

**Scrap Mersey Tolls Press Release 13 October 2019**  
**Mersey Gateway - Two Years On**

The old bridge from Runcorn to Widnes was closed at midnight on Friday 13th October 2017, and the Gateway opened a few minutes later on 14th October. There may be some people celebrating this birthday, but the reality is that this scheme has been one of the worst things to happen to our region in the last decade.

Scrap Mersey Tolls had thought of marking this weekend with a protest, but we are instead issuing this statement to try and counter some of the nonsense that will be pumped out by the PR people.

Arguably the Gateway is the wrong bridge in the wrong location, but wherever it was built there was no reason for it to be tolled. The decision taken in 2004 to toll the bridge meant that it opened nine years later than originally planned and is actually costing the taxpayer more than the rejected plan for an untolled bridge.

The Gateway people claim that there is record traffic. In fact there is less traffic using the new bridge than in the last full year (2016) of use on the old bridge.

No one, apart from Merseyside politicians likes tolls, but the system being used on the bridge is particularly bad as it results in drivers frequently being penalised because Merseyflow claims that they did not pay the tolls on time. Despite the Traffic Penalty Tribunal viewing what is happening as unlawful, up to the end of June an almost incredible 1.4 million Penalty notices had been issued by Merseyflow and about 220 thousand of those penalties will have been passed to bailiffs to enforce by threatening to seize people's property and cars. Those behind the scheme say that these numbers are not significant compared with the number of drivers using the bridge, but every single one of these penalties is at least an unwelcome nuisance and in many cases has caused extreme distress. Even one case would be too many when this crossing need never have been tolled.

The 14th October should not be an occasion for celebration. It would be more appropriate to reflect on the folly and callousness of our politicians.

**DETAIL - SOME OF THE CLAIMS BY TOLLING SUPPORTERS**

**"There Was No Choice But To Toll Both Bridges Or You Get No New Bridge"**

This was the claim from the politicians at the end of 2004 when the Labour government refused to back the Halton Council scheme for a new untolled bridge that was estimated to cost £200 million and be open to traffic in 2008.

The result of the decision to toll the bridges was perverse as the taxpayers ended up agreeing to pay £655 million towards the tolled scheme and the bridge was not open till nine years after the date that an untolled bridge could have been ready.

Potentially the effect of tolling on the taxpayer is even worse than £655 million. The Department for Transport has in its annual accounts a 'contingent liability' of £1,546 million for "Commitment by the Department to fund any shortfall of toll revenue from the Mersey Gateway Bridge to meet Halton Council's financial obligations under the Demand Management Participation Agreement".

In the period since the decision was made in 2004 to toll the Mersey, the tolls in Scotland and

Wales have been removed. The only other planned tolls scheme in England - the new A14, because of opposition to tolls has gone ahead without them. At one point the new Queensferry Crossing over the Forth was also to be tolled, but it went ahead without tolling.

The fact is that the 'Gateway' scheme could also have gone ahead without tolls. The bridges were tolled because of cooperation between Merseytravel, Halton Council and the Labour Government which had the aim of protecting and increasing Mersey Tunnel tolls. They may have also influenced the stopping and delaying of possible new untolled crossings upriver near Warrington, which could have gone ahead at very low cost and would have eased traffic down river.

### **"Tolls And Penalties Are Legal"**

Perhaps taking lessons from what Merseytravel has been able to do, the backers of the tolled bridges seem to have ignored almost every rule in the book. They have done this with cooperation from government agencies, the Traffic Enforcement Centre 'court' and to some extent even local Police. But the thorn in their side is the Traffic Penalty Tribunal. Drivers who have appealed on time have won every appeal to the Tribunal. The toll backers have vast resources and could have afforded to go to the High Court to try and get these decisions overturned. They have not done so. This is an indication that even they realise that the way the tolls are enforced is unlawful.

### **"Traffic Is At Record Levels"**

The Council has boasted about the amount of traffic using the bridge. In fact the current traffic has fallen by 1.5 million journeys a year.

During 2016 (the last full year that the old bridge was open) there were 25.4 million vehicles using the bridge. For the most recent 12 months (July 2018 to June 2019) that figures have been published, there were only 23.9 million vehicles using the new bridge.

Nearly 40% of journeys are made by drivers who do not have to pay the toll. Without this the fall in traffic would have been even greater.

As well as traffic having fallen since the crossing was tolled, it is also very substantially less than the official forecasts that were available at the 2009 Public Inquiry. The actual traffic using the old bridge on a weekday was then said to be 90,000, and that figure was forecast to increase. This compares with a figure of only about 78,000 now using the new bridge on a weekday.

### **"The Effect Of Penalties Is Minor"**

We recently issued a press release commenting on this-

<http://www.notolls.org.uk/smtpdfs/SMTPR7Oct2019-£32mPenalties.pdf>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/scrapmerseytolls/>

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