



Dennis DesRosiers

In Defence of the Automobile

"[Railways represented] the secret of the political unification of the new large states - American and European - which congealed or accreted in that industrious and revelatory century: as frontiers were pushed outwards, a land ten times larger in linear dimensions and accordingly 100 times greater in area could be brought within the range of prompt communications from the centre of government.

"The motor car was to achieve something more, when it picked up the torch that the railways eventually proved unfit to carry any longer. Whereas the political and economic effect of the railways was to offer society a certain consolidation, the motor car offer particularity, so that any member of a society with such a vehicle available could at last choose his own starting point and his own destination, link them by his own choice of routes, and make the journey either alone or in company of his own choosing. Another fixed condition of human life was thus lifted: an individual could now shun isolation, could enjoy independent mobility, could indulge his curiosity and hope. Steam may have brought us into the Machine Age, but it was the motor car which brought us out of the Dark Ages." - LJK Setright, Drive On

The automobile captures popular imagination as something of a transient phenomenon, talked about as though on the cusp of something - the cusp of change, of regulation, of replacement. It

is said to be the scourge of our time, responsible for problems economic, environmental and social. Amongst the chattering classes, it is thought to be a villain from which we must be saved with all due haste.

It is none of those things. To attack the current state of private transportation is to rail against salt, soil or water - basic blocks upon which our civilization has grown. As social historian LJK Setright posits in the above excerpt from Drive On, the appearance and acceptance of personal cars represents a profound demarcation between the serfdom that defined pre-modern majority existence and the freedom Westerners now enjoy.

Those taking the car for granted ought to remember that this object of contempt delivered us from the sordid city existence we once enjoyed - nay, tolerated. Travel by horse fouled our streets to a degree now unthinkable, contaminated groundwater supplies with all manner of communicable diseases and induced urban longing for a vaguely-remembered pastoral past. Cars - even the half-baked horseless carriages common during the brass era of motoring - represented a big step forward.

Cars sped the development of national-level agriculture, letting the citizen farmer distribute his harvest with unprecedented ease and efficiency. They allowed for equally-unprecedented access to medical expertise, effectively moving childbirth

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VEHICLE OWNERSHIP TRENDS - CANADA

Year	Total Vehicle Sales (Units)	Vehicle Usage Billions of (KMs)	Total Units in Operation (Millions)	Vehicles Per Driving Age Population	Kilometres Driven Per Vehicle
1960	523,188	118	5,787,703	49.1%	20,474
1965	830,995	146	6,981,125	53.2%	20,983
1970	774,372	176	8,394,444	55.7%	20,998
1975	1,316,629	207	9,917,726	58.1%	20,836
1980	1,263,807	231	12,039,552	63.6%	19,181
1985	1,530,410	269	12,998,971	63.9%	20,675
1990	1,314,118	333	15,128,911	68.9%	22,011
1995	1,162,512	331	15,724,638	67.4%	21,041
2000	1,586,083	358	17,100,899	68.9%	20,952
2001	1,597,875	376	17,667,665	70.2%	21,293
2002	1,731,823	386	17,910,647	70.1%	21,579
2003	1,625,050	395	18,207,157	70.3%	21,691
2004	1,574,803	399	18,709,017	71.3%	21,304
2005	1,630,142	404	18,882,567	70.9%	21,373
2006	1,666,008	424	19,365,344	71.7%	21,916
2007	1,690,345	447	20,242,775	74.0%	22,081
2008	1,673,522	458	21,202,441	76.7%	21,593
2009	1,498,636	470	21,608,346	77.4%	21,753
Average Annual Growth					
1970/1960	4.0%	4.1%	3.8%		0.3%
1980/1970	5.0%	2.7%	3.7%		-0.9%
1990/1980	0.4%	3.7%	2.3%		1.4%
2000/1990	1.9%	0.7%	1.2%		-0.5%
2010/2000	0.0%	3.2%	2.6%		0.6%
2020/2010	-0.5%	2.6%	1.8%		0.9%

Source: DesRosiers Automotive Consultants Inc., AIAMC, CVMA and Registration Data © R.L. Polk & Company, 2008 data released 2009.

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from the bedchamber to the hospital. Domestic tourism would be nowhere if not for the automobile.

Cars compressed distances in new and amazing ways, letting previously far-away towns become convenient neighbours. I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that widespread access to private transportation strengthened the

gene pool by opening insular communities.

Now, with more than two hundred years' research and testing propping the latest internal combustion engines - devices capable of scrubbing their waste products of nearly every atmospheric contaminant specified in the regulatory obstacle course

erected over decades of confused policy-making - the car has apparently become undesirable to those who will soon inherit the keys. So say a host of recent articles discussing the waning interest of young people in vehicles and vehicle ownership.

A theory put forth in a recent Advertising Age article (<http://>

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adage.com/print?article_id=144155) suggests that the Internet has reduced kids' connection to cars. Portable devices allowing constant contact and communication cannot be operated effectively (or legally) from the driver's seat, so young users are drawn to transit options allowing them full use of their time. Efficient ordering of one's schedule has always been a primary underwriter of success and is today perceived as necessary for basic social buoyancy.

A study quoted in the piece shows that the number of people aged 16 to 19 obtaining drivers' licenses fell considerably between 1978 and 2008, affecting not only the proportion of the overall vehicle parc owned by this demographic group but also the total number of kilometers driven for which they are responsible.

Despite the 'always on' nature of modern telecommunications, the auto industry is meeting wants and needs as it always does. Bluetooth headsets allow phone users to chat within the bounds of the law while an increasing number of in-vehicle convergence systems (e.g. Ford's SYNC) will have the ability to send and receive text correspondence using voice commands.

Returning to Setright's argument, would not this sort of functionality give personal transportation a decided edge over the communal churn of time-efficient public transportation? One falls victim to the shifting winds of novelty if the lessons of history are ignored and

it is believed that sons harbour fundamentally different aspirations than fathers. Young people always strike out in a direction opposed to that of the preceding cohort, and they always find their way back to a similar place. The fact that cars aren't in tight focus between ages 16 and 19 does not mean that cars will not play for them the very same role that they presently play for those aged 30 and older. Unless you are a childless, fit, downtown resident of a mild-climate city well-served by public transit, private cars will remain the preferred option for the foreseeable future.

To fight the car is to fight the North American built form. It does not require a degree in economics to ascertain the futility of this conflict. Realism must be restored to the policymaking apparatus if real progress is to be made.

Further to the original point, can the decline in the number of 16-year-olds owning and driving vehicles not be traced to factors other than the amorphous "Internet?" As Bill Clinton famously declared during the 1992 U.S. Presidential election, "It's the economy, stupid." During the 30-year time series cited above, the financial burden shouldered by those in younger age brackets and their parents has grown tremendously. Higher education transitioned from exception to expectation, with constantly creeping tuition rates impinging upon young peoples' ability to afford personal transportation as early in their lives as before. The very same studies showing

declining license-holding among middle-teenagers also show a leveling-off near 100 percent as the mid-twenties approach. The nature of the curve may be changing, but the destination remains the same.

So - While understanding that cars are not disappearing and young people are not likely to shun en masse the freedom of movement to which modernity owes so much, those in the automotive industry must be cognizant of the fact that cars no longer symbolize 'freedom' with the explicit punch delivered to previous generations of young consumers. With much of the past two decades spent at an ownership level approaching (and often exceeding) 100%, a not-insignificant portion of the American buying public has become so inured to the wonders of personal transportation that such freedoms have evolved from enshrined needs to grudging wants.

The implications of all this may run counter to popular speculation. What would happen if vehicle ownership were to drop by 50 percent overnight - or even over a medium-term timescale (say, ten years)? Such a reduction in the number of cars being purchased, operated and maintained would have immediate and serious effects on the livelihoods of the approximately 800,000 people directly tied to the automotive sector - those who make, sell and fix cars, nevermind all the people

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who manage and maintain the state's physical infrastructure. Cheering the demise of the automobile and its replacement with high-volume public transportation implies the elimination of a large sector of the Canadian economy with no viable successor. We understand the respect accorded to environmental issues, but we question whether governments at all levels are prosecuting their respective wars (energy use, airborne emissions, commute times, etc.) with cognizance of their policies' true consequences.

(We also question where governments will find the funds to undertake a massive expansion of public transportation options.

This issue has been placed in stark relief by Toronto's upcoming mayoral election, with candidates half-pledging paltry kilometers of transit expansion at Obama-large cost to the taxpayer).

Is the automobile threatened? At present, no - Chastened perhaps, but not hurt. The present clamour has already taken the industry in a markedly different direction than it might otherwise have headed, shaping it into a pillar of interdisciplinary innovation. It's also important to note that the advancement of connected technology into the automotive realm has reaped many benefits for drivers and passengers alike. Navigation, for instance - whether aided by a satellite system or a printed map from Google - has been banished from the black arts

resulting in less indecision and less uncertainty while traversing unfamiliar locales.

We've seen a reduction in vehicle counts; that much is certain. This reduction, however, has been related to recessionary economics more than anything and should not be taken as a measure of the buying public's interest in (or dependence on) cars. The conclusion that this trend presages the beginning of the end isn't supported and should not be repeated as fact. It is the opinion of a cloistered few who may not possess a true appreciation for the needs met by the automobile and its place in history as a great force of inspiration and liberation. Cars can (must?) change, but they cannot disappear.

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2010 DESROSIERS AUTOMOTIVE YEARBOOK

- The **2010** edition of the hardcover **DesRosiers Automotive Yearbook** is currently at the printers and is scheduled to be mailed out with the July 15th issue of the **DesRosiers Automotive Reports**. This is a very special edition for us as we are celebrating **25 years** in business this November.
- Dennis will once again be signing each and every copy. To ensure you receive a copy please be sure your account is up-to-date. For inquiries on your accounts status please contact Jillian McConnell and 905-881-0400 ext. 18.
- New to 2010 edition is three new segmentations all within the light truck segment. As you may have noticed throughout the last year a great deal of changes has occurred within the light truck segment.
- Once you receive your copy please contact Jillian McConnell at jill@desrosiers.ca as we would love to hear your thoughts on this special anniversary edition.