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Why London continues to grind to a halt

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Like all guests on Desert Island Discs, Rabbi Hugo Gryn was once asked what luxury he would take with him to his desert island. He answered to the effect: 'Well Sue, I live in London, so what I would like is a parking space.' By the same token, I dream of a stretch of open road.

London is a city wearing down its own clutch. The congestion is so unnecessarily and excruciatingly bad that, these days, it seems that London is engaged in one giant joyless game of Grandmother's Footsteps, jerking forward a few paces at a time only to be brought to a shuddering halt by forces that are as arbitrary as they are absurd.

Five years after the introduction of the congestion charge, London often finds itself at a standstill. A survey this month showed that London is the slowest city in Europe. A car averages 12mph in London, which is 40 per cent slower than in Paris. (A cyclist tends to travel at 14mph.)

Mayor Ken Livingstone's office likes to boast that the traffic on the streets has been reduced by one fifth. That may be true, but things still grind to a halt because the room for manoeuvre on London's roads has been so severely reduced by bus lanes, pedestrian walkways and longer waits at traffic lights. Reduced road space means that even with many fewer cars on the road there has been an imperceptible 8 per cent reduction in congestion.

It is the random, unaccountable gridlock that is really grinding down the cheerful disposition of Londoners and eroding the city's claim to be a modern international capital. Outdated rules, such as the nighttime ban on lorries, mean trucks clog the city in the middle of the day. Thames Water gets to dig up the streets, without an explanation, an apology or a reimbursement for lost time.

Transport for London is, ultimately, responsible for this sclerosis. And, yesterday, Capita joined the queue of its critics. The business services company had run the congestion charge scheme since its introduction in 2002, but yesterday lost the estimated £56 million contract to IBM.

As a result, London's traffic has become IBM's problem. No doubt, the IT consulting group is looking beyond the existing scheme to the growing business of managing traffic. London will soon start to consider expanding the congestion zone. In addition, IBM is bound to hope that its experience in London will help it sell congestion charging and, potentially, road pricing outside London and beyond the UK.

But all that future business depends on political will and, in turn, public approval. Londoners stuck in traffic are finding that their support for the congestion charging system, like their patience, is wearing thin.