

FIVE-LIVE'S LIFELESS STATISTICS

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No-one can say the BBC's Five-Live news and sports programmers do not respect statistics. From the numbing simplicity of football statistics in Winter, which hardly ever get into double figures, to the erudite disquisitions of the cricket commentators in Summer, evidence abounds of programmers' concern for the informativeness and precision of the numbers they broadcast. But not, it now seems, when it comes to the statistical slaughter on Britain's roads. I did not know that when — two days before the Cup Final and before the M4 Protesters were to express their irritation with speed camera vans on seven motorway bridges — I got a call from a siren-voiced Five Live producer. She had got my name from Roger Harrabin, no less, whom I had helped out with a Huttonesque role for his Today Programme Speed Tribunal. She wanted me to do several minutes — live! — about the statistics of speed camera effectiveness on the heels of two “clips” from a protester and a safety campaigner.

As with Hutton, tribunals do not now resolve issues in the way they did in the French Revolution. The murk still hung in the air. Secretary of State Alistair Darling was able to get away with his claim that the Safety Camera Partnership installations (those yellow cameras operated by 24 police forces) had reduced the number killed and seriously injured by 40% and saved over 100 lives. His claim was made just one day before the Today tribunal, when the political embargo on the DfT report of the 3-year results of the program was lifted. (It had been imposed on the grounds that it might influence the European Parliament elections in some way.)

Months earlier, ignorant of the overarching secrecy, I had tried to get hold of the 3-year report that must have been in press — if only to prepare for the tribunal. Such is the way government now commissions external research, I could not access the report even though most of it had been done by a sister department at UCL — and despite the fact that the statistical techniques on which the report would have to rely had been developed by the benefactor, Francis Galton, and the first professor, Karl Pearson, of my UCL department! Rather sad too — that departments within the same university that once cooperated in the search for scientific truth are now constrained in that search by the need for contractual confidentiality.

The Today Tribunal got *some* attention, though. The Official Statistics Section of the Royal Statistical Society held a meeting at which three experts on the assessment of speed camera effectiveness (Ronan Lyons of Swansea, Linda Mountain of Liverpool and Rune Elvik of Oslo) independently agreed that Alistair Darling's numbers were probably biased and that it might be more realistic to cut them by two-thirds. Observers from DfT made no comment and have maintained radio silence.

With all that water under the bridge, I could not refuse the offer of a few minutes on Five Live in which I might be allowed to correct some of the public disinformation. How naive! When the proposed time of the M4 Protest item was changed from 8.50pm to 6pm, I even imagined that this might provide a larger number of listeners. When I was phoned at 6pm and recorded with liberal interruptions by the interviewer, the possibility of an unedited piece was clearly lost, but I still hoped that something would survive. (After all, Roger Harrabin had been an excellent editor of his Today Tribunal recordings.)

By that time, Chelsea had become Champions and the M4 Protest item had to wait to the last ten minutes of the Weekend News. First, we got the clip from the “protester” — none other than Paul Smith, the doughty enemy of officialdom. Then much more than a clip — a gently interrupted discourse from Robert Gifford (officialdom incarnate). Here was no sign of the pressure on time that I had been told Chelsea fans, eager to hear the Buddhist wheel turn in praise of their heroes, were placing on the M4 item. So Gifford had plenty of time to regurgitate the “lifeless statistics” that would satisfy the Five Live producer — Alistair Darling’s 40% reduction and over 100 lives saved. In the end, I could not complain of poor editing of what I had recorded — none of it was broadcast, and my rebuttal of the Darling numbers did not get an airing. Perhaps my interviewer had decided that listeners would have been turned off by what I was able to convey to him, based on the following notes I had made for the promised but aborted minutes.

- Two quotes from Today Tribunal:
 - (i) ‘Even good people may find themselves disagreeing strongly — but, for 60 million people unevenly distributed on a small island, compromise is surely better than conflict.’
 - (ii) ‘The present growing multiplicity of highly visible speed cameras — whether fixed or mobile — may be more of an irritant than a serious contribution to road safety.’
- M4 Protest is a predictable expression of irritation at the sight or just the thought of speed camera vans parked on motorway bridges.
- When it is petrolheads who want to do much more than the 79 miles-an-hour that the police enforce, the irritation (really a frustration of a criminal intention) cannot be justified.
- But the irritation may be justified — when it is drivers who see the whole Safety Camera Partnership program as a wasted opportunity to discover a better way of cutting road casualties.
- The seven Wiltshire cameras may reduce casualties. But they can’t tell us that greater reductions would not have been achieved at lower cost and with less aggro in other ways. For example by using SPECS (Speed Check Services) that measures the average speed over several miles — as the French do on their Autoroutes. With that, any safety benefit is spread over the whole length of road and not confined to the short “gaming” stretches at the yellow cameras. It could also get boy racers off the road without being chased by police cars.
- The organizer of the M4 Protest has indicated he would like the police to catch the villains that burgled his home and assaulted his family — instead of wasting their hours in the camera vans.
- But what is being missed by DfT is the prospect of getting better science into road safety measures in this country — that include ensuring public acceptance of the measures. This prospect has been almost destroyed by the privatisation of government science that started with Thatcher and Major and has been vigorously developed by Blair and Brown.

- The Transport Research Laboratory was privatised in 1997. The management of the Safety Camera Partnerships Program was given to PA Consulting. That's a limited company that Gordon Brown must think represents the so-called "wisdom of the private sector".
- The Safety Camera program and its statistical assessment was effectively removed from independent public scrutiny and controlled by the Department for Transport— so that Alistair Darling and others are able to spin unreliable and uninformative statistics (in ways that are now used across the whole of government). Darling did that last year on the day the Department for Transport ended its political embargo on the publication of PA Consulting's statistics.
- Iraq is not the only depository of dodgy dossiers!