

# Jonathon Porritt - viewpoint



Jonathon Porritt is Founding Director of the sustainability charity Forum for the Future and outgoing chair of the Sustainable Development Commission. FirstGroup is a Corporate Partner of Forum for the Future and our work with the Forum has included future visions for the public transport sector. We have therefore asked Jonathon for his viewpoint on the role the industry can play in addressing some of the challenges society faces in connection with travel.

“2008 was a year of conflicting signals for the global transport industry. In the cold grip of recession it’s easy to forget that only a year ago the worldwide desire to travel was still booming. By May 2008, the demand for mobility from aspiring car owners in China to budget flyers in Europe, outstripped our ability to produce and refine fuel. The price of crude oil doubled in a year to nearly \$150 a barrel. At this price the old market certainties began to unravel: car makers rushed to design plug-in hybrid vehicles, airline profits evaporated, and public transport operators found themselves with a boom in demand as drivers voted with their wallets and left their cars at home.

In that respect, 2008 was the year when markets began to align with concerns about climate change, showing us that the relentless, car-dominated growth pattern that we’ve known since the 1950s is not just environmentally unsustainable, but economically unsustainable too. When the current downturn ends and demand returns there will be no magical gush of cheap new oil supplies to fuel it. As an oil company executive recently warned, “The era of easy oil is over”. Any demand recovery will push prices back up, and \$150 oil may not be far away again.”

“Governments and companies must therefore act quickly to adapt to a new world of carbon and oil constraints; in this respect, 2008 was again a vintage year. In the UK, the world’s first legally binding climate change law was enacted, committing the country to an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. In the US, a decade of denial came to an end with the election of a new administration also committed to an 80% climate target supported, crucially, by the development of a low-carbon car sector.

**We are therefore at the beginning of a period of major change in how we get around. This potentially presents the greatest opportunity for public transport since the rise of the car.**

Extended and enhanced networks can win customers from increasingly expensive and congested car travel, throughout urban areas and intercity corridors. New information systems can make them easy to access and navigate; vehicle innovation can slash their emissions, while decisive regulatory support can help make them reliable. The industry can be at the core of a more connected, fair and resilient economy.

But this outcome is far from automatic. Without greater innovation and investment buses and trains could stagnate while new technology cars, already near production, are seen to win the carbon competition, and with it the case for investment and road space. This would do nothing for community or congestion. Much worse, government bailouts for failing car makers could just end up backing the status quo, leaving the economy wide open to a climate and energy crunch.

**The current recession is temporary. But the climate and energy constraints we face are not. They will become the dominant challenges for business. Bolder moves in policy and technology are therefore needed for public transport to spearhead the move to a low-carbon economy. The industry needs to show what it can do, challenging government to enable it to deliver at scale. Otherwise the opportunity – for sustainable business, as well as sustainable mobility – may be missed.”**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathon Porritt".



The UK has established a legally binding greenhouse gas emission reduction target of 80% by 2050.