

12 December 2008

STATEMENT FROM NATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TOLLS

ASSUMING THE RESULT OF THE TOLL POLL IS THAT THE GREATER MANCHESTER "CONGESTION CHARGE" SCHEME IS REJECTED

The National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) has been opposing the "Road pricing" scheme for tolls on most roads since it was first proposed by Alistair Darling (then the Transport Secretary) in July 2004. We have been involved with the opposition to the Manchester scheme since early 2007 as part of the group "Manchester Against Road Tolls" (MART).

If it had not been for MART there might not have been a "referendum". For over a year the authorities rejected calls for the public to decide on this issue. So MART started the process of requisitioning referendums on elected Mayors as a proxy for a vote on the tolls issue. The authorities did not want elected Mayors and this summer they conceded that there would be a "referendum" on their plans.

We are delighted that the so called "Congestion Charge" scheme has failed to get support in this ballot. This is a victory for the people over the establishment. The spread of tolls under various names received a major blow when in February 2005 the voters of Edinburgh rejected the idea by three to one. That failed to kill the beast, but the voters of the Manchester area should now have driven a stake through the heart of this Toll tax vampire.

We are also relieved as the voters were tempted to vote "Yes" by adverts that said "I want cheaper bus fares - That's Why I'm voting Yes". This claim was no better than a "Con" trick, as the only official proposal was for lower fares in limited circumstances for the low paid. As with other means tested benefits, not all of those who might have been eligible would have claimed it.

The Government also tried to push it through with a bribe of £1.5 billion pounds and a claim that 90% of drivers would generally not have to pay tolls. This was in effect saying to the people of Greater Manchester vote "Yes" as it is others who will pay for transport improvements and not you. That the Government should campaign on "I'm alright Jack" basis was a scandal.

There was also a mystery that if so few people were paying, then where was all the money to come from? Despite the large bribe there would still be loans of over one billion pounds to repay, plus interest and the cost of administering and trying to enforce the charges. The authorities' own figures gave an estimate that tolls would have to sum to over £8 billion over the life of the scheme. Even this astronomic figure was probably too low, as the authorities had based it on collection and enforcement costs that were many times lower than those experienced with the London scheme.

In our view the rules requiring local authorities to be open in what they do were ignored at various stages, though the Local Government Ombudsman in effect refused to consider our complaints because he couldn't deal with an issue that affected the population as a whole! We also made a Freedom of Information Act request to see

what was in the scheme submitted in August 2007 to the Government, but they sat on this for nearly a year before releasing anything, and part of it is still secret.

There has been a mammoth promotion campaign by the authorities which has been going on since last year. We estimate that the authorities have so far spent about £40 million on drawing up the scheme with a large part of that being spent on "consultation" and "informing the public". All of this "information" was one sided, with Ofcom deciding at the end of November that the "information" advertisements broadcast by ITV on behalf of the authorities had breached the Code on Political Advertising.

Much of what has happened since it was confirmed that there would be a "referendum" would not have been allowed if this had been a real referendum. There are rules under the "Political Parties, Elections And Referendums Act 2000", but what has taken place in Greater Manchester is instead a local poll under Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003. There are no rules for a local poll, and in particular there are no limits on campaign expenditure and no way of knowing where the funds came from. Even the Ballot paper pack was in our view biased to obscure the fact that the real question was "Will you accept tolls on roads?"

The mantra of the Government has for some time been that "doing nothing is not an option". We quite agree, but the Government should now rip up it's plans for "road pricing", "congestion charging", toll lanes on motorways and other new tolls and toll increases. It should look at carrots instead of sticks and at improving the capacity of the road network and public transport without road tolls. Drivers pay fifty billion pounds a year in fuel duty and other taxes, and the Government puts very little of that back into the roads system. Instead what has been happening around Britain is that the authorities are introducing measures that have the effect of slowing down general traffic and creating the congestion that they then want to tax.

If, despite this vote, the Government and other parties who have similar ideas persist in a policy of more taxes and tolls, we hope that all drivers will revolt and demand a fair deal for what they are already paying.

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