

## Off the road or off the mark? The anti-4x4 campaigns

It has become the modern urban stereotype of our times: the mum dropping off her child to school on a three-mile round trip in a rolling two-tonne battlewagon designed to cross the sand dunes of Namibia or the forest tracks of the Amazonian jungle. We are incensed, outraged at this blatantly anti-social act by somebody who clearly puts the safety and comfort of herself and her child above any consideration of her actions on collective community welfare or the viability of the planet. In North America, and now here in the UK, activists are campaigning against the 4x4 with increasingly militant and interventionist strategies. It is a campaign that is at best misguided and illogical, and at worst downright counter-productive.

It is obvious, of course, where the basis for this attack comes from. It does not require a degree in physics to understand that, other things being equal, a vehicle that is heavier and larger than others will consume more fuel to get it moving and, once moving, will cause more damage should its progress be impeded by a passing pedestrian. Moreover, there can be little doubt that larger vehicles take up more road space, and need more room to park and turn. So where is the problem with the anti-4x4 campaigns? Here are a few issues:

- The category of 4x4 is an attractive but ultimately meaningless description that makes no logical sense in terms of the campaigns.
- There is no attempt to recognise why these vehicles might have become popular, and what should be done about the underlying causes of this popularity.
- It is the parochial politics of envy that fails to embrace the wider issues.

There are numerous definitions of 4x4 vehicle used more or less interchangeably, including all wheel drive; off-road vehicle; sports utility vehicle (SUV); all-terrain vehicle. Unfortunately, none of these are coherent categories. The term 4x4 refers to the basic concept of the transmission system, wherein all four wheels are driven with motive power on a full-time basis. There are numerous cars that are 4x4 but they are not the mobile environmental disasters portrayed by these campaigns. Audi for example has been making various 'quattro' versions of its saloon cars for many years. Strangely, many of the vehicles being developed for the urban eco-warrior of the future feature 4x4 drive in the

form of hub-mounted electric motors coupled to regenerative braking systems. Even within the 'conventional' 4x4 segment, there is a vast range of types and performance, with many small 4x4 vehicles being no better and no worse than a traditional saloon or hatchback.

Equally, if the protests are about excessive fuel consumption and vehicles that are inappropriate for the use to which they are put, then why is there no campaign against the use of sports cars in urban areas? These are vehicles that feature very high performance in terms of acceleration, top speed, braking, etc. and are designed to travel very quickly – indeed well in excess of any legal maximum. They often have large engines, and in any case are tuned to deliver those performance extremes rather than fuel efficiency. Or what about the luxury vehicles? These may weigh over 2 tonnes, occupy over 5 metres of road length, and be wider than many cars are long.

These protests also never give any consideration to the reasons why people use such cars, and no attempt is made to resolve the underlying issues. Rather, all we get is the rather childish and negative tactic of putting anti-4x4 'parking tickets' on windscreens and holding up motorists while pretending to be traffic crossing assistants (or whatever the modern jargon is for a 'lollipop lady'). There are all sorts of issues here to do with, for example, the poor condition of the roads; the psychological need to feel secure even if that feeling is largely an illusion; the result of a society obsessed with material status; or just the decision that a particular vehicle best matches an overall lifestyle. Indeed, our stereotypical mum might have no real alternative means of getting her child to school than driving, and at least in her case there is more than one person in the car: average occupancy rates are of the order of 1.2 people per car.

This sort of protesting is lazy, reactionary and illogical. It is highly damaging to have the vital importance of environmental issues such as road safety, travel choices, pollution and global warming undermined by incompetence, incoherence and ignorance. It is easy to see the gross waste of resources that most 4x4 cars embody, but frankly that is also true of most cars, full stop. This sort of campaign all too easily fosters the illusion that we can make clear, consistent and rational choices about the total environmental and social impact of vehicles, but in fact it represents the worst sort of sloppy analysis and headline-grabbing stupidity. Such campaigns are desperately parochial, and even if successful (though it is difficult to define what success means in this context) would probably make a marginal net contribution to either safety or quality of life or the

state of the environment. In the end these campaigns undermine the credibility of protest, make environmentalists easy targets to attack, and for this alone should be deplored.

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