

Transport has cool customer in the hot seat

Kulveer Ranger
Adviser to Boris Johnson



■ These two-wheeled wonders may have been dubbed 'Boris bikes' but, along with his boss, Kulveer Ranger has played a prominent role in promoting the Barclays Cycle Hire scheme

by Marina Thomas
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» SIGNAL failure on the uber-crowded Northern line threatened to hijack my interview with Kulveer Ranger, Boris Johnson's transport whizz at City Hall.

While I turn up cursing and dishevelled, he is as fresh faced, charismatic and calm as ever. He also happens to be celebrating his 36th birthday that day.

Ranger is wearing the smart three-piece suit he is known for – and, of course, his turban. In fact, he could have had a future in fashion.

His family had a wholesale costume jewellery shop in Soho and he dabbled in fashion as well as DJing before becoming a management consultant and then moving into politics.

Part of the new generation of young, progressive Conservatives, Tatler magazine featured him as "top Tory tot-

ty" in 2008 and he is seen by political commentators as a future transport secretary.

But what of the ongoing nightmare of the Jubilee and Victoria line upgrades which have apparently left Boris tearing his hair out with London Underground executives? And, of course, don't forget the strikes by various unions.

Credible

Ranger says he always respects the choice of people who withdraw their labour if doing so is justified and a proper case is put forward.

"But every time there's a strike it's always about safety. It is our number one issue. We have one of the best, if not the best, records for safety in the world.

"It seems ingenuous. They need to be more honest with their members and the public.

"It can't always be about safety. There has been a humongous change especially since Oysters came in in 2003,

and saying no to any change is not a real position to hold."

Each time I have met Ranger, I have been amazed by his supreme ability to spin any situation while sounding ultra-polished and highly credible – more so than any other politician I have interviewed.

During our discussion, this politicised persona is rather frustrating at first as he launches into a gushing speech about Boris and how "privileged" he is to work with him.

But as the interview becomes more relaxed over tea, I found out more about him, his Tory views and how he came to acquire them.

Ranger was born and bred in Hammersmith and his grandfather Gurnam Singh Sahni, still alive, set up this country's first Asian newspaper, the Punjab Times, in the mid-60s.

He also fundraised with Sir George Young, the Conservative politician who is currently the Leader of the House of Commons.

Inspired by the challenges his grandparents faced in coming over from India and engaging with different cultures, Ranger still sees Singh Sahni as his role model.

A fan of art and design, Ranger did an architecture degree at University College London – an experience which, he says, "brings him a different perspective" in his role as



■ Since Ranger started his job in 2008, the East London line opened and Oysters came to the river

Johnson's transport adviser.

Following stints in fashion, he then spent 10 years in management consultancy with the Nichols Group, where his clients included the Department for Transport, Network Rail and London Underground.

"Some people may see transport as nerdy, but it is fascinating, complex and always challenging," Ranger says

Enthusiastic

"There are macro and micro issues every day – it is the most exciting brief in the world. Transport is two-thirds of Johnson's agenda. It impacts on every minute of every day of all of our lives.

"A lot of people have views and issues. You want to engage with that."

Since he became the mayor of London's transport adviser in 2008, the East London line extension has been delivered, Oyster cards have been brought on to the river network, the Woolwich DLR extension has been completed

and, of course, 'Boris bikes' and cycle superhighways have been rolled out after some glitches.

Ranger is looking forward to focusing on Crossrail, opening up the river further and rolling out air conditioning on to more of the sub-surface Underground lines in the coming year.

And he is enthusiastic about east London regeneration, with 2012 around the corner and Crossrail due to be completed by 2018.

"It will be a fantastic time for the next 10-20 years in Docklands with all the infrastructure being put in place."

Ranger's Tory beliefs are in a small government delivering value for money, a strong economy and policies that make sure "everyone has a part to play in society".

As a Sikh, Ranger believes in 'sewa' – "we should all try and give something back".

But he is rather embarrassed when I ask him whether he volunteers his own time.

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Ranger's CV

He has helped deliver projects including the Oyster card in London and the King's Cross redevelopment.

He is a former vice-chairman of the Conservative Party with responsibility for cities.

In 2005, he ran for MP in Makerfield, Wigan, getting

12.2 per cent of the votes.

He was head-hunted by Boris Johnson after the May 2008 election to take charge of London's transport infrastructure.

His remit covers the Underground, buses, cycling, the river, overground rail and walking.



■ Ranger has been tipped as a Tory to watch out for in a new generation of politicians

Pictures: Joe Lord

He admits he no longer does, saying how time-consuming his job is.

"I'm not one of those people that thinks government should provide everything for you. People have struggled to get a view of the Big Society. I think it can work for London. We need to see how we can bring together our communities, people with poor education, alcohol problems, single parents.

"In London you transcend tribal politics. London is your constituency not your political ground and politics takes on a much broader view."

Ranger is coy about future roles in the Conservative Party following the outcome of the election battle between Ken Livingstone

and Johnson next year.

But this is an extremely driven and intelligent individual who would fit in well with a Cameron cabinet and the new Tory ideologies.

Ranger calls Johnson "one of the most charismatic politicians around of his era".

"Boris is an inspiring character in many ways - people love him, people have different views about him.

"He strikes a chord with almost everyone he meets. That is quite special and unique.

"I am surprised about how much we have got done [since May 2008] as bureaucracy eats into a lot and it takes a lot of time to get through. We have pushed a lot of

things through under huge financial burden."

In his spare time, Ranger rides cycles and motorbikes and has done charity events in hiking in Bhutan and on his bike.

The next six to 12 months will be crucial for the Underground upgrades ahead of the 2012 Olympics, and after weeks of delays, the pressure is on Ranger to ease commuter pain.

"Whatever you do in life, you have to make it your passion, and although I'm not an engineer and some people see transport as nerdy, it's what you make it.

"I am challenging the status quo and have every faith we can deliver world-class transport for 2012."

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On football

Ranger is a big Spurs fan, touting Harry Redknapp as a future England manager. But he always comes back to politics, likening the huge pressure

managers are under to what politicians face. "One minute they are heroes, the next villains. To retain that calmness is to be admired."

On the Jubilee and Victoria lines

"I understand everyone's frustrations. We are on the cusp of delivering that upgrade, people are working really hard.

"As we are in the testing stage at the moment on the Jubilee line, it is subject to more problems than usual."