

Tracking the Motives Behind the Phony War on “Traffic Gridlock”

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1. Purposes of Report

As a result of having published several reports that question, challenge, and to some degree ridicule the notion of “gridlock”, as in “traffic gridlock”, I receive communications about the use of the term in such publications as media stories, media releases by politicians, government agencies, corporations, and interest groups, as well as in government, corporate, and interest group publications.

A central point in many of the communications, and the focus of this report may be summarized as follows;

If there is no empirical evidence of even one gridlock event ever occurring anywhere in Canada, why is the term frequently used by people such as politicians, journalists, traffic engineers, heads of transportation agencies, and representatives of car companies and land development companies who make claims about the need to spend more money on roads, or who boast about spending more money on roads, to either get out of gridlock or to prevent getting trapped in gridlock when there is no gridlock?

The question is based on the premise that there is no apparent evidence of a traffic gridlock event ever occurring in Canada, so it is appropriate to begin the report by validating the premise. I do that in Part 2 by first briefly recalling the evidence-related findings and evidence-related challenges that were included in previous publications.

Then, as further validation of the premise, I discuss recent research which corroborates the earlier findings regarding the lack of publicly available evidence to support claims about past, present, or foreseeable gridlock events in Canada.

In part 3, the main body of the report, I consider the possible motivations of people in politics, government, journalism, and business who use a term in a way which they should surely know is conceptual and operational nonsense.

I note for clarification that this is not a funded research project, so the research design is limited to being selective rather than comprehensive in scope. I doubt that limited resources have any effect on the findings but, of course, should anyone think otherwise then he or she is invited, again as per the previous reports, to provide counter-arguments to my position that there is no publicly available evidence to support claims about any gridlock event ever occurring anywhere in Canada.

To close Part 1, the focus of this report is on Canada because the primary clients for the report are Transport Action Canada and the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods, for which I am Distinguished Research Fellow, and Policy and Research Advisor, respectively. However, based on my literature searches, communications with researchers in other countries, and responses to previous reports which are posted on several websites, this investigation may have applicability in other countries where claims about gridlock also appear to far out-strip evidence of gridlock.

Consequently, I am optimistic that in addition to promoting more informed discourse about (motor vehicle) traffic congestion in Canada, this report could contribute to comparative research at the international level into robust measures of congestion. As a preliminary observation in that direction, it will be a significant outcome of this report if it prompts research in other countries about the motives behind references to gridlock and then, more importantly, into ways and means of rationally explaining, discussing, and making informed public policy and planning decisions regarding the pros and cons of different levels of congestion involving all modes of urban transport, that is, walking, cycling, transit, and private motor vehicle.

2. Validating the Premise of No Apparent Evidence to Support Claims of Traffic Gridlock

As noted above, there are two aspects of the validation process in this report:

- Recalling previous findings and challenges in prior publications;
- Presenting the findings of recent research undertaken for this report.

A. Recalling Previous Findings and Challenges about the Absence of Gridlock Evidence

To simplify matters, and for ease of access purposes, I am using as background references only those published materials or productions which have been posted on websites, and are therefore readily accessible to viewers, including websites such as urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com, transport2000.ca, wellarconsulting.com, and slideshare.net.

I believe that these productions which are arranged in last-to-first order (2011, 2011, 2010, 2008, and 2007), are sufficient to provide the background information necessary for the purposes of this report. Further, rather than going through the cumbersome exercise of repeating titles in the text, I identify the production titles by number; that is, report 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, as follows.

- 5** *Traffic Gridlock: A Bad, Mis-Leading Metaphor that Makes for Bad, Mis-Directed Public Policy* (2011)
- 4** *Traffic Gridlock: The Real Deal or a Pile of Nonsense?* (2011)
- 3** *Inspiring a Sustainability Action Agenda* (2011)
- 2** *Cutting to the Chase in Designing New Measures of Transportation System Performance* (2008)
- 1** *Sustainable Transport Best Practices and Geography: Making Connections* (2007)

Reports 1 and 2, which were written five and four years ago, respectively, establish that “gridlock” is based on the word “grid”, which is a term that been around for hundreds of years, and is in the curricula of elementary school, high school, college, and university courses or classes in geography, social studies, arithmetic, design,

electrical engineering, geometry, art, architecture, shop, civil engineering, cartography, surveying, etc.

I have not located any evidence or even an opinion which denies that grid is the root of gridlock, or which contends that traffic gridlock applies in situations or circumstances which do not involve a grid of streets.

So, to be clear, in order for gridlock to occur the traffic event must involve a grid of streets. Or, to re-phrase, NO GRID, NO GRIDLOCK, just a traffic jam on an arterial, a plugged intersection, a backed-up expressway, whatever, but if the traffic problem is not distributed over a grid of streets then by definition there cannot be gridlock.

That point is made repeatedly in reports 5 and 4, and the YouTube video that complements report 3.

Figure A and Figure B from report 5, which have been referred to as

“Graphics which should be sent to every politician, journalist, professor, and anyone else who mis-uses the term gridlock for reasons of ignorance, laziness, whatever. Some of these people will not change their ways because they are lost causes, but others may wake up and smell the coffee.”

are presented in the report at this point to illustrate the grid-gridlock relationship which is at the core of the premise of Part 2. That is, in order to be credible it is necessary that any claim of evidence about traffic gridlock meets the test presented by Figure B.

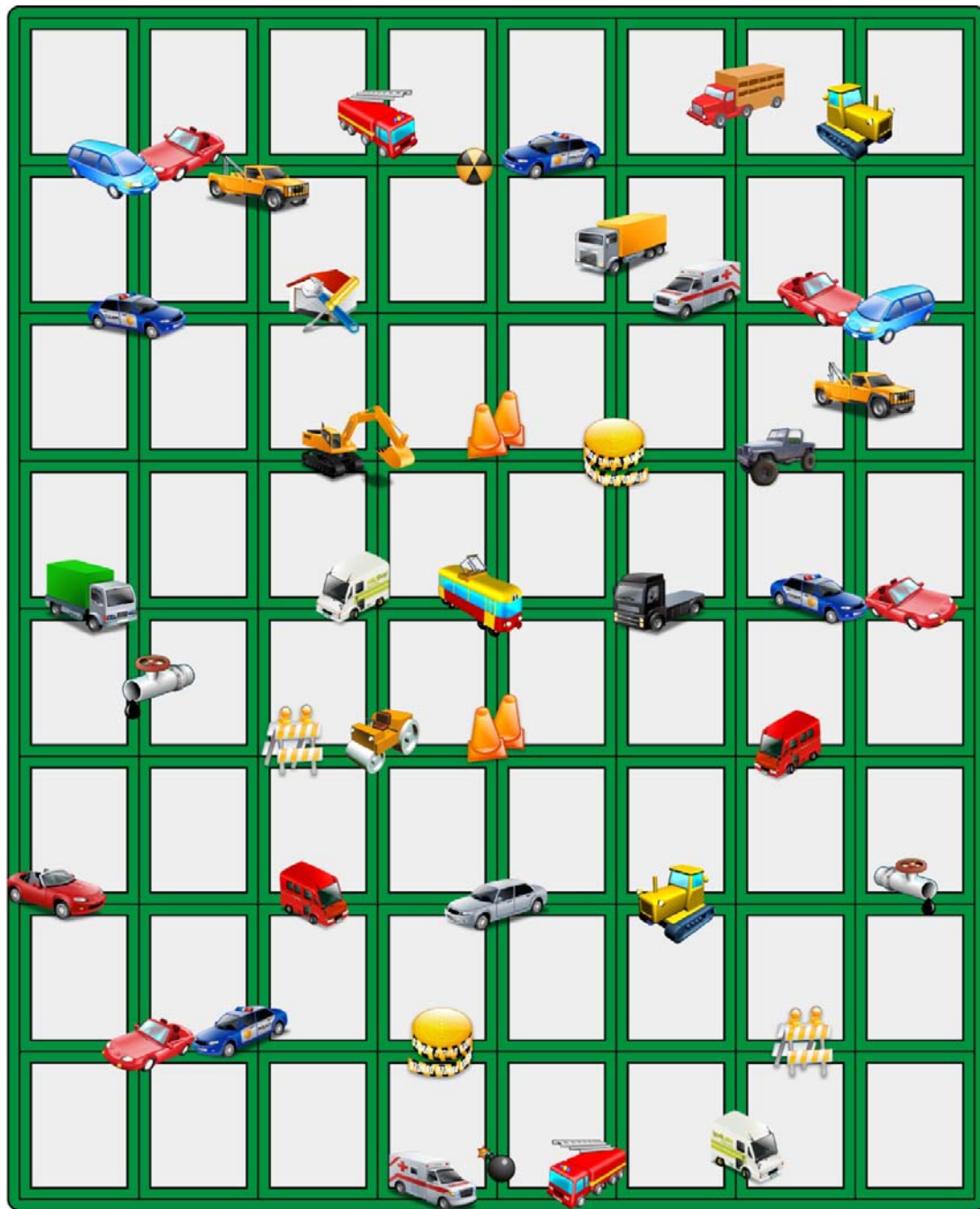
There are other graphics in report 5 and report 4 about the grid-gridlock relationship, as well as numerous accounts of Google search results seeking evidence of purported traffic gridlock. Those graphics and results are accessible by clicking on the links, and readers can examine the original reports for information which is the basis for the premise that there is no apparent evidence to support claims of a traffic gridlock event ever occurring anywhere in Canada.

The bottom line, again, or the essential truth if you will, and there are no ifs, buts, or maybes about the matter, is that for traffic gridlock to occur the traffic situation must affect a grid of streets.

Further, and as also stated in reports 5, 4, and 3, during preparation of those productions I diligently searched the pertinent, extant bodies of literature, and I issued numerous widely circulated calls and challenges in a search for evidence of a traffic gridlock event that occurred for a second, a minute, an hour, whatever, somewhere in Canada.

In addition to not receiving any evidence or even comments to the contrary regarding the contents of those reports, I have not located any contrary evidence or argument in the multiple bodies of literature which I search on a regular basis, nor have I received any research findings in that regard.

**Figure A. Graphic Illustration of Traffic Incidents
Causing Blockages of an Urban Traffic Grid**

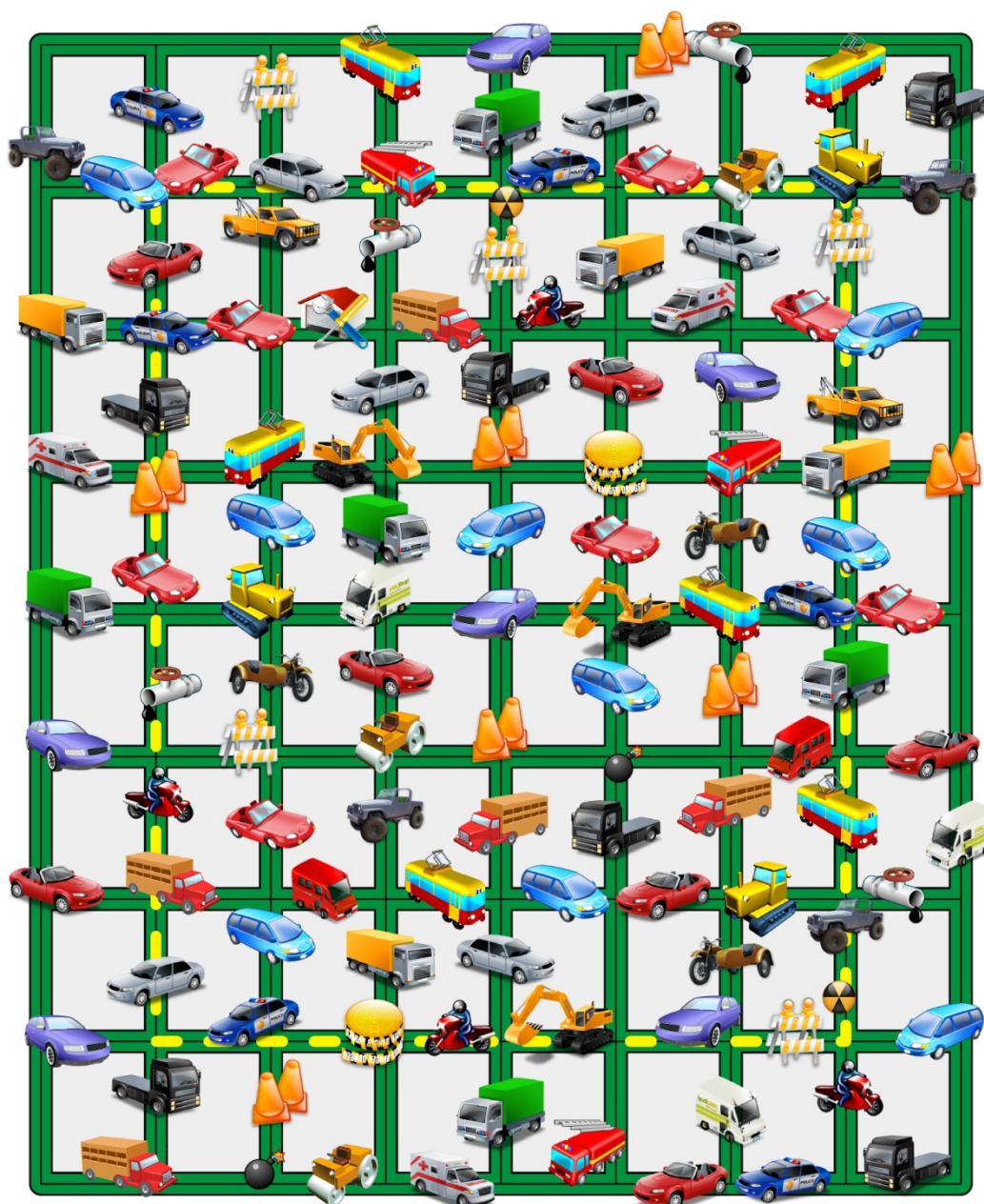


Legend

Green = Streets with unobstructed vehicle traffic flow
Icons = Incidents obstructing vehicle traffic flow
Grey in black border = City block
Dashed yellow line = Gridlocked area

Source: B. Weller, 2011. Traffic Gridlock: A Bad, Mis-Leading Metaphor that Makes for Bad, Mis-Directed Public Policy, p. 8.

Figure B. Graphic Illustration of Traffic Incidents Causing Urban Traffic Gridlock



Legend

Green = Streets with unobstructed vehicle traffic flow

Icons = Incidents obstructing vehicle traffic flow

Grey in black border = City block

Dashed yellow line = Gridlocked area

Icons represent different traffic incidents such as: Collision; Slow-moving city road-work vehicle; Stopped delivery truck; Stopped sanitation vehicle; Vehicle pulled over by traffic police; Signal light malfunction; Construction site; OWS demonstration; Vehicle with flat tire; Funeral procession; Visiting dignitary procession

Source: B. Wellar, 2011. Traffic Gridlock: A Bad, Mis-Leading Metaphor that Makes for Bad, Mis-Directed Public Policy, p. 11.

Therefore, in regard to the premise that there is no apparent evidence of a traffic gridlock event ever occurring in Canada, because no counter evidence or arguments have been encountered which refute in part or whole any of the findings in previous reports, it is deemed appropriate to conclude that the premise is not invalidated.

In the next section, I review research done since reports 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were published, in order to ascertain whether new or different information has been published which invalidates the premise.

B. Recent Research Validating the Premise of No Apparent Evidence to Support Claims of Traffic Gridlock

I have considered a number of ways of testing the validity of the premise, and I believe that there are two ways which are sufficient for the purposes of this report: first, another round of literature searches and, second, direct communications with people of note who have made public declarations as to the reality of gridlock.

The people of note selected for this report are William Ford, president of Ford Motor Company; the editor of Ottawa Sun; and the public delegations at the Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic Congestion, June 04 and June 06, 2012.

a. Literature Searches

Using the research design of previous reports as models, including productions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 listed above, as well as other reports which can be found at wellarconsulting.com, slideshare.net, and transport.2000, I conducted sample searches of the learned, professional, popular, vested interest, public interest, and other literatures, including Google listings.

I did not find any evidence or argument that invalidates the premise.

In the event that I missed such evidence, I look forward to having it brought to my attention at the earliest moment.

b. Questions about William Ford’s Presentation, “A Future Beyond Traffic Gridlock”

Having due regard for William Ford, president of the Ford Motor Company as a major player in the automotive industry, I attempted to have Mr. Ford explain remarks he made about traffic gridlock in a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talk that was brought to my attention by an announcement alert from *Government Technology*. (<http://www.govtech.com/technology/A-Future-Beyond-Traffic-Gridlock.html>)

The letter which I attempted to put before Mr. Ford was sent to various individual and department email addresses of Ford Motor Company in the U.S. and Canada, and is presented as Exhibit A.

**Exhibit A. Email Letter to William Ford, President, Ford Motor Company
Re Use of Term Traffic Gridlock in TED Presentation**

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellarb@uottawa.ca]
Sent: August 17, 2011 4:01 PM
To: 'Wford@ford.com.'
Subject: FW: Request for Information re A Future Beyond Traffic Gridlock

A re-send, prior rejected by system administrator.

B. Wellar

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellarb@uottawa.ca]
Sent: August 17, 2011 3:58 PM
To: 'Wford@ford.com.'
Subject: Request for Information re A Future Beyond Traffic Gridlock

Dear Mr. Ford,

Courtesy of a posting by *Government Technology*, I recently viewed your presentation "A Future Beyond Traffic Gridlock". The title of your presentation and comments made during the presentation prompt a request for information.

That is, I would appreciate learning of any study (ies) or evidence which you had at your disposal to justify using the term "traffic gridlock" in the title and the remarks of your presentation.

As noted in a recent report, it is my finding that in more than 99.99% of newspaper stories, as well as in items arising as Google results, the references to so-called "traffic gridlock" are not supported by substantive studies and associated substantive evidence.

For your information, my report is titled, "Traffic Gridlock: The Real Deal or a Pile of Nonsense?" and can be viewed at wellarconsulting.com, slideshare.net, and transport-action.ca.

You may have evidence which could cause me to modify my findings, and as a result I look forward to receiving the requested information at the earliest moment.

Kind regards.

Barry Wellar

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Borrowing from the pages of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and the seeking of the Scarlet Pimpernel, when it came to the email communication to Mr. Ford,

“I sent it here, I sent it there, I sent that email everywhere”,

but all ten attempts using various directories and 'suggestions' about forwarding were re-directed, rejected, perhaps diverted into the ether and, for all intents and purposes, deep-sixed. No response from or on behalf of Mr. Ford was received.

Having done the right thing by attempting to contact Mr. Ford, but failing, I am moved to opine in the absence of being informed to the contrary that if Mr. Ford had any evidence he would have put it into his TED presentation to give it substance instead of spinning what I perceive to be a pile of platitudes, wishes, vague notions, etc.

Further, if dealing with facts and evidence, or even a relevant graphic or photograph of traffic gridlock did not fit the TED format, or is not Mr. Ford's “thing”, then it would seem to make good corporate sense for someone at the receiving end of the emails to direct me to the studies that would give credibility to Mr. Ford's presentation.

In the absence of any challenge, then, a TED presentation by the president of Ford Motor Company fails to invalidate the premise that there is no apparent evidence to support claims of traffic gridlock.

That said, I remain most receptive to evidence from Mr. Ford which justifies his reference to the term “traffic gridlock”.

c. Ottawa Sun Editorial, “We need quick fix for gridlock”.

The Sun is apparently Canada's largest newspaper chain, and it is reasonable to expect that if any member of the Canadian newspaper community has evidence of genuine traffic gridlock (Recall Figure A and Figure B) it is the Sun, in part because it has reporters in many of Canada's largest metropolitan areas.

Moreover, since they appear to be a technologically savvy group, it is reasonable to expect that Sun journalists and editors have e-access to not just Sun files, but access to massive inventories of digital files from which traffic gridlock evidence could be sourced nationally and internationally.

As result, when an editorial in the Ottawa Sun included the word gridlock, I sent a letter to the editor in search of evidence to support the use of the term in a statement which presumably represents deepest thinking by the editor, editorial board, editorial writer(s), or whoever writes and signs off on Ottawa Sun editorials.

I note for those who may be new or naïve when it comes to the letter-to-editor game, that I am well aware that the chances of one of my letters being published in the Ottawa Sun range somewhere between slim and none, but no matter. That is, once the email is sent and received the communication is a matter of record and, as a

companion outcome, as the author of the letter I have the final say as to whether it “sees the light of day” so to speak.

By way of illustration, in report 3 (*Inspiring a Sustainability Action Agenda*) there is a copy of the email containing the unpublished letter to the Ottawa Sun on a sustainable transportation issue. That letter has “seen the light of day” through report 3 being posted on various websites, and receiving multiple thousands of visits, a number of which resulted in comments about the resourceful way that I circumvented the File 13 fate which frequently befalls those who question or challenge media editorials.

Drawing on that experience, Exhibit B presents another unpublished letter to the editor of the Ottawa Sun, this time on the topic of gridlock.

**Exhibit B: Letter to the Editor, *Ottawa Sun*, Re Use of the Term
“Gridlock” in an Editorial**

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellarb@uottawa.ca]
Sent: July 12, 2012 12:51 PM
To: 'ottsun.oped@sunmedia.ca'
Subject: Letter to editor, Re: “We need quick fix for gridlock”, July 11

Dear editor,

Re: “We need quick fix for gridlock”, July 11. I have seen the word “gridlock” in your newspaper on a number of occasions, but I do not recall ever seeing a photograph of this phenomenon.

Could you provide a photograph or even better several photographs demonstrating a gridlock event that has occurred in Ottawa? Or any Canadian city for that matter?

It could be scary, but I look forward to seeing the photograph(s).

Barry Wellar

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That letter to the editor was not published and, I suspect, for good reason from the Sun’s perspective.

Simply put, I do not have a shred of doubt that if the Ottawa Sun had such a photograph, it would have been the basis of a feature story or multiple feature stories.

Further, I do not have a shred of doubt that if other members of the Sun chain had published such photographs, my letter would have been published and the person or persons writing the comments at the end of letters to the editor for the Ottawa Sun would have so informed me by means of a remark about the flaw(s) in my letter.

Therefore, in the absence of evidence accompanying the editorial, the lack of an evidence-based response to the letter to editor and, to the best of my knowledge, never having published any evidence-based article(s) on the subject of traffic gridlock, the Ottawa Sun fails to invalidate the premise that there is no apparent evidence to support claims of traffic gridlock.

Again, and consistent with the invitation to Mr. Ford, it is not too late for the Ottawa Sun to validate its use of the term “gridlock” by publishing any photographs that it has on file or obtains depicting a genuine traffic gridlock event (Recall Figure A and Figure B above) occurring anywhere in Canada.

d. Communications with Public Delegations Who Used the Terms Gridlock or Traffic Gridlock during the Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic Congestion, June 04 and June 06, 2012

The terms “gridlock” or “traffic gridlock” received 21 mentions on June 04 and 30 mentions on June 06, respectively, during Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic congestion, June 04 and June 06, 2012.

The list of participants, presentations to the Committee, and the questions asked and statements and answers given can be viewed at: http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/transcripts/files_pdf/04-JUN-2012_G015.

For reasons of context, the names and affiliations of the participants who referred to gridlock or traffic gridlock during the hearings are presented in Exhibit C.

It is my finding from examination of the transcripts that no one, no one, who used the term gridlock or traffic gridlock during the hearings supported the use by including evidence or references to evidence in the transcripts, nor did I locate any evidence in reports submitted to the Committee.

As a result, it was necessary to contact the people listed in Exhibit C and ask about evidence, which was done via email communications.

With variations in regard to affiliation, agency, etc., the letter presented as Exhibit D was sent to everyone listed in Exhibit C who used the term gridlock or traffic gridlock in her or his remarks.

Exhibit C. Individuals Who Used the Terms Gridlock or Traffic Gridlock during Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic Congestion, June 04 and June 06, 2012

Members of the Public

James Alcock, Chair, Get Toronto Moving Committee

Wendy Baskerville, TTCriders

Bruce Macgregor, CAO, York Region

Andy Manahan, Executive Director, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario

Paul Manuel, Vice-President, Sales, Kapsch TrafficCom IVHS

Frank Notte, Director of Government Relations, Trillium Automobile Dealers Association (TADA)

Elliott Silverstein, Manager of Government Relations, CAA South Central Ontario

Elected Officials

Rosario Marchese, MPP (Trinity–Spadina)

Denzil Minnan-Wong, Councillor, City of Toronto

John O'Toole, MPP (Durham)

Jonah Schein, MPP (Davenport)

Todd Smith, MPP (Prince Edward-Hastings)

I hasten to add before proceeding to Exhibit D that although the materials were reviewed several times, it is quite possible that I missed someone who should be on the list in Exhibit C. I invite corrections to the list, and upon receipt and confirmation of a name or names I will expand the ‘survey’ accordingly.

All letters were sent July 29 or July 30, and in some cases additional communications were exchanged.

As of this date (October 12, 2012), responses to the inquiry of July 29 or July 30 have been received from some of the individuals who used the terms gridlock and/or traffic gridlock during the hearings.

**Exhibit D. Example of Email letter Sent to All Individuals Who Used the Terms
Gridlock or Traffic Gridlock during Hearings of the Government of Ontario
Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic Congestion,
June 04 and June 06, 2012**

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellarb@uottawa.ca]

Sent: July 29, 2012 2:19 PM

To: 'john.otooleco@pc.ola.org'

Subject: Government of Ontario Committee Transcripts: Standing Committee on
General Government - June 04, 2012 - Traffic congestion.

**Re: Government of Ontario Committee Transcripts: Standing Committee on
General Government - June 04, 2012 - Traffic congestion.**

Dear Mr. O'Toole,

I see in examining the transcript that you use the term "gridlock" in your remarks about traffic congestion, and I hope that you will contribute to my research on that topic.

In addition to conducting literature reviews, I have been searching for photographs, films, videos, traffic flow data, or any other kind of factual evidence of traffic gridlock events anywhere in Canada for any length of time, such as a day, an hour, or even for several minutes.

As you are no doubt aware, the term gridlock is widely used in association with vehicle traffic conditions in numerous media stories, as well as in interviews, presentations, etc., by elected officials at all levels of government, and various interest groups.

However, I believe that in order to develop and implement solutions which actually solve the so-called gridlock problem involving motor vehicles, we need to understand how traffic congestion which is a normal part of the urban condition reaches the state of so-called gridlock.

I would be most grateful, therefore, if you would send me materials which you have that demonstrate an actual gridlock event in Canada, and/or if you would inform me of individuals, organizations, agencies, or other sources which have or might have evidence of traffic gridlock.

I look forward to receiving the requested information at the earliest opportunity.

Thank you in advance for your assistance and kind regards.

Barry Wellar
Dr. Barry Wellar, MCIP
Distinguished Research Fellow
Transport Action Canada

For premise validation purposes, the important point is that none of the respondents informed me that I missed evidence contained in the transcripts, or in the supplementary reports, and no one directed me to any other body of evidence to support her or his use of the term gridlock or traffic gridlock.

Moreover, for premise validation purposes, it is emphasized that the persons listed in Exhibit C are hardly “lightweights” in the Ontario transportation sector. As a result, there is every reason to expect that if there is any evidence to support the notion that traffic gridlock has ever occurred in the Province of Ontario, or anywhere in Canada for that matter, then someone in this august group would be the person to lay out such evidence for all to see.

Further, given the occasion, that is, a Hearing of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic Congestion, there is every reason to expect that if any gridlock or traffic gridlock evidence existed, this would be the place to put it on display. However, when all was said and done no evidence was provided by anyone listed in Exhibit 3.

That is, although the terms gridlock and traffic gridlock were mentioned a total of 51 times by twelve contributors to the Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic congestion, June 04 and June 06, 2012, no one provided evidence of the existence of gridlock or traffic gridlock during the Hearings, and subsequent communications to participants in the Hearings yielded exactly the same evidentiary result: nothing, *nada*, nil, zero, zilch, *rien*, zip.

Or, to re-phrase, despite a specific, explicit request to provide evidence to justify using a term or terms upon which most of the supplications turned, no one, not one person, provided evidence of any substantive kind (Recall Figure A and Figure B above) to support traffic gridlock-related contentions expressed during the Hearings.

Some fourteen (14) weeks have passed since the participants in the Hearings were asked for evidence, and none has been forthcoming, so this may be a courtesy doomed to be unrequited. However, in the interests of open dialogue I invite all participants and any sympathizers of participants, including those entities mentioned in the transcripts, to send me any genuine evidence (Recall Figure A and Figure B above) that they have on file or encounter regarding a traffic gridlock event.

e. Results of Recent Research to Validate the Premise of No Apparent Evidence to Support Claims of Traffic Gridlock

The search for evidence to support use of the terms gridlock and traffic gridlock to describe what may be perceived to be extreme, or hyper congestion, came up empty after repeating the search procedures used in previous studies. Therefore, based on the findings from literature searches, the premise stands: there is no publicly available evidence to support claims of traffic gridlock.

Further, no evidence to counter the premise resulted from repeated attempts to contact William Ford, the president of Ford Motor Company, or the editor (through

letters to the editor) of the Ottawa Sun, or the elected officials (municipal and provincial) and members of vested and public interest groups who participated in the June 04 and June 06, 2012 hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic congestion.

Therefore, in the absence of finding any evidence to the contrary, the premise that there is no apparent evidence to support claims of traffic gridlock is deemed to be validated.

3. What Are the Possible and Probable Motives of People in Politics, Government, Journalism, and Business Who Use a Term Which They Should Surely Know is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense?

Variations of this question have occurred to me on multiple occasions over the past 40+ years during my experiences as university professor, senior civil servant in the Government of Canada, a member of and advisor to community and other public interest groups, consultant to community groups, governments, and corporations, and more than two dozen engagements – opinions, trials, and hearings – as an expert witness.

Since this is not a funded project, and conditions do not permit interviews, I am relying on the literature, informal consultations, and my research experiences over the past 40+ years to guide me in addressing the motives question. As a result, the research design of this part of the report is organized around compiling a list of possible motives, and then selecting five for discussion. This approach fits the design principles of exploratory research, and provides directions and opportunities for others to expand on the present work by questioning or postulating motives which are pertinent to their research or other interests.

A. Possible Motives for Using a Term Which Is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense

Table 1 is a first cut at a list of motives that could conceivably run into the many hundreds, partly because there is great potential for mixing and matching verbs and nouns. At the time of this writing in mid-October some 200 motive statements have been assembled, and those presented in Table 1 are selected for illustrative purposes.

As for what might seem to be a negative flavour or tone to the motives, it should suffice to recall that the motives are based on the apparent fact that the terms gridlock and traffic gridlock are used by people in politics, government, journalism, and business who use a term which they should surely know is conceptual and operational nonsense. Under that circumstance, it seems to me that it would be duplicitous at best to impute a positive spin to the motives.

Table 1. An Illustrative List of Possible Motives for People in Politics, Government, Journalism, and Business to Use a Term Which They Must Surely Know is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense

Achieve a vested decision

Achieve a vested interest

Achieve a vested reputation

Achieve a vested outcome

Achieve a vested public perception

Achieve a vested priority

Appeal to ideologues

Appeal to shallow thinkers

Baffle brains

Cover-up for lack of knowledge

Create a distraction

Create a diversion

Create a false impression

Create an image

Create an illusion

Create an impression of knowledge

Create a rallying point

Create room to manoeuvre

Cultivate interest

Cultivate a mind set

Cultivate a myth

Curry favour

Table 1. An Illustrative List of Possible Motives for People in Politics, Government, Journalism, and Business to Use a Term Which They Should Surely Know is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense (Cont’d)

Divert attention

Foster a myth

Influence a decision

Influence media coverage

Influence opinion

Influence perception

Influence priority

Influence thought

Influence an outcome

Influence a vote

Intimidate

Market a product

Pander to ideology

Pander to special interests

Peddle a myth

Perpetuate a myth

Placate a vested interest

Promote a vested alternative

Promote a vested “call to arms”

Promote vested interests

Promote a vested vision

Table 1. An Illustrative List of Possible Motives for People in Politics, Government, Journalism, and Business to Use a Term Which They Should Surely Know is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense (Cont'd)

Rally troops

Rattle with rhetoric

Scaremonger

Seek to impress

Sell "fluff"

Sell an image

Sell sizzle

Serve an ideological imperative

Serve a vested interest

Sponsor a myth

Truckle to ideology

Twist perceptions

As noted above the list of possible motives in Table 1 is sufficiently illustrative for the purposes of this report. An expanded list is in preparation for a future paper.

It is my experience that questions and comments about motives are the subject of much discussion in many fields on many issues, and most of them in Table 1 can be found on a daily basis in media productions.

However, I believe that this report is an original, formal investigation into the motives behind people in high places using a term such as traffic gridlock which apparently has no basis whatsoever in fact, and should surely be known to be conceptual and operational nonsense to the people using the term.

To my mind, therefore, it follows that such behavior begs for pointed, in-depth, and extensive analysis of the motives behind past, present, and future utterances and writings about so-called traffic gridlock by people in politics, government, journalism, and business. In the next several pages I lay the foundation for such analysis.

B. Brief, Indicative Comments on Probable Motives for Using a Term Which Is Conceptual and Operational Nonsense

The difficulty of selecting five probable motives ranks up there with choosing three flavours for a triple-decker ice cream cone when there are 50 choices on the board, and you are thoroughly partial to at least a dozen of the offerings.

To reduce the options, the motives selected for discussion in this report are derived from the TED talk by William Ford, the Ottawa Sun editorial, and the hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - June 04 and June 06, 2012 - Traffic congestion.

I hasten to add that while I do not ascribe the selected probable motives to any of those productions, I am pleased to acknowledge the contributions which they made to my thinking about motives.

a. Scaremongering

It is my impression that scaremongering, which seeks to create a sense of foreboding, concern, anxiety, dread, gloom-and-doom, and worry, worry, worry about a multitude of grim scenarios, is the basis for many of the references to gridlock or traffic gridlock in media reports, committee presentations, public meetings, petitions, etc.

Drawing on materials reviewed for the validation process, scaremongering stories, images, references, etc., which readily come to mind include those about thousands of commuters not getting to work on time because their private motor vehicles are frozen in traffic in downtown Toronto; numerous businesses going bankrupt because trucks carrying merchandise cannot meet their Just-in-Time schedules; and, entire regional economies grinding to a halt and economically going into the tank, in all cases because vehicular traffic is vividly portrayed as being paralyzed for block after block after block by dread, dire, grim, brutal, end-of-civilization gridlock.

Given that scaremongering has a tremendous return-on-investment ratio, that is, it takes very little skill or effort to shout “Gridlock” and the results can be significant among certain groups, it strikes me that scaremongering ranks highly among the motives which are put into play by those fueling or waging the phony war on gridlock, and is a significant driver of other motives.

b. Pandering to ideology

Pandering to ideology includes attempting to humour, gratify, satisfy, indulge, etc., the “automobilitis” people who think that they should be able to drive throughout urban areas as though there is no one else on the road, that any stoppages in driving any time, any place, under any conditions, should be no more than one light cycle at worst, per day, and that the private motor vehicle – car, SUV, minivan, pick-up, tractor trailer, etc., – should be treated as “king of the road” as a matter of course.

It is my impression that pandering to ideology is behind much of the hyperbole and hysteria that accompany doomsday pronouncements, exhortations, and predictions regarding so-called gridlock.

As a possible case in point, there appear to be individuals and collections of individuals (e.g., political parties, interest groups) who are pathologically opposed to rail for moving people and freight, and in what might best be described as a knee-jerk reaction, they invariably yell “Gridlock” as the code word or trigger for galvanizing the pack into calling for and building more roads at even the hint of increased support for rail transport within and between cities and regions.

c. Serving a vested interest or vested interests

It is my impression that the overwhelming majority of references to gridlock, as in “Need to break the gridlock stranglehold” make no reference whatsoever to the public interest which is served, for example, by increased regard for sustainable transport principles and practices, with emphasis in order of priority on the walk, cycle, and transit modes, and then the private motor vehicle mode for moving people, and the rail mode over the truck mode as the preferred mode for moving inter-urban freight.

Rather, instead of having all due regard for the broad public interest, the focus is on catering to a particular segment of society such as, for example, companies in a sector of the business community, and particularly those which move people and goods by road-based private motor vehicles, or those which benefit from increased expenditures of public funds on road construction.

d. Sell “fluff”

Traffic congestion levels range between lowest order and highest order, with a number of levels in between, and there are a variety of methodologically-based quantitative, qualitative, and visualization techniques for measuring, evaluating, and illustrating or demonstrating the causes and consequences of the different levels.

Anyone familiar with geographic information systems (GIS) knows what I am talking about, and any reader wanting to know more about GIS can find information at numerous websites, including that of URISA (www.urisa.org).

However, rather than do any substantively heavy mental lifting, it is far easier and in many cases unavoidably tempting for some individuals, agencies, corporations, etc., to just use the clear-as-mud term “gridlock” which has a lot of sensory appeal even if it does not exist in reality.

That way, by selling “fluff” as a substitute for substance, and wrapping the urban transportation problem up in one word that means anything and nothing, the users of the term avoid the burden of explaining why urban areas by definition involve congestion, and that it takes serious thinking, writing, talking, visualizing, etc., to explain, first, why congestion is an essential condition of urban development and, second, why it is that for every challenge presented by congestion at different levels

there are important messages and significant opportunities affecting not just transportation and mobility, but land use planning and development as well.

Along that line of thought, I recently encountered what I consider to be the fluff factor when I was asked to comment on a “congestion study” by the TomTom Company, which is a supplier of in-car location and navigation products and services, commonly referred to as GPS devices.

As reported by Tom Spears in ‘Going nowhere fast’ (Ottawa Citizen, October 13, 2012, p. E14), I use the phrase “pretty shallow analysis” or, fluff, if you will.

My major point of concern was that whoever did the congestion study seemed to have little appreciation that congestion is a core part of the urban condition. Rather, it seemed to me, the congestion angle was being used as a means to sell a product, and not to meaningfully address structural, functional, or other causes of extreme congestion. Trifling at the margins like that falls into the fluff domain in my view.

e. Influence outcomes

It is my impression that virtually everyone – politician, journalist, government official, agency rep, business person, etc., – who uses the term gridlock does so for the purpose of influencing an outcome or outcomes such as: having new roads built; having existing roads extended; having existing roads widened; having intersections enlarged; removing on-street parking; shortening the walk times allowed for pedestrians to traverse intersections; precluding or limiting bike travel; promoting the sales of private motor vehicles; moving an item up on the political agenda; affecting a vote on transportation mode funding; affecting the contents of a Transportation Master Plan; affecting the contents of an Official Plan; diminishing the role of transit; scuttling talk about rail infrastructure, etc.

This is not to say, of course, that there is anything inherently wrong with the motive of attempting to influence outcomes. The problem which arises in this case, however, is that since there is no evidence to support the notion of gridlock, a thinking person is ineluctably led to the perception that the motive is ulterior, and the purpose served by the outcome is not in the public interest.

f. Other motives in Table 1

With respect to the other motives in Table 1, I believe that each of them warrants consideration as a probable motive for use of the term gridlock. There are, of course, many ways to comment on the motives, but I am optimistic that the discussions of the five motives selected for this report are sufficient for illustrative purposes, and are also sufficiently indicative for anyone seeking guidance about critiquing any of the motives.

Moreover, I am optimistic that this discussion will inspire others to add to the body of motives, and the body of commentary on the motives underlying use of the term gridlock or traffic gridlock by politicians, government officials, journalists, and business people who should surely know the term is conceptual and operational nonsense.

I close section 3 by extending an invitation to readers who perceive that my interpretation of motives is on the unfair side.

Readers are invited to email me counter views, that is, positive views which identify and describe the motives which he/she believes are behind the thinking of politicians, government officials, journalists, and business people who use a term which they should surely know is conceptual and operational nonsense. Upon confirmation of the legitimacy of the communications, they will be included in one or more future productions, such as a report or a website posting.

Finally, I particularly look forward to receiving communications about motives from the actual users of the term gridlock or traffic gridlock, so that we will have on record first-hand explanations as to the thinking behind the motives which fuel what I argue is a phony war on so-called gridlock. Again respondents are requested to send all communications as emails, so that they may be incorporated in a future production.

4. Next Steps in Tracking the Motives behind the Phony War on “Gridlock”

The phony war on gridlock is most likely driven by a variety of motives, but since many of the motives can be traced back to money and to ideology, which are two of the most powerful forces in Canadian society, it is likely that the phony war will continue in one guise or another for some time to come.

It is possible, however, that the duration and intensity of the phony war on gridlock could be diminished significantly by means of targeted actions that focus specifically on users of the term. The following activities are relatively easy to implement, and in combination have the potential for considerable impact as files on the users of the term(s) and their affiliations are compiled and made widely available through the Internet.

First, and as done for this report, keyword searches for “gridlock” and “traffic gridlock” in media reports, government documents, media releases, interest group releases, conference presentations, website entries, etc., lead quickly and directly to individuals, agencies, corporations, etc., contributing to the phony war on gridlock.

Second, well-publicized requests for evidence to support claims about gridlock are an excellent way to inform networks of contacts that certain individuals, agencies, corporations, etc., have been called out and put on the spot to produce evidence in order to avoid/escape the “Phony” tag. The practice of doing call outs digitally means that information interchange is instantaneous, and readily disseminated.

Third, courtesy of the Internet it is remarkably easy to disseminate files, which means that tracking contributors to the phony war on gridlock can be done easily, quickly, and with minimum cost. It is my impression that the phony war has elements of an orchestrated enterprise, and that being the case there is emphasis on creating local, regional, national, and international networks to track contributors, claims or contentions, and explicit, implicit, possible, and perceived motives.

