



Cattle Class travel: how low can it get?

Opinion piece by [Jane Turner](#) August 2013

I don't swear much. I moan a fair bit about the many things that drive me mad, but usually in sentences of polite and passable English. But if there's one thing that effs me off and makes me eff and blaspheme, it is traffic, transport and the **slow state of travel**. Anyone who has worked with me over the last ten years knows that I have moaned loudly and regularly about being stuck on the **A556**, the **M5**

6
M60
or the
M6

at various points in the week. It's a fact, that I have spent far too much of the last decade of my life on these effing four roads, stuck in a jam or crawling along at a speed as slow as a snail.

I drive almost everywhere most of the time, as the car, in my opinion, is unquestionably the best way to get around, despite the clogged up road network. When I have had to use public

transport, I have effed even louder than when I am in the car, particularly when on the effing train.

One train journey in particular made me so mad that I actually swore aloud, ignoring the risk of being thought a lunatic. With hindsight it was comical as the doors on the train stopped working, so that at every station the train stood still for longer as the driver had to prise each and every carriage door open to let people on and off, chugging off and threatening total breakdown with every cough and splutter. The journey took twice as long as usual, which was not particularly fast to begin with. Nobody but me seemed to care, everyone else was switched off from reality and engrossed in various pieces of technology, probably more used to depressing train delays than “she of the car”. Meanwhile, I almost had a heart attack, muttering to myself about the dire and failing state of the capitalist system and its transport network and experiencing the journey as a metaphor for backsliding Britain.

Given my frustrating experience of transport, I was happy to discover that I am currently living within 800 yards of the proposed **high-speed railway** line (HS2). But my happiness soon turned sour, as even if it gets the go-ahead, I still have to catch a slow train or drive a long way to the nearest station to link up with and make use of it. Speedier? No. Not for me or anyone within earshot, but I’ll reserve judgement on that transport proposal for now, as it is taking longer to debate and finalise than it’s taken China and other forward looking countries to build whole new cities and continent crossing transport links. I might just be dead and buried before the first stretch of the HS2 track is laid.

So, I listened with interest to this week’s report about overcrowding on trains, and plans for future train commuters travelling in already packed carriages, to get less space allocated to them than travelling sheep. In proposals for more than 1700 new train carriages, human beings will be allocated just one square metre of standing space for every four people, of all shapes and sizes (that’s about the size of a standard cushion, apparently) and less than what European

travel regulations allocate to travelling sheep and goats. **Baaaarbaric.**

But, what really got my goat was a discussion, aired at lunchtime on **Radio 2**, where there was a gobsmacking justification given for squashing people uncomfortably together in order to move them from A to B and in effect treating them worse than cattle.

Jeremy Baker (affiliate professor of ESCP business school) said that the smaller specification on future trains made a moral statement that we are all in this together (heard that somewhere before), all commuting together and fitting in with each other just like in China where billions of people work together for the common good. He added that those who complain about the lack of space and want more space and comfort are “morally lacking and only ever think about me, me, me”. “How much space do they want?” he asked. “Is there no limit to the amount of comfort they think they deserve?” he shouted. Enough to make me eff at the radio.

Environmentalists bear most responsibility for this type of idea getting airplay and being taken seriously. Due to the general acceptance of environmentalism, which is ingrained in everyday parlance, (have you noticed how just about everyone mentions the E word at least once every day?) bonkers justifications like Jeremy’s are common, and lead to ordinary commuting people getting treated worse than a truck full of cattle. Most people these days seem to believe that we are ravaging mother Earth just by breathing, but especially in our endeavour to travel more, at greater speed, and in comfort and style, so the authorities can get away with squashing us all together, and forcing us to pay a fortune for the experience.

It seems that almost everyone now believes that new roads, faster trains, and improved transport systems would spoil the environment, take up too much of our green space, and somehow spoil us in the process, whereas I believe that more and better transport and travel would be a life enhancing experience and a sign of and route to progress. There was a time when Brits would laugh or stare in horror at the images of Asians hanging off the sides of over-packed trains, stuffed full of people and cattle in “third world” countries, whereas now, they propose such ramshackle shipment as their version of a more worthy form of travel.

It amazes me what people say these days to justify what is in effect poor planning, under-development, and stagnation, and what arguments they use to justify the lack of progress in improving transport in the UK. The government churn out the usual platitudes and statistic twisting statements to tell us how they are spending record amounts on transport, purchasing and updating new stock and adding new routes, including HS2, which is not fair or accurate.

More people are travelling on planes, trains, and automobiles, with some reports of trains carrying 50 per cent more people than they were designed for. Instead of making the experience better for commuters, the backward looking, austerity blinkered men-at-the-top are not only making things worse, but justifying their lack of direction in moral terms, and blaming us, the transport users for wrecking the environment, and being selfish for wanting a speedier and more comfortable journey. Is comfort and speed really too much to ask of transport in the 21st century?

I say yes to high-speed railways, yes to faster and more comfortable travel, road and air expansion and no to being trapped in a slow moving hunk of rusty metal, or squashed together with my fellow human beings longingly peeping out over the horizon from underneath their sweaty armpits. There is plenty of the planet left to see and plough. And, I'd quite like to invite Professor Jeremy for a “communal chat” sometime, maybe meet up on the Northern Line at rush hour, where we could bask in our “all in it togetherness” and discuss his opinions about

the luxurious travelling arrangements with the “spoilt” (squashed and frazzled) commuters.