

## The 30 mile per hour speed limit – time for a decent burial?

*I have just the first points on my licence for doing 38 miles an hour in a 30 mile an hour limit. I actually thought I was in a 40 mile an hour limit and the picture given in evidence confirmed light traffic, a wide road with a grass verge and no pedestrians in sight.*

‘Charles,’ I said ‘I should be feeling guilty but I feel resentful that having the first points on my licence when I was exceeding the 30 mile an hour speed limit, doing no harm.’

**‘Or more good than harm,’ he responded to my surprise. ‘I have every sympathy with you and I think with good reason.’**

‘I thought you were in favour of respect for the law,’ I said.

**‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘but it is difficult for the law to command respect if it is not soundly based. Let’s go back to basic principles and ask “is the concept of the speed limit valid?”’**

‘Of course it is,’ I said. ‘Many lives are saved by them.’

**‘That’s true, but why 30 mph?’**

I hadn’t an immediate answer.

**‘I suspect because in 1935, when it was invented, 30, as half of 60 seemed about right. Hardly a good reason, even if the concept of a speed limit were strategically valid.’**

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

**‘Well, traffic policy, cars as well as trains should aim at achieving optimal speed. When considered purely from the point of view of utility, there is no upper limit to this. Therefore one has to attempt to achieve a balance between speed, cost and risk of personal injury.’**

‘Surely you don’t mean “let cars go as fast as possible until the death rate becomes unacceptable”?’

**‘No,’ he said, ‘that’s an oversimplification. Apart from loss of amenity there are other pressures**

**pushing the optimal up. One is pollution from cars traveling below their most efficient speed, and I thought you might suggest damage to the health of the occupant.’**

‘That rings true,’ I said. ‘I remember when we had a spate of DVTs, when the route from the north to the southeast was obstructed by three or four major sets of road works. Less time in the car and more time for exercise!’ and on reflection added, ‘and you mustn’t forget other health benefits of rapid transport, fresher food, not feeling rushed when one arrives at work or returns home.’

**‘These are all reasons to keep the traffic flow moving. The upper boundary is almost entirely determined by risk of personal injury, except in very heavy traffic, where the optimal speed to prevent stop-start bunching is about 50 mph. With modern cars, added pollution arising from high speeds is not a major factor.’**

‘But a lower limit is necessary in many places, in towns for example,’ I insisted.

**‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And that depends on who is at risk. As I am sure you are aware, science suggests that for unprotected road users, pedestrians and cyclists, 30 mph is far too fast, but for vehicle occupants it is unnecessarily slow.’**

‘What’s the answer?’

**‘In residential areas where predominant hazard is to pedestrians the scientifically appropriate speed of 20 mph should be introduced. This would require reasonable proximity to access roads designed to protect pedestrians. High traffic density and the risk of collision associated with many side turnings would be covered by a limit at the next optimal speed (45 or 50 mph), safe for the occupants and best for the environment. Strict enforcement of these speed limits is fully justified.’**

‘What about in open country?’

**‘This is more difficult because the risk of accident varies much from time to time, with traffic density and road conditions. Don’t forget that the risk of collision depends on the square of the number of**

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**vehicles. As a realistic speed limit would be safe 90% of the time, in other words unnecessarily restrictive 80% of the time, logic would suggest some discretionary enforcement. This of course is particularly true of the current 30 mph limit which is rarely, if ever, appropriate.'**

I expressed surprise. 'Speeding is an absolute offence. Surely, as you so often say, the law should be respected and therefore strictly applied.'

**'I am also realistic. Your recent experience shows that many speeding motorists will do no harm. Unfortunately traffic fines now make money locally, and as a matter of fact are an easy way of doing so. Not totally without justification, they often are seen only as such and the police held to be better applying their energies elsewhere. Hardly a recipe for a good relationship!'**

'But,' I argued, 'you are suggesting stricter appliance of a lower limit!'

**'The difference is that the 20 mph level has the potential for social acceptability. This would require good road design and vigorous public education. Peer pressure would then encourage compliance as with the alcohol limit, something that will never happen with the arbitrary 30 mph.'**

'And speed humps, chicanes and so forth?'

**'No! They only add to pollution in many ways and senses. I hope they would become redundant.'**

*Is it only because I was caught recently that I have much sympathy with what he said?*

Coemgenus