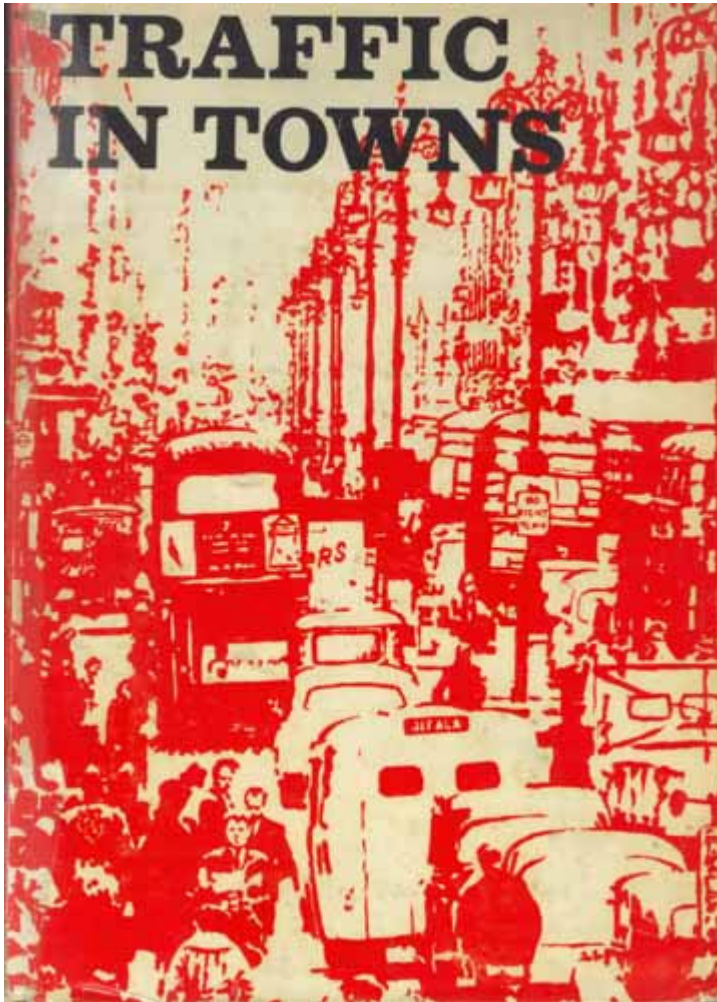


“Traffic in Towns” revisited
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Summary of a presentation given to the Transport Panel of the Sydney Division of Engineers Australia on Feb 5 2008.

When I first began operating in Sydney, twenty-odd years ago, I was struck by the number of senior traffic engineers who, when giving public talks (like this one), acknowledged the formative influence of “The Buchanan Report”, aka “Traffic in Towns” (1963) on their careers and thinking.

Now, of course, most of those experienced engineers are retired and the current generation of professionals were largely trained in a post-Buchanan era, when many of the opinions he voiced for the first time had entered the mainstream of thinking..My background - I worked for Colin Buchanan & Partners for over twenty years, the first fifteen of them in UK, and I was sent by them to Australia as the inaugural manager of Sinclair Knight Buchanan, a transport planning joint venture. I was a public transport

specialist when I came to Sydney, where I quickly realised that there was no money to be made at it and it was necessary to broaden my horizons a bit.

It is worth revisiting “Traffic in Towns”, to see which ideas are now part of conventional wisdom in Australia, which are things that still need to be done, and which are replaced by more up-to-date thinking, being a product of the time and place of the report (the UK, 45 years ago). Despite a long association with Buchanans, I did not have my own copy of “Traffic in Towns” before I came to Australia, where I picked one up in a secondhand bookshop after it had been a casualty of a local library clear-out. On reading it with part-Australian eyes, its continued relevance seemed obvious.

Colin Buchanan, who died in 2001 at the age of 94, had a remarkable career. He started out as an Assistant Engineer at a Divisional office of the Ministry of Transport, where his interest in driver behaviour led to the publication of what was, in effect, the first advanced driving manual. The Second World War then intervened, with Buchanan seeing service in Africa as an engineer. After the war the British set up a Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and he joined it. Failing to find a niche in the new Ministry (he blotted his copybook in the 1950’s by becoming the branch chairman of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants, the civil service union. This was not a good career move in a paternalistic age), he was sin-binned at the MTCP by being put into the Inspectorate, which in those days dealt with slum clearance inquiries behind closed doors. He later graduated to proper Planning Inquiries, with public scrutiny of his reasoning.

He continued to pursue his interest in the motor car, however, and the then Minister of Transport, Ernest Marples, set up a small team headed by Buchanan to report on Traffic in Towns. At the time the prevailing attitude was to encourage it. Traffic in Towns was a most unofficial-looking official publication, well written and profusely illustrated, and it proved a best-seller for HMSO.

After producing a hit, Buchanan and his team were in some demand for the provision of advice and this is the origin of the consulting practice that bears his name, Colin Buchanan and Partners (CBP). The “Partners” had greater longevity as consultants than their leader: he retired from consulting in 1971. I joined CBP’s practice in 1973, moving on in 1993. By then Colin Buchanan had turned into an academic – at first at Imperial College; London (where he became known to CBP as “the Prof”), and then at SAUS – the School for Advanced Urban Studies – at Bristol University, where he ended his career.

I will never forget the comment made by a Dutchman to me when I was assigned to my first overseas posting by CBP. “We thought that by hiring Colin Buchanan & Partners we’d get Sir Colin Buchanan”, he said, “but instead we got *you*.”

Traffic in Towns was divided into five chapters, with a detailed technical appendix. After an initial and uncontroversial introduction, the first, contextual, chapter raised a number of issues of use of the internal combustion engine. This covered the sheer versatility of the motor vehicle, the door-to-door access provided by urban road freight, traffic NOT

in towns (bear in mind that there were far more towns in the UK than in Australia), safety issues (here Australia differs from UK, with rural areas accounting for a higher percentage of vehicle user fatalities than urban – though the bulk of accidents featuring pedestrians and cyclists are still in urban areas), environmental impacts (largely visual in 1963 - climate change and energy challenges were not perceived then), the future of the motor car (there is no shortage of visionaries inventing better ways of moving people – although the 1960's examples may look quaint, there are equivalents now), land use issues and finally the question of how much change we could contemplate (ambition). Each of these was accompanied by appropriate photographs and most of the pictures apply in Australia today. I think parking is under control here at a local authority level (though not at a metropolitan one), and that the issue of encroachment does not apply here (Australia is not as tightly packed with people and cars as the UK was in 1963 – and is today). The report, if anything, underestimated the impact of the motor car on our urban lifestyles, and if written today would probably have placed greater emphasis on urban public transport as an alternative to private transport.

The second chapter established a theoretical base for the remainder of the report – the working hypothesis was that the capacity of a street to carry traffic greatly exceeded its environmental capacity, and the technical Appendix examined the issue of how to calculate that environmental capacity. That indeed was the weakness of the report, because 25 years after its publication there was still no agreement among professionals as to how it should be calculated. The principle seems to have been accepted, though, and led to the urban bypass program in the UK.

In the third chapter, a number of practical studies were worked through. These covered a small town (Newbury, in Berkshire), a large town (Leeds, in Yorkshire), a historic town (Norwich, in Norfolk) and a metropolitan block in Central London assuming three different levels of redevelopment. The basic message was that the relationship between environmental quality, the level of accessibility and the cost is fixed but complicated by the fact that some forms of physical arrangement are more efficient than others. Pick any two (environment, accessibility, cost) and the third is determined. Thus the outcome is largely a function of how much a society is prepared to pay, but the sums are not small. The examples were based on the assumption that the money would be provided – they were not the recommendations of the report, as some took them to be..

The fourth chapter looked at lessons from current practice. At the time of the report, the New Town movement was in full swing in the UK, considerable bomb damage was still left over in towns from the Second World War, and town & country planning was enjoying its moment in the sun. Looking further afield, the United States provided negative pointers to the future (with Los Angeles a prominent example), while Europe (particularly Scandinavia and Germany) raised hopes.

Finally, the fifth chapter drew some general conclusions. As a summary of what ails Australian cities, this could have been written today (the emphasis is mine):

“... The pressures that are now developing - **the increase of the population, the reaction against overcrowding and obsolescence, the increase of motor vehicles, the demands for industrial productivity, the continued drift of population and employment to the south** [the city], **the rapidly increasing demand for holiday facilities** – these are such that, unless the greatest care is exercised, it will be easily within our ability to ruin this island by the end of the century ...”

I will let Colin Buchanan have the last word:

“... (traffic) conditions as they are going to develop in this island [Britain] will demand an almost heroic act of self-discipline from the public. Motor manufacturers, parents and teachers will have major parts to play, but the main burden of responsibility will rest with drivers.”

By 1988 it was obvious that many of the problems raised by the report were still plaguing towns, and Buchanan was asked what one thing he would have liked to have seen done that would have made a difference. He replied, “That’s easy - I would have put a woman in charge of driver education.”