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"How Election result affects moves to implement road pricing"

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The wider picture

If I can start by reminding you that “tolls” have been unpopular going back to at least Magna Carta where they were described as “evil”. So the authorities have introduced phrases such as “road pricing” and “congestion charging”, when what they are really talking about is tolls.

The word “toll” is usually taken to mean a charge for using a particular stretch of road. At one time all tolls had some form of barrier to make sure that people paid. But some tolls in other countries are now “barrierless” or “open road” and use some sort of passive tag inside the vehicle which is identified by sensors using microwave radiation. These systems are usually backed up by cameras to catch those drivers without working tags. The expression “Road pricing” in the narrow sense is usually taken to mean using a system such as just described to toll most main roads and potentially all roads.

As I will expand on later, the General election result will have had very little effect on the chances of there being any movement towards such a national “Road pricing” system.

What is more likely is a more limited expansion of tolling in one form or another. In going through the prospects for this, I will be going over some familiar ground, as the past is a pointer to what may happen in the future, and also to remind you of the various ways in which they are attempting to extend tolling.

Tolls are not of course new. At one time there were in Britain 30 thousand miles of tolled roads – together with tolls on most river crossings. In the late 1800s, the tolls were removed on every one of Britain's turnpikes and almost all the bridges including the London ones. With only a few exceptions, the formerly tolled roads and bridges became public highways maintained by the local authorities.

Unfortunately, tolls reappeared in the 1900s and though they are most unpopular with drivers who have to use them, some politicians and others are keen to take us back to the 1800s.

Process of Government

The “Process of Government” is the title of a book published over 100 years ago. In part it looked at “Tammany Hall”, which was the corrupt Democratic Party machine that controlled New York and some other American cities till at the 1960s. The research on this concluded that all Governments get into, and stay in office by doing what the most powerful interests want. Politicians tend to be amoral. That is to say they are not usually concerned as to whether what they say is accurate or not, and often they don't know whether it is.

This has an effect on officials. If asked, they are expected to publicly support the policies of those in power and to avoid revealing any information that might cast doubt on those policies. Putting it another way, officials are expected to be “economical with the truth”, even though this means that what they say is misleading.

One example of being “economical with the truth” is the numerous surveys which “prove” that drivers support road pricing. There was another one published by the DfT recently (the 26th August). It said that “*over half of adults agreed that the current system of paying for road use should change so that the amount people pay is based on how often, when and where they use the roads*”. Of course the phrase “*when and where they use the roads*” means “road pricing” and “congestion charging”.

The people who take part in these surveys are deceived. They are given no facts about the extent to which drivers are already paying too much. Neither are they told about the vast costs of setting up and administering these road pricing schemes, and instead are given the impression that drivers would pay the same amount as now.

I have said that the authorities are misleading the public, but the politicians are also deceiving each other as their opinions on things such as road pricing will be influenced by the inaccurate and partial information from colleagues and from the officials who are supposed to be working for them.

In some cases it seems to be the officials who tell the politicians what to do! One example of this is from when we were fighting the Manchester road toll plans and we realised that some of the Manchester TIF submissions to the Government were made before the councillors had seen and approved them.

When it comes to legislation at Westminster, the opinions of MPs are also moulded by what they are told by lobbyists. I was heavily involved with trying to stop an Act that aimed to increase tolls and to use the profits to fund public transport. We had no funds other than what came out of our own personal pockets, but the authority that we were up against was believed to be spending over one million pounds. Such sums can include buying a lot of lobbying. And it is difficult to deal with, as it is done in private and you don't know what is being said.

Another problem for campaigners which they will not be aware of, is the possible use of surveillance powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers *Act* 2000, to discover what those who oppose the authorities are up to.

Local congestion charging

Anyway if we leave the political process and move to “Road User charging”, what has been happening?

As far as most drivers are concerned the most visible events over the last seven years or so have of course been the attempts to introduce so called “congestion charging” and sell the idea of “road pricing”.

These attempts did not depend on any change in the law, as the necessary legislation was passed ten years ago. The main act is the Transport Act 2000 which covers England and Wales, and there are similar acts which cover London and Scotland.

These three acts introduced powers for the Government and local authorities to toll any road. As the word “tolls” is like poison to most drivers, the acts refer to tolls as “Road User Charging”. None of the acts, by the way, use the expression “congestion charges”, which is a Public Relations invention.

It was Durham that in 2002 first introduced a charge under the 2000 Act legislation, but it only applies to one street. Then the London Act powers were used by Ken Livingstone to introduce a charge from February 2003.

So far these are the only instances of the powers being used (apart from Dartford which I will come to later). But Edinburgh also attempted to use the equivalent Scottish powers to introduce a “congestion charge”, though most people there referred to it as a toll.

Edinburgh Council needed the agreement of the Scottish Executive to do this, and the Executive ordered that there must be a public inquiry. This was held in the summer of 2004. On behalf of the ABD, Doctor Alan Wernick gave evidence to the Inquiry, though tragically he died soon after.

In the October of 2004 the Inquiry ruled in favour of the scheme, but at the same time the Scottish Executive decreed that there should be a local poll. Our alliance played a part in the campaigning that took place between the October and the poll in February 2005.

The plan was defeated by a margin of nearly three to one.

Though most of them will have known nothing about it, this victory in Edinburgh was important for all British drivers. If the poll had gone the

other way, then local authorities around Britain would have been queuing up to introduce similar schemes.

As it was, we forecast that the anti roads lobby, and those who would love a new tax on drivers would not give up.

In the event, to persuade local authorities in England to persevere with such schemes, the Government five months later came up with the Transport Innovation Fund as a financial carrot. The result was that in 2005 and 2006, councils that covered almost all urban areas in England applied to be considered for TIF. As the various rounds of TIF took place it became clear that the Greater Manchester area was the front runner, and nearly all the other areas had not even left the starting gate. As some of you may know, our alliance then joined with the ABD in early 2007 to start a group, which it was decided to call “Manchester Against Road Tolls”.

One of the main things that the MART group decided to do was to try and persuade the authorities to have a poll on the issue. It seemed most unlikely that the Manchester politicians would agree to this, but in the end they decided to risk a poll.

As you will all know, the result of the poll in December 2008 was another major defeat for the authorities - this time by a margin of nearly four to one.

Though the Manchester plan was killed, various other local authorities continued to develop plans, till in March this year the Government finally announced that the TIF programme was dead. At that time, only Tory controlled Cambridgeshire had submitted a congestion charge scheme, and one other – Tory / Lib Dem controlled Reading was just about to do so.

While all this was going on, Ken Livingstone, despite a negative result from consultations, went ahead with his own plans for a western extension of the London charge zone which was implemented in February of 2007.

National road pricing

In parallel with these attempts at “congestion charging” in local areas, there were various attempts to sell the idea of national “road pricing”.

The first clue that something was going to happen was in July 2003, when the DfT published a discussion paper called "Managing Our Roads". It set out what the Government said were the advantages of tolls and set up a feasibility study for what was to be called “road pricing”.

A year later, in July 2004, Alistair Darling issued the “Future of Transport” white paper, which set out his strategy for “road pricing”. The Government at the same time abandoned its separate plans for tolling lorries. Over the next two years there were more announcements from the Government and from organisations which supported the proposals.

Then in November 2006, an online facility for petitions to the Prime Minister was introduced. As everyone knows one of the first petitions was Peter Robert's - “to Scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy”. The petition got a record 1.8 million signatures by the time it closed 3 months later in February 2007.

Peter Roberts had delivered a mortal blow to Road pricing, though the plan was not kicked into the long grass till a year later when in March 2008 Ruth Kelly quietly made an announcement.

I say it was kicked into the long grass, rather than buried, as various interests were still pushing it, and the Labour Government continued with research on it.

Despite these reversals for tolling, Parliament passed a new Local Transport Act in November 2008. The Act amended the 2000 Transport Act to make it even easier for local authorities to introduce “road user charging”. Oddly, one of the strongest opponents of the Bill was a Labour MP – Graham Stringer, who had been a major opponent of the Manchester plans. By contrast, the Tories virtually sat on their hands while the 2008 Bill went through.

Other tolls

I will now move on to other forms of tolls. These used to be empowered by Acts, which applied to only one location. But in 1991 the Tory Government passed the New Roads and Street Works Act, which enables tolls to be put on any new road or river crossing. It also for the first time made it a criminal offence to refuse to pay a toll. The Skye bridge was the first use of this legislation and 130 of the protesters there were convicted, with some going to gaol.

The only other use of the 1991 Act, so far, was when the Tory Government decided that the Birmingham North Relief Road, would be a privately operated toll road – to be known as the M6 Toll. The road which opened in December 2003 initially appeared to be a success. But it became apparent after a year or two that not enough drivers were willing to pay a toll. This has meant that the company has lost a substantial amount of money and that the road has not had the effect of reducing congestion, that a toll free road would have had.

In July 2004, the Labour Government came up with their own scheme for the M6. They abandoned their own recently announced plans for toll free widening of the motorway and came up with the M6 “Expressway” – which was to be a new road in effect extending the M6 Toll up to the Manchester area. We campaigned against this, though the decision two years later to abandon the scheme, was probably mainly because of opposition from anti roads groups.

In March 2008, the Government came up with yet another new idea, this time it was to add tolled lanes to existing motorways. This plan was dead a year later.

There have been various other proposals made to toll new roads and to put a toll on all existing motorways and some other main roads. These proposals did not come from the Labour Government, but from the Lib Dems and some members of the Tory party, such as John Redwood.

We have also had the perpetuation of tolls that should have ended. The prime example of this is the Dartford Crossing where from April 2003 the no longer legal tolls were replaced with “road user charges” under the Transport Act 2000 powers.

Recently there has been another major twist which we have been fighting. This is a plan to build a new tolled crossing of the Mersey using the New Roads Act 1991 powers. The bridge will be near to a free crossing, and the Leader of the local Council last year said - *"The two bridges will be so close together that to have one bridge free and the other bridge charged would be a waste of money as people would not use the new bridge and everyone would try and trundle across the present bridge"*. So the intention is to use the Transport Act powers to also toll the free bridge.

The official estimate is that the total traffic crossing on two tolled bridges will actually be less than it is with the existing free bridge.

The new Government are currently considering approving this mad plan. The only thing that is making them hesitate is another bizarre feature of this scheme – despite the tolling it will still need money from the Government.

If this Mersey bridges scheme does get Government approval, it will be a model for what they will do elsewhere. So if you need a new road, not only may it be tolled, but tolls may also be added to alternative routes.

The election

And so at last we come to May's General Election.

The Labour manifesto said that they would not introduce road pricing in the life of the next Parliament. Some Labour candidates also hinted that the tolls on the Humber bridge might be removed.

The Tory manifesto said nothing at all about any form of tolls. But during the election campaign, David Cameron expressed enthusiastic support for tolling any new roads and praised the M6 Toll.

The Lib Dems were quite frank about what their plans were if in Government, though they must have assumed that this was impossible. Their manifesto said that they would "*Undertake preparations for the introduction of a system of road pricing in a second parliament*".

Tom Baker, the Lib Dem Transport spokesman, who is now one of the Coalition Transport Ministers, went further than the manifesto; he said that his party would start by tolling all the motorways and dual carriageways.

The manifestos were overtaken by the Tory / Lib Dem Coalition "Agreement" that was published on the 11th May. This made no mention of any form of tolling, and in fact it does not mention roads at all.

But almost immediately after the new Coalition was formed, Vince Cable told the Sunday Times that the Coalition were looking at a plan submitted by Rothschilds. The bankers proposed that all the motorways and trunk roads be sold off, probably to overseas buyers, who would then toll them. Though they might be "shadow" tolls, that means that the Government would in effect be renting the roads back.

The Government would have a very large amount of money up front to pay off its debts, providing of course that they could fiddle the books so that the money from the banks was not itself treated as a loan. Vince Cable was reported as being enthusiastic about all this, but nothing has happened since, at least nothing in public.

In any case what gets into the papers may only be the tip of the iceberg. There will be private lobbying from organisations that would hope to gain from any extension of tolling. Lobbyists will include potential builders and operators, suppliers of tolling equipment and services, and public transport operators.

On the other hand, Philip Hammond, the new Secretary of State, has said that he will “end the war on the motorist”. I would take that with a large pinch of salt. But he is certainly clever, and he should realise that demanding further money from drivers and businesses who use the roads is not good for Britain, or the Tory party!

One of the new Transport Ministers is Mike Penning, a Tory, who when in opposition said that he wanted the Dartford tolls removed. It now seems clear that he and the new Government have no intention of removing those tolls, though it is not clear whether they will privatise them as Labour planned.

Whatever Philip Hammond and his Ministers may be mulling over, as I said at the beginning, there is no chance at all of the Government announcing within this Parliament that they intend to go ahead with national road pricing. There are three main reasons for this -

Firstly, Labour abandoned their plans for national road pricing, and it would be political suicide for the Tories if they now said that it was their own aim.

Secondly, there would still be immense practical difficulties, with the possibility that a lot of time and money would be wasted on a system that eventually had to join some other big schemes on the scrap heap..

Lastly, the financial costs are **huge**, and a lot of the cost would be in advance of getting any income. As part of the feasibility study that Alistair Darling called for in 2003, it was estimated that a national scheme would cost between 10 billion pounds and 62 billion pounds to implement, with annual running costs of up to 5 billion pounds on top of that. If you assume that the higher estimate is more realistic and spread the initial costs over ten years, then the amortised cost is over 10 billion pounds a year, or the same as adding another 23 pence tax a litre to the cost of fuel. That is 23 pence a litre tax just to break even – all the money collected would be wasted in the cost of collecting it.

I also think it most unlikely that any local authority will attempt to introduce “congestion charging”. They will know that the opinion surveys that claim people support such charges are a sham, as they have the evidence of the real polls in Edinburgh and Manchester. In March this year, Labour withdrew the financial carrot of TIF and though both Tories

and the Lib Dems have supported congestion charging it is most unlikely that the Coalition can afford to bring back that carrot. Without it there is no chance that any Council will commit Hara-kiri.

Having said that, since the General election, a very bleak picture has been painted about the state of the public finances. There is pressure for massive spending cuts and increased taxes. The DfT are not exempt from this pressure and they will be required to make massive savings from somewhere. Roads users get a very bad deal at the moment but it seems to be inevitable that it will get worse. So though there is no chance of national road pricing or local congestion charging, there are likely to be worse roads and more taxes and tolls.

The tolls might only affect a few areas, or could extend all the way up to the tolling of most motorways and other major roads.

One difficulty the Coalition might have in doing this is if the measures only affected England. Wales has their own say on road toll matters, and it is unlikely that the Labour / Plaid Cymru Welsh Assembly Government will do what the Westminster Coalition wants. Scotland has removed all tolls and it is unlikely that they would bring them back to please a Government in London.

What next?

So what next? This largely depends on people like you.

As the ABD will be aware only about one in 10,000 of drivers is in a driver's organisation. Those who don't like drivers and oppose the building of new roads are well organised, have a lot more money and tend to get a better press. The result is that though most councillors and MPs drive, they treat drivers badly and most changes to roads are to slow traffic rather than to reduce congestion.

One possible advantage that drivers have is that there are a hell of a lot of us. This means that those in power must have in mind that if they push drivers beyond a certain limit, then the drivers may rebel.

Apart from Peter Roberts' petition the only example of the use of the potential power of drivers was the protest in October 2000 about the price of untaxed fuel as it affected farmers, though others joined in. The ease with which they were able to hold the country to ransom gave the Labour Government a bad scare. But they were better prepared at the next protest in September 2005, which had little effect. Perhaps overall the protests showed that drivers can usually be safely ignored.

But getting back to the 64,000 dollar question what can drivers and in particular the ABD do? We sometimes refer to the need for the three Ps – People, Press and Politicians. You have to involve sufficient numbers of People, nationally and at a local level, to get the Press to take you seriously, and then when you have the Press with you, the Politicians will follow. All this is of course, easier said than done,

If I can mention one other important thing, which is that we need well researched and presented information, and one of the most important audiences for this is not drivers nor the press but direct contact with politicians. Even opponents may be influenced indirectly.

In conclusion, there is still a war on the motorist and it is being fought on various fronts. Over the last twenty years, drivers have had a lot more defeats than victories, but if the few of us, including the ABD, had not been fighting on behalf of the many, then both the present situation and the future outlook for drivers would be a lot worse.

Thank you.

<http://notolls.org.uk/>