

NATIONAL ALLIANCE **AGAINST** TOLLS - SCOTLAND

Tolled Bridges

Background

1. National Alliance Against Tolls - Scotland made a submission to Phase Two of the Tolled Bridges Review. The purpose of this document is to briefly deal with a few of the points that have arisen since then.
2. A decision by MSPs is needed now on the issue of Scotland's three remaining tolls - Erskine, Forth and Tay. This is partly because of the "Tolled Bridges Review" but in any case tolls will soon end on two bridges unless MSPs agree to keep them. Tolling periods were extended, but the statutory power for tolls on the Erskine Bridge ceases on 1 July 2006 (originally 1991) and on the Forth Bridge on 31 March 2006 (originally 1995).
3. The Tolls consultation document was a list of questions, and in effect gave to the condemned toll payers, some choice as to the manner of execution. Those in the areas that suffer from toll regimes see no point in tinkering. Our response therefore set out why the tolls should not continue. Another 27 respondees took a similar line, and indicated some degree of opposition to tolls, including:-

Argyll & Bute Council - *"this Council reiterates its fundamental objection to tolls continuing on the Erskine Bridge"*

Dunbartonshire Chamber of Commerce - *"It is our policy that the tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be withdrawn Tolls create an artificial barrier to trade and discourage the free and true movement of goods and labour from one side of the Clyde to the other."*

Federation of Small Businesses - *"Ideally we would envisage the bridges being part of the wider trunk road network and consequently toll-free."*

Fife Council - *"Council has reaffirmed its principled opposition to bridge tolls"*

Freight Transport Association - *"would prefer to see all bridges toll free"*

Glasgow City Council - *"... Council's view that the tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be abolished."*

Inverclyde Council - *"... considered that tolling on the Erskine Bridge will have adverse effects ... especially on the lower Clyde. As a result the Council agreed that tolling on the Erskine Bridge should end immediately"*

Renfrewshire Council - *"... continues to hold the view that the bridge should be free in the same manner as the remainder of the strategic road network in this area.... The strong social, economic and environmental arguments for abolishing tolls on the Erskine Bridge were forcibly made to the Executive ... in a letter signed by the 9 Council leaders associated with the Clyde Valley Community Planning partnership."*

Scottish Council for Development and Industry - *"As a supporting mechanism for economic development and social inclusion, SCDI feels that the abolition of tolls on all bridges in Scotland would be the most equitable course of action".*

Strathclyde Passenger Transport - *"... the ongoing presence of tolls on the (Erskine) bridge affects accessibility to employment opportunities, adversely affects local communities and increases traffic flows on the A82, the Clyde tunnel and the M8 in Renfrewshire."*

Transport Research Institute - *"remove all tolls and pay for maintenance etc from fuel duty"*

West Of Scotland Transport Partnership - *"The Partnership believes that tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be abolished".*

4. The authorities (including the Executive), who currently receive the tolls want to keep them. The current and previous Transport Ministers when questioned by MSPs have refused to accept that tolls (except at Skye) should go. It was also reported (Evening News 20th July) that an official from FETA (the Forth bridge authority) said:- *"A crossing like the Forth Road Bridge takes so much upkeep and maintenance, it is not fair that central government should have to pay for it."*

Despite being described by one Fife councillor of "spin-doctoring", FETA agreed on the 2nd September that a "Communications Manager" be recruited and the services of a PR firm be sought.

In February, the people of Edinburgh rejected tolls by a margin of three to one. They rejected the idea of tolls despite vast efforts to sell the idea, and despite 42% of Edinburgh households not having a car.

There can be no doubt that the people want the removal of the three remaining bridge tolls.

Where tolls money is being spent

5. Over the UK as a whole there are £50 billion of taxes a year on roads use. Only £7 billion of this is spent on roads. This unfairness is aggravated, when a few are forced to pay tolls on top of the taxes. Tolls are even being used to help pay for another road - In April the Executive announced that a scheme for the upgrading of the A8000/M8 spur would go ahead. The scheme was described as "vital" and of "strategic importance". Despite this it appears that around £12 million of the costs will come from Forth road bridge tolls.
6. More money is being wasted in collecting tolls.
The Forth bridge authority have a five million pound scheme to replace toll booths. The decision to spend all this money has been taken while the Scottish Executive is reviewing the tolls regime. Perversely, the work on these toll booths is currently causing major queues and tailbacks.

On the Tay they also want to spend a lot of money moving the toll booths (due to the major congestion that the toll barriers cause in Dundee). The Tay Bridge board have voted to spend £2 million on the existing toll booths, and another £13 million in the longer term (Dundee's Evening Telegraph on 19 September). Though it appears that the Tay board will not be wasting this money till after MSPs have decided whether tolls will continue.

"Congestion"

7. The authorities argue that tolls are needed to reduce congestion. But when Forth bridge tolls were last increased FETA said (press release 21st April) that the new level of tolls "would not deter significant numbers of bridge users".
8. The reality is that people are on the road when they need to be. Making them pay more just adds to the pain of the unfortunate few who are subject to a tolls regime. Toll advocates also want to bring in "differential" tolls (higher tolls at certain times and / or on faster lanes). In the USA these are referred to as "Lexus" tolls or lanes, as it is the drivers of big luxury cars who use them. The less well off and those who need to travel long distances to work will lose out again.

Advocating tolls as a means of reducing congestion, can only mean that the intention is to force poorer drivers off the road. Tolls are themselves a cause of any congestion, drivers may be delayed at the toll barriers, or may take long detours to avoid the toll.

Tolls Needed for a new bridge

9. Over the last two months, the authorities have made announcements indicating that a new Forth road bridge is needed because either the existing bridge needs to be replaced or it can't cope with the traffic. The implication is that if a new bridge is needed then it will have to be tolled, and therefore the existing tolls should be kept. Some may wonder about the timing of these announcements, but in any case the arguments are spurious.
10. Is a new bridge needed because the existing bridge is likely to fall down?
If so then why did FETA tell last December's toll inquiry FETA that they wanted a toll increase because they planned to spend over £100 million on extra maintenance for the bridge over a period of twenty years?
According to a bridge official, any damage is caused by heavy goods vehicles (Evening News 26th August), but lorries were exempted from the toll increase.
11. Is a new bridge needed because there is too much traffic on the existing bridge?
If so then why do the official figures from FETA show that the traffic in 2004 was actually less than it was in 2003? When the Forth railway bridge was recently closed, there was no perceptible effect on the road bridge.
12. Whatever else is decided, approval was given in June to another bridge across the Forth at Kincardine. The capacity of the existing Forth road bridge could be increased by improvements to approaches, tidal flow in peak periods (which is used in England and elsewhere including the Golden Gate bridge), and by removal of the toll barriers (the four lane untolled bridge over the Mersey at Runcorn carries 5 million more vehicles a year than the Forth bridge).
13. Though the toll advocates have called for a new bridge, they don't seem to want cars to use it. According to a bridge official it would be *"a multi-modal bridge with lanes for buses, taxis and high-occupancy vehicles on a bridge deck capable of carrying light rail or trams."* (Evening News 26th August)
14. Toll advocates want a new bridge built under the Public Finance Initiative. If any bridge is built in this way, then the cost of financing will be crippling. We would end up with a situation where the tolls on old and new bridges are so high that the whole area suffers economic blight. In any case we believe that the claimed need for a new bridge is a red herring. The issue of whether a new bridge is needed, is a long term question that needs thorough and independent research into all the alternatives, including the possible uses of the Forth rail bridge. All the bridge tolls should be removed without further excuses and delays.

Some points from the original submission:-

1. Bridge Tolls were intended to be temporary

Tolled crossings were promoted at Westminster on the basis that tolls would only be levied for a limited period, during which the original cost of construction would be recovered. Some tolls remain, because promises have been broken and the goal posts moved to keep the income from tolls.

2. Tolls are Unfair

Tolling is discriminatory and unfair to the few who have to use these roads. Tolls are regressive and unrelated to income or size of car. They hit those who have to travel long distances to work and who even without the tolls burden already spend a disproportionate amount of their income on fuel duty and other roads taxes.

3. Tolls are Uneconomic

Businesses where road transport is important will prefer to locate elsewhere. Tourists will tend to avoid areas where there are tolls. The removal of these three tolls, would give Scotland a competitive advantage in attracting business from other areas of the UK and EU that suffer from tolls.

Toll collection prolongs congestion periods and where there is a choice, drivers will tend to avoid toll roads and use other roads, causing longer journeys, more fuel consumption and more emissions.

4. Tolls Income is an infinitesimal part of Scotland's budget

Tolls on the three bridges raise a gross amount of about £21 million, (Erskine £5m, Forth £12m, Tay £4m). This is a great deal of money to the few who carry the burden, but it is insignificant in relation to the Executive's budget of £27 billion for 2005/06, or it's budget underspending of £280 million last year, or the £4 billion or more which is Scotland's share of UK taxes on roads users. If the bridges were assimilated into the normal road network, then there would be large savings in administration and toll collection, and maintenance needs could be judged more objectively.

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