

# MindsinMotion.net jubilee: looking back with transport ecologist Udo Becker

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To celebrate the first *MindsinMotion.net* jubilee we go back in time with various speakers at our founding conference.

[O009 Image 1](#)

“In 2004 we still had the feeling that the obvious facts could conjure up enough pressure to achieve something less unsustainable. But that promise was not kept. In some fields we're even slowly moving backwards, despite the fact that our knowledge is going forward,” are the not very uplifting words of Udo Becker, who is professor of transport ecology at the Technical University of Dresden, Germany.

At the [Energy in Motion](#) conference of 2004, organised by the then Dutch EU presidency, Becker was chair of the session: 'Sustainable urban transport: clean vehicles for healthy cities'. “I did chair that session,” he says, “but do I really want to read what I think of the results since then?”

However, Becker, always walking a tightrope of hope over a valley of disillusion, agreed to an interview. “There are two sides of the medal,” he explains, “it is also good to see the impact of the EU presidency and to see what influence others have had.”

## **Naive**

“I thought things could get better!” he says when asked about his expectations five years ago. “In retrospect, maybe we were naive, but we spoke our minds and lobbyists seemed to take us seriously back then. At the time, I thought one could talk to ACEA, for instance. [ACEA is the European automobile manufacturers' association.] ACEA's Secretary General Ivan Hodac was also present at the conference.”

Hodac is one of the other speakers we've interviewed for this series, so don't miss his take on things.

## **Self-centred**

Becker continues: “But the car industry proved more cynical than I expected and I never thought that European institutions and national governments would be so easily turned around by them.

“I must admit there is a new directive on CO2 emission limits for cars: emission standards were set at an average of 130 grammes per kilometre in 2015. But that applies only to passenger cars, and only in the test cycle, and energy consuming extras like airconditioning are left out of the equation. Also, 'dual mapping', which is a form of manipulating the test cycle so that the resulting emission values differ from real life emissions, still seems possible. The overall effects of the new requirements are less than unambitious, while everybody knows that our planet needs ambitious solutions.“

#### [F073 Image 1](#)

Standards were meant to apply to light duty vehicles as well, but as always, the procedure is being stalled. One would think that the car industry and German companies in particular would have learnt the lesson that ambitious framework conditions help them in the long run and give them an edge over competitors, but short-term and self-centred thinking seems to be even more common than in 2004 when we met in Amsterdam,” Becker says.

#### **Ivory tower**

Although he is often disillusioned, Becker is still happy to be teaching. “It is fun!” he says. “Universities can be ivory towers from which it is easy to speak. But it is also a world where long-term discussions can and must take place, and students are eager to talk about long-term solutions. All this short-termism does not really satisfy the minds and perceptions of our students, and that gives hope.

“Students tend to respond quickly and very strongly. Of course, it will be some time before any of our students becomes chancellor, but I'm optimistic about this because pressure is mounting. Just think of the growing global consensus about climate change.”

#### **Pass the baton**

Becker concludes the interview with a question to one of the other speakers at the 2004 conference.

“I admire those people working in administrations, doing their daily businesses. Take for example Robert Thaler [of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management], who was also present in Amsterdam, 2004. I'd like to ask him: 'Hey Robert, how do you manage to keep up your good humour after all?'

“Of all the necessary resources I think 'good humour' is the most critical one, besides the time we need to change societies. 'Time' one can not generate, but good humour we can!”

## Udo Becker previously on MindsinMotion.net

- [“Focus on access instead of traffic”](#)
- [People-oriented mobility policies to induce global changes?](#)