# Privilege as road to perdition | Inquirer Opinion

https://opinion.inquirer.net/178184/privilege-as-road-to-perdition

The sense of entitlement is real—and disgusting.

Ours is a culture severely cleaved by consciousness of class—recall how the term “bakya” was a fatal derogative in the ’60s, until “burgis” turned the table around in the ’70s. As amply demonstrated by certain high officials, being seen as rich, powerful, or influential translates into a life of ease and privilege, with doors effortlessly opening and restricted bus lanes beckoning.

Which explains why on Sunday at Edsa Guadalupe, a luxury car with plate number 7 thought nothing of slipping into the busway meant only for emergency vehicles and the five top officials of the land.

According to the Department of Transportation, the white Cadillac Escalade ignored and tried to run over the traffic enforcer who had approached it before fleeing the scene, its passenger even flipping the bird as it sped away.

While the driver, who surrendered Tuesday, said he was in a hurry to get back to their Ortigas office because he was feeling unwell, subsequent information belied this. In a press briefing, Sen. Raffy Tulfo said the vehicle belongs to Orient Pacific Corp. whose shareholders, Securities and Exchange Commission records revealed, include the brother and father of Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian.

The passenger was an elderly Gatchalian relative, Tulfo said, refusing to confirm speculations that it was the senator’s father, plastics tycoon William Gatchalian who had initially denied using the vehicle at that time, saying he was in Japan.

## Complicit passengers?

The SUV’s link to Senator Gatchalian puts into doubt the Land Transportation Office’s (LTO) previous claim that the protocol plate—issued to incumbent senators—was fake, raising questions on whether it was shielding the official from blame. His earlier denial notwithstanding, shouldn’t Senator Gatchalian now explain his family’s involvement in the near-mishap, especially since protocol plates are supposed to be tacked only on vehicles while they are being used by the official concerned?

So what happens now? Will the LTO include the senator and his family in its sanctions and legal consequences of flouting the bus lane rule and endangering lives in the process? The agency should take this opportunity to show its uncompromising stance on traffic violations if only to discourage motorists and riders from taking their cue from officials who put themselves above the law.

According to the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA), it apprehended 11,571 bus lane violators from Jan. 1 to Nov. 10 last year. On its first day of imposing stiffer fines and penalties in November 2023, the agency caught 333 entering the Edsa bus carousel, two of them its own personnel.

## Metro’s carmaggedon

Escaping the city’s notorious traffic—among the worst in the world, according to multinational traffic data provider TomTom International BV—has often been cited as an excuse, and indeed, being stuck in the Metro’s carmaggedon means the country losing as much as P2.4 billion a day as of 2014. This could increase to P6 billion a day by 2030, says a study by the Japan International Co. Agency.

For some government officials, such figures are enough reason to flout the rules: don’t their lofty positions and heavy responsibilities make their time more precious than those of mere mortals? Their seven-figure earnings also means they have more to lose with every minute wasted in monstrous traffic.

No wonder several government officials have been caught disregarding the bus lane rule, among them Ilocos Sur politician Chavit Singson who rightfully apologized for the lapse and even offered a reward to the traffic enforcer for doing a good job. Senate President Francis Escudero similarly apologized for a household member whose driver broke the rule. Not Leyte representative and actor Richard Gomez, who was bashed on social media for suggesting that the bus lane be opened to others like him, who had to stew in traffic while only a few buses were seen using the restricted lane.

## False conceit

Exercising the same clout, a woman claimed to be from the military and a man identified himself as a Bulacan mayor when apprehended for the violation. Three traffic enforcers—since reprimanded—even escorted one drunk violator to his condo instead of the police station, saying they just wanted to make sure he got home safely. How has the MMDA dealt with these cases?

What these entitled individuals fail to understand is how the restricted bus lane imposes equity—giving those unable to afford a vehicle and the luxury of choosing a shorter route, the alternative of riding public transport allowed on a less crowded and time-efficient lane.

In the end, an unbending and equitable application of traffic rules would put pretenders in their place, while stripping officials of their false conceit. They are, after all, public servants working on the behest of a taxpaying public, and should be the first to shun abuse of power and defer to the law.