Top line: The population may be far more adaptable to major change than the policy process currently assumes. People adapt to transport and non-transport policy measures in ways which go beyond retiming and rerouting options that transport planners work with.

Well-managed cities and settlements are unlikely to occur by chance and are more likely where urban planning and transport policy settings are set to ensure long-term public benefit and improved economic productivity. Yet policy change is characterised as being slow and incremental. The risk is that we explain away or limit variability in the data we collect and seek to design policies and transport systems that broadly support the continuation of existing practices. In discussing a radical shift to a low carbon economy, many researchers identify a need for a more significant and rapid change to transport policy and travel patterns. Research has drawn on evidence from two sources to support the contention that more radical policy change is possible.[1] First, there is a substantial and on-going churn in household travel behaviour which, harnessed properly over the medium term, could provide the raw material for steering behaviour change. Secondly, there is an evidence base analysing significant events at local, regional and national level which highlight how travellers can adapt to major change to network conditions, service availability & social norms.

The limited extent to which stability can be assumed becomes apparent as soon as the debate is broadened out beyond the convenient but misleading assumption that transport policy is the primary lever of change affecting travel behaviour. It is commonplace to assert that the demand for transport is derived from the need to access employment, food and other essentials, health and education, visiting friends and so on. But there is remarkably little analysis of the ways in which changes exert a profound impact on how much we travel. Conceptualise the system as one in which disruptions are commonplace, then different policy choices become controllable. Policy change itself can also be seen as a positive disruption, which could open up a raft of new opportunities to align policy implementation with the capacity for change. However, when set against the current framing of stability and habit, disruption can also be a major political embarrassment.

The researchers suggest the need to explore a new paradigm – adaptation to changes in the environment, the socio-technical systems of provision and rhythms and choices of individuals, families, communities and companies. Responses to unplanned major disruptions show the potential for innovation – for new states to be imagined. Responses to planned major disruptions e.g. London Olympics show that significant behaviour shifts can be managed and are not as problematic to travellers as is often feared.

Two critical questions are posed: first, whether we could usefully consider the notions of disruption and adaptability as more appropriate concepts for planning for transport than those of habit and stability; and second, whether the idea of disruption and disruptive events can be embedded in policy to such an extent that they can be used as proactive policy tools to achieve a significant shift in travel behaviour towards lower carbon modes and practices.

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[1] Mardsen, G., Docherty, I. 2013. Insights on disruptions as opportunities for transport policy change, *Transportation Research Part A*, 51: pp. 46-55.