

# Antisocial bastards

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**T**he road-rage lobby couldn't have been more wrong. Organisations such as the Association of British Drivers or Safe Speed – the boy racers' club masquerading as a road-safety campaign – have spent years claiming that speeding doesn't cause accidents. Safe Speed, with the help of some of the most convoluted arguments I've ever read, even seeks to prove that speed cameras "make our roads more dangerous". Other groups, such as Motorists Against Detection (officially known as Mad), have been toppling, burning and blowing up the hated cameras. These and about a thousand such campaigns maintain that speed limits, speed traps and the government's "war on the motorist" are shake-down operations whose sole purpose is to extract as much money as possible from the poor oppressed driver.

Well, last week the Department for Transport published the results of the study it had commissioned into the efficacy of its speed cameras. It found that the number of drivers speeding down the roads where fixed cameras had been installed fell by 70%, and the number exceeding the speed limit by more than 15mph dropped by 91%. As a result, 42% fewer people were killed or seriously injured in those places than were killed or injured on the same stretches before the cameras were erected. The number of deaths fell by more than 100 a year. The people blowing up speed cameras have blood on their hands.

But this is not, or not really, an article about speed, or cameras, or even cars. It is about the rise of the antisocial bastards who believe they should be allowed to do what

they want, whenever they want, regardless of the consequences. I believe that while there are many reasons for the growth of individualism in the UK, the extreme libertarianism now beginning to take hold here begins on the road. When you drive, society becomes an obstacle. Pedestrians, bicycles, traffic calming, speed limits, the law: all become a nuisance to be wished away. The more you drive, the more bloody-minded and individualistic you become. The car is slowly turning us, like the Americans and the Australians, into a nation that recognises only the freedom to act, and not the freedom from the consequences of other people's actions. We drive on the left in Britain, but we are being driven to the right.

It is not just because of his celebration of everything brash and flash that Jeremy Clarkson has become the boy racer's hero. He articulates, with a certain wit and with less equivocation than any other writer in this country, the doctrine that he should be permitted to swing his fist – whoever's nose is in the way. For years he has championed the unrestrained freedom of the road. He takes it so far that from time to time he appears to incite his disciples to vandalise and even kill.

"If the only way of getting their [the government's] attention," he told the readers of the Sun in 2002, "is to destroy the tools that pay for their junkets and their new wallpaper, then so be it. I wish the people from Mad all the very best." In February this year, he suggested that speed cameras might be "filled ... with insulating foam that sets rock hard". After the London bombings in July, he observed that "many commuters are now switching to bicycles ... can I offer five handy hints to those setting out on a bike for the first time. 1. Do not cruise through red lights. Because if I'm coming the other way, I will run you down, for fun. 2. Do not pull up at junctions in front of a line of traffic. Because if I'm behind you, I will set off at normal speed and you will be crushed under my wheels ..."

Clarkson wants society out of his way when he's driving, and he isn't too particular about how it's done. One day, one of his fans will take him seriously.

But, doubtless cheered by the response of his readers, he has expanded his journalism from attacks on "the Lycra-Nazi sandalistas of Islington" (cyclists) to polemics against every kind of government intervention. He now rails against "nannying bureaucrats sticking their index-linked snouts into the trough" (health and safety inspectors); complains that he has to tell the police why he wants to keep a gun; appears to champion the right of householders to shoot burglars in the back; and ponders the use of landmines to deter rambles.

His acolytes are also venturing on to new ground. The website of the Association of British Drivers carries the usual links to campaigns against humps in the road (yes, people really are that sad), speed cameras and the congestion charge. But it also

directs its readers to about 50 sites claiming that global warming is a fraud and a lie, several tirades against the evils of the nanny state, and an article by John Redwood calling for lower taxes. Libertarianism has left the road and is now driving down the pavement.

Of course, these politics are possible only while we have a state capable of picking up the pieces. If there were not a massive hidden subsidy for private transport, those who decry the nannying bureaucrats couldn't afford to leave their drives. Speed cameras, according to the government's study, now save the country £258m in annual medical bills: a fraction of the billions in health costs inflicted by Clarkson's chums. Just as the leftwing movements of the 1970s, in the geographer David Harvey's words, "failed to recognise or confront ... the inherent tension between the quest for individual freedoms and social justice", the new libertarians fail to recognise the extent to which their freedoms depend on an enabling state. They hate the institution that allows them to believe that they can live without institutions.

It is strange to see how the car has been overlooked as an agent of political change. We know that the breaking of the unions, the dismantling of the welfare state and the sale of council houses that Margaret Thatcher pioneered made us more individualistic. But the way in which the transition from individualism to the next phase of neo-liberalism – libertarianism – was assisted by her transport policies has been largely ignored. She knew what she was doing. She spoke of "the great car-owning democracy", and asserted that "a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure". Her road-building programme was an exercise in both civil and social engineering. "Economics are the method," she told us, "the object is to change the soul." The slowly shifting consciousness of the millions who spend much of their day sitting in traffic makes interventionist government ever harder. The difference between the age of Herbert Morrison and the age of Peter Mandelson can be accounted for, in part, by the motorcar.

It shouldn't be hard to see how politically foolish are the current government's transport policies. The £11.4bn that it is spending on road building is an £11.4bn subsidy to the Conservative party. However much Blair seeks to accommodate the new libertarianism, he cannot consistently position himself to the right of the opposition. The longer he sustains Thatcher's programme of social engineering, the more trouble he stores up for his successors. Every branch line that is closed, every bus that is taken off the road, every new lane that is added to a motorway hastens the day when the Tories get back behind the wheel.