

The Mersey Gateway Public Inquiry 2009

PROOF OF EVIDENCE OF MERSEY TUNNELS USERS ASSOCIATION

Introduction

1. My name is Dave Loudon. I am the Chairman of the Mersey Tunnel Users Association (MTUA) which campaigns on behalf of users of the Mersey Tunnels. Our ultimate aim is the removal of the tolls with the Tunnels being merged into the road network. I have a small business and travel all over the region. During the course of my business I use the Runcorn Bridge about four times a week.
2. Due to increased population and higher incomes there is of course more traffic on most roads including the bridge. Unfortunately the vast bulk of the increasing amount of money that the Government takes from drivers is not spent on the roads to help it to cope with the demand from motorists and businesses. This is one reason why there are some bottlenecks on the roads system, particularly at peak times.
3. A new Mersey crossing should certainly therefore be good for both drivers and the economy as it will deal with one bottleneck. That is it should be good for drivers and the economy, but it won't be if like the Mersey Tunnels the crossing is tolled.
4. Putting tolls on a river crossing is like putting up a big sign saying "KEEP AWAY!". The effect is partly shown by the fact that the Mersey Tunnels have twice the lanes of the Runcorn bridge, but carry slightly less traffic. The proposed tolls will encourage traffic to divert east, though the way things are going on the authorities and the Government may decide to block the tolls free routes at Warrington and the M6 Thelwood Viaduct.
5. The harm can affect both sides of the crossing, but there is usually "a wrong side of the tracks" where there are fewer employment opportunities and people are forced to either travel further to find work or have to move home to an area that is not blighted by tolls.

6. The plans before the Inquiry are the worst possible nightmare as they also intend to toll the existing bridge. As a businessman I believe that this toll will have a particularly bad effect on businesses. Some businesses and groups may be supporting the scheme as proposed, but in my view any that are supporting it have either done so through ignorance of what this scheme involves or they have been taken in by the threat that "there is no alternative" and have yielded without a fight.

7. As chairman of the MTUA I am also well aware from what users of the Tunnels say that tolls such as on the Mersey Tunnels divide families and friends and particularly hit those on the lowest incomes and in the worst paid jobs. When we were opposing the Mersey Tunnels Bill in 2004 we told their Lordships about the effect of the tolls on one of our committee members who used to live in Liverpool but had moved to the other side shortly before her husband had died. Not only did she have to pay the tolls to see the rest of her family, her job as a cleaner was on the Liverpool side, and because of her hours of work she went by car. The tolls obviously took up a large proportion of her income. Their Lordships passed the Bill so it seems that they were not too concerned about those on low incomes. And no doubt there will be people here who support this scheme for whom tolls are a price worth paying, and some may even think that it is an advantage of the scheme if poorer drivers are discouraged from using the roads. But what a sorry country it is when drivers on low incomes who already have to pay high fuels and other taxes are divided from their families by the extra burden of a toll tax which is the same for them as the driver of a large luxury car.

8. The plan to charge for this vital link at Runcorn is totally against all that has been talked about in the past when we were told that the aim was that the new Mersey crossing would not be tolled. There was not even a whisper of a suggestion that the existing bridge which was paid for long ago would also be tolled. This will be the first time in Britain that a bridge has been taken from the people and handed over to a private firm.

9. Further down river we still have this yoke around our necks, though we were promised that the Tunnels tolls would not be permanent. The authorities and the Government must believe that as they have got away with charging tolls on the road link at Liverpool for over 75 years, then the people nearby in Widnes and

Runcorn will believe that this fate is inevitable and will not complain. I see that in Halton the only promise seems to be that there will be tolls for at least 30 years and that they will keep on going up!

10. The proposed crossing is also in my view in the wrong place as most of the traffic is going to or from the Liverpool area which is to the west of the proposed crossing or to or from North Wales and West Cheshire which is also to the west. The optimum route would have linked the M57 and M62 via the Knowsley Expressway direct to the M56 without going through Runcorn. The authorities also intend to almost close the existing bridge. The combined effect of the proposed location for the new bridge and the scaling down of the existing bridge means that most of the cross river traffic is to be routed through the middle of Runcorn to the disturbance of local people.
11. The residents of Runcorn and Widnes have been given the impression that they are going to get reduced rates on the new bridge and also on the old bridge. A nice promise that you will get reduced rates on what is now free! But in any case these promises may be worthless as the authorities have admitted that the tolls and any discounts will depend on what the new owner of the bridges says. We are also unsure as to whether these discounts are legal, as the MTUA last year called for a discount on the Mersey Tunnels similar to that proposed for Dartford and we were told that the Government had said that the circumstances at Dartford were "unique".
12. What is not unique about the existing Runcorn Bridge is that the cost of building it was largely met from ALL taxpayers and particularly the people of Cheshire and Lancashire. So how come they are to pay more? Is it just because the people of West Cheshire, Liverpool, Wirral and Knowsley don't get any vote on this plan?
13. The MTUA do not oppose a new crossing of the Mersey, but the plan for tolls and for almost closing the existing bridge will be a disaster and I urge the Inspector to make sure that the Minister is aware of this – so that if this terrible scheme does go ahead at least the politicians won't be able to say that they didn't know what they were doing.

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