

Don't Reinvent The Wheel!



We have or had most of it but don't practice them due to a sheer lack of discipline

The circular issued by The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) on the September 14, 2015, preventing the purchase of vehicles on a 100 percent finance or lease to reduce the number of vehicles on the road has got mixed reactions from the public. So, is this really going to solve the issue of traffic congestion in Colombo and its suburbs? Well, it's easier said than done.

I have seen many blogs and social media comments on how we should tackle this critical issue, but what most people don't remember or were not born at a time when Sri Lanka had some of the World's best practices in traffic management many years ago, at a time we hardly had automobiles on our roads. Some of the interesting ones I recall from my childhood were;

- Red number plates for taxis
- Vehicles with odd and even numbers driving on separate days
- Tram network
- Heavy goods haulage using trains
- Restricted import of used vehicles unless under very specific cases where the owner has personally used the same vehicle overseas

I am sure some of you older folks may remember more practices. Some of these may or may not work in today's context; however the point I am trying to emphasise here was the levels of discipline and etiquette we had on the roads. Where has this all gone? We had it all and lost it!

On many of my road trips out of town in beautiful Sri Lanka, which is very regular, one of the most noticeable things is that drivers don't even dim their headlamps at night, don't give way to traffic on narrow uphill roads and use indicators. Very often I drive past cyclists riding their bikes abreast, or vehicles without working tail lamps and some even without headlights. Considering all these factors, the newly elected government must unify all concerned departments and stakeholders and identify the issues and take appropriate and swift actions before it's too late. Some actions highlighted below are easy to implement and quick wins, while some may take longer with huge investments. Basically the quick wins are already in the country's rule books but not implemented for whatever reason.

I have taken the liberty to create a 'To Do List' from my perspective, which I am sure most of you will agree or have already thought of. These actions will ensure lesser congestion on our streets and most importantly safety for all.

Improve Public Transport

Reliable and comfortable public transport means many people will leave

their automobiles at home

- Comfortable Metro or Monorail System
- Discontinue uncomfortable buses and introduce proper clean and air-conditioned City Buses and double decker buses - provide a special incentive for current bus owners on these routes to scrap their existing bus and buy an approved city bus
- Install a GPS timing device to ensure all buses run on a fixed time table
- Bringing Tram Network back into action
- Ban three wheelers - They are a huge safety concern and also create traffic congestion
- Ban heavy commercial vehicles during peak hours
- Introduce electronic toll gates within City and immediate suburb boundaries - revenue for the government that can be used to further develop public transport
- Upgrade or introduce modern trains
- Increase parking facilities at train stations
- Comfortable and regular feeder buses and trams to and from train stations
- Introduce air-conditioned and a reliable water transport system in canals
- Completely ban buses plying on the main arterial roads such as the Galle Road, Duplication Road, High Level Road and certain sections of Negombo and Kandy roads and replace them with modern trams or allow only double decker buses (except buses coming from outstation)
- Ensure public transport of any sort is available within a five minute walk from any home or office

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Parking Management

This will deter motorists from making unnecessary trips and also contribute to Government revenue which can be used to improve public transport

- Install Electronic Parking Meters on all city streets to increase and implement a heavy fine for improper parking which disrupts the traffic flow

Vehicle Imports

Safety first - Let's aim safer vehicles and prevent cheap and substandard

brands making Sri Lanka a dumping ground

- Ban the import of second hand vehicles
- Introduce a minimum three star safety rating for all vehicles similar to NCAP
- Enforce a ban or higher insurance premium when registering an unregistered used vehicle
- Heavy duty concessions on taxi imports and low financing costs with extended repayment plans (taxi's designed to Government specifications, which cannot be used for any other purpose) – this will have a direct impact on the cost of hiring a taxi

Vehicle Ownership

- Have a matrix whereby a revenue license fee gets more expensive as the vehicle ages
- Incentive for scrapping ageing vehicles
- Special incentives for vehicle scrapping and recycling yards to start up
- Introduce a mandatory retirement age for vehicles
- Easy rules for re-exporting ageing vehicles to other countries
- Owners who intend keeping a vehicle over the retirement age to apply for a special number e.g. classic or vintage car number

Police

We don't have to reinvent the wheel. Most of these rules are already documented and approved. It's high time we prevail upon the public to abide by the rules. Simply charging motorists for crossing the double line is not everything. There are more important aspects to look at to make our roads safer and congestion free. Where do motorists drive when pedestrians, hawkers, bikers and livestock all share the same track?

- Strictly enforce traffic flow rules and all approved laws
- Heavy penalties for obstructing traffic flow as a result of improper parking
- Re-enforce parking rules on no parking zones including parking on yellow lines
- Charge VIP vehicles when breaking road rules – nobody is above the law
- Establish a law on who can use red and blue flashing lights on their vehicles
- Strictly enforce random road worthy tests on all roads – check tyres, indicators and brakes.
- Strictly enforce bus lanes
- Retrain Police force on road rules and conduct refresher training regularly

- Ban raring cattle and livestock within city limits
- Ban more than two people riding on motorcycles
- Re-enforce the rule where cyclists cannot ride parallel to each other
- Ban the use of tractors, agricultural implements and equipment and heavy machinery on city roads. These must be carried on a trailer.

Some Large Schools Have Large Driveways Only As Decoration And Don't Let Parents Or School Vans Through Their Gates.

Road Designs

- Maintain a standard for specifications – e.g lane width and pavement width
- Increase the number of Uni-flow roads
- Create pedestrian only roads and ban any motorised vehicles on these – example Laurie's Road in Bambalapitiya between Galle Road and Duplication Road has almost become difficult to drive through due to the number of pedestrians, this street should be declared pedestrian only, except for residents, where they will be given a resident sticker to be placed on the windshield
- Some roads in downtown (Fort and Pettah) must be also declared pedestrian and public transport only – a quick fix here is to deploy a fleet of electric 'Golf Carts' for public use on these nominated roads until a tram network is complete. It's an environmentally cost effective solution.
- Accelerate the construction of highways and link roads

Other

Some large schools have large driveways only as decoration and don't allow parents or school vans through their gates. Open up or face heavy penalties. School authorities must also be held accountable for road safety and congestion

- Mandatory rules for all schools and places of worship to bring down some walls and implement an 'IN' and 'OUT' gate system thus not interrupting traffic flow
- Conduct regular road safety awareness campaigns – there are many Corporates that would partner with the police as part of their CSR campaigns.
- It comes free most of the time and doesn't cost the Government
- Remove unauthorised or dangerous kiosks and stalls on pavements

The newly elected government has a huge task of fixing this ticking time bomb. I remain confident that this new team has all it takes to tackle this critical issue. Unless we combine our efforts and bring about a solution, we are bound to lose productivity as a nation, which will have a direct impact on our economy. During a recent conversation, I had with some friends overseas about their holiday plans, as a proud Sri Lankan, I tried everything to convince them that their next holiday must be in our paradise island. However all my efforts were in vain as their final response was that they have heard from several visitors to Sri Lanka and also read in blogs that major part of the time spent in Sri Lanka is wasted on the road as they are heavily congested and it will take hours to reach a destination that is only a few kilometres away. They eventually chose another country where the kids can enjoy the resorts and sightseeing more than remain stuck on the road.

Let's start by implementing what we already have and the quick win actions and the rest will all fall into place! A car enthusiast myself, I would definitely leave my vehicle at home if I could travel with ease and comfort in public transport within the city. But until then I am compelled to keep my engine running and wheels contributing to the existing nightmare.