

A Hi Barbara. I see you're studying for your driving licence, how's it going?

B Hi Stephen, OK I guess...what about you, have you taken the driving test?

A I passed the written part but then I stopped taking lessons and I've decided not to continue.

B Why?

A First of all it's too expensive and I have enough things to pay for as it is with my limited income. But I also asked myself if I really needed a car. After all, there's a good chance that cars will soon be dead.

B Dead?

A Yes, the car has been at the heart of industrial civilization for a century or so now, but the era of mass vehicle ownership and the idea that life isn't complete without a car is coming to an end. The Top Gear TV show which was once so popular is now losing viewers, nobody writes pop songs about Ferraris anymore, and few boys now dream of owning a fast sports car. And what's more important, greener more liberating alternatives are available thanks to environmental concerns.

B So when will we stop using cars?

A The sale of diesel and petrol cars will be banned in the UK starting from 2040. The city of Oxford wants to ban all petrol and diesel vehicles by 2020 and Paris will ban all non- electric cars by 2030.

B But what about the car industry, how is it reacting?

A General Motors has announced that it will soon begin testing driverless cars in the challenging conditions of New York, apparently in a bid to create a fleet of driverless taxis. Forecasters at Bank of America feel that the US has already reached peak car usage and that the market's ready for disruption. Their focus is on ride-sharing services, car-pool apps, and the collective use of bicycles.

B I know these car-sharing and bike services are popular in countries like India and China, but car ownership there has risen dramatically too. Though the main road around my town is constantly jammed with traffic, I think people will be more reluctant to give up their cars than you think. The car remains a symbol of freedom and I'm not sure it will be easy for us to give up the idea of having one, even if we realize it's not cost efficient to keep it.

A But using public transport will be an increasingly attractive proposition.

B The train network where I live is in a terrible state, the services are unreliable, and the infrastructure desperately needs modernizing as in many other areas in Britain. At the end of the day we feel more certain of arriving at work by car even if we are stuck in traffic jams and sometimes get in late.

A But deep social trends do point in another direction. In 1994 forty-eight per cent of seventeen to twenty-year-olds and seventy-five per cent of twenty-one to twenty-nine-year-olds had driving licenses. By 2016 these figures had dropped respectively to thirty-one and sixty-six per cent. Some of this, of course, can be accounted for by the deep financial insecurities experienced by millennials and the outrageous cost of car insurance. But it looks as if it might have just as much to do with the shape of the future.

B But people will want their cars to get around.

A Probably not. In the US, the average cost of the UberX service is around one dollar fifty per mile. In New York City, car ownership works out at around three dollars a mile. As and when Uber and Lyft go driverless in cities and suburbs across the planet, the financial savings of not owning a car will become obvious to all.

B There could be long-term benefits if what you say comes true. Mobility would no longer be dependent upon a huge cash outlay for driving lessons, not to mention buying the car and paying the new driver insurance. And everybody, regardless of age or disability, will be able to access the same transport. Decreasing numbers of cars could bring opportunities for the radical redesign of urban areas. The advantages for the environment will be evident. And as towns become more and more car-free, they'll introduce their own changes. Neglected railway lines may come back to life and with any luck my local train service might finally work efficiently.

Outline

The car has been at the heart of industrial civilization for about a century, but the era of mass vehicle ownership and the idea that life is not complete without a car is coming to an end. The sale of diesel and petrol cars will be banned in the UK starting from 2040. Greener more liberating alternatives are available, using public transport will be increasingly attractive, and the financial savings of not owning a car will become obvious to everyone. Initially sceptical, the second speaker ends up by acknowledging the possible long-term benefits: everybody, regardless of age or disability, will be able to access the same transport, decreasing numbers of cars could bring opportunities for the radical redesign of urban areas, and the advantages for the environment will be evident.

Questions

1. Do you use car-sharing services like Uber? What do you think of them?
2. Should all cars be banned from city centres?
3. How do you think urban areas should be redesigned once cars disappear from the streets?
4. Are we giving up part of our freedom if we don't buy a car?