between self and society that has long been the fault-line along which British politics suffers repeated seismic shocks. To many critics, those that own and drive 4x4s are simply selfish, putting short-term personal desires over and above the interests of the people with whom they share the world, and of course the environmental health of the world itself. To those that own and drive 4x4s, the critics are simply intruding where they have no right to go, and are motivated by envy as much as self-righteous social concern. And perhaps even many of those most vocal in their complaints against 4x4s, are so because it is a way of assuaging their own guilt: I may drive a car, but at least it isn't one of those behemoths.

Sometimes of course, symbols of things are more important than things themselves. Or, to put it another way, even if the critique of 4x4s is flawed in various ways the underlying points remain valid: cars consume fuel, pollute our atmosphere, contribute to global warming, and are a major source of death and injury – especially to people not inside a car at all. The 4x4 is in this sense a useful focus point, or the medium through which wider debates are channelled. Populist discourse can be negligent of rational science or factual grounding, but that does not mean it is simply wrong as a result. The industry has been quick to point out that the 4x4 is a meaningless category, with some merit, and to say that many cars fall into the top rated band for CO2 tax following the recent budget. This is fine, except that the message it puts out is that

‘yes 4x4s are bad...but so too are all these normal cars.’ One could equally address similar concerns to sports cars (or indeed combine both and target the Porsche Cayenne), or perhaps motor sports. It is the growth in sales and prevalence on our streets that has prompted this specific concern with 4x4s.

Equally, the relationship between science and public policy is often tenuous to say the least. But, those of the receiving end of such policy would do well to be cautious in their calls for ‘science-lead policy’. This has been a feature of the policy scene in Europe over recent years, with in particular industry arguing that all policy interventions (aka ‘red tape’) should be justified against scientific and cost or competition grounds. This is all very well, and leads to nice cosy compromises like the voluntary agreement to limit average new car CO₂ emissions to 140 g/km by 2008 – but what if the science tells us (as it seems to) that global warming is spiralling out of control, that we are not meeting even the modest targets for CO₂ reduction set out in Kyoto, and that unless decisive action is taken now then for all intents and purposes the process of rapid climate change will become irreversible?

Despite the lack of clarity over what constitutes a 4x4, and the inadequacy of the data required to ‘prove’ absolutely the extent to which this class of vehicles is comparatively heavy, dangerous, fuel consuming, space-consuming, and generally inappropriate for urban conditions, it is still hard to deny that these vehicles are of growing concern. All the available evidence (mostly but not entirely from the US) shows this class of vehicle to be a particular safety hazard, for all sorts of very obvious reasons. In a recent Greenpeace report on 4x4s, a wide body of evidence was accumulated to underline just how inefficient, expensive, and threatening these vehicles are – with a particular focus on Land Rover. Is it fair to pick out Land Rover? Should Greenpeace be attacking one of the few remaining domestic manufacturers of cars just because it is a specialist in this area? After all, some of the very largest 4x4s are made by other companies: Toyota, Mitsubishi, Nissan, General Motors, and Ford all spring to mind – and it could be argued that in various respects the Land Rover models are rather less glaringly anti-social or inefficient than these competitors. Well, maybe it is fair, maybe not. The fact remains that Land Rover have the biggest market share in the class in the UK, and are therefore somewhat synonymous with the 4x4 concept in the mind of the public. Campaigns often need an overt focus, something tangible, or something that is recognisable and embodies or encapsulates the essence of the issue. Land Rover meets those requirements.

Where does the debate go from here? Already, Land Rover has unveiled at a recent motor show a collection of technologies that they consider would amount to a significant reduction in the environmental burden imposed by their vehicles. This is all well and good, but the following observations still apply:

- The technologies are not on production cars, at least on Land Rover production cars. Why not? It is not as if the issue of fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions is new.
- Fuel economy may be reduced from ‘awful’ to just ‘bad’, but it hardly amounts to a revolution.
- Put another way, the same set of technologies implemented on a standard passenger car would mean that the gap in performance between the Land Rover 4x4s and other cars would still be as large.

- Few of the measures have much contribution to make with respect to safety, particularly the safety of other road users outside the vehicle.
- Every car sold is a rolling legacy, it will remain in use for a great many years (and in fact Land Rovers remain in use well above the average of about 13 years), and so makes a contribution to global warming for many years also.

In reality, this is not just about Land Rover. It is not even just about 4x4 cars. It is about the need for more urgent action in all sorts of policy and strategy areas. Just prior to this C&A piece being written, the government was busy admitting that the UK will not meet the targets set under the original Kyoto agreement. As pragmatic politicians they are busy re-writing the targets. As a society, as a collective of institutions from academia to government to corporations, we appear unable to construct solutions to the problems we face that successfully combine both massive technological progress with acceptable social cost and corporate profitability. The 4x4 debate is precisely that issue, albeit in microcosm.