

NATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TOLLS - SCOTLAND

Scottish Executive - Tolled Bridges Study 2006 - Submission

Introduction

1. The Executive invited submissions of evidence to a study "*of the economic, social and environmental impacts and costs of retaining or removing the tolls from the Tay and Forth Road Bridges. It will focus on the impacts of the tolls on the economy and local communities in Fife and Dundee; will also examine wider impacts, on the Lothians and nationally...*".
2. The National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) was formed by groups, including Skye and Kyle Against Tolls (since wound up), protesting against existing tolls around Britain. We took part in the Edinburgh Toll Poll campaign, and gave evidence at the Inquiry into the last toll increase on the Forth road bridge.
3. We made a submission to the last tolls review - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/57346/0016570.pdf> - and believe that it should already be clear that tolls are unwanted, unfair, uneconomic and unnecessary.
4. Consultants are being appointed to assist this study in some way. We have asked for the brief that has been given to the potential consultants. That has been refused. The rest of this submission highlights some of our main points, but we assume that those undertaking the study will also look at our last submission and the information and views on our website.

General points

5. Turnpike and bridge riots around Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries showed what people thought of tolls. All the then tolls and "*exactions*" in Scotland were abolished by Section 33 of the Roads and Bridges (Scotland) Act, 1878. That view is reflected in recent surveys and in last year's Edinburgh toll poll. The Edinburgh people rejected tolls by a margin of three to one - despite a biased question, a costly pro tolls campaign, and 42% of Edinburgh households not having a car.
6. Bridge tolls were intended to be temporary. The Forth Bridge tolls should have stopped by 1995. Tolls on the Tay bridge were to cease when the construction

cost had been recovered, which in effect was achieved some years ago as the existing debt is due to subsequent works.

7. Tolls are a regressive tax. Their unfairness is compounded by being a tax which mainly affects those in Fife and on Tayside, and which has little or no effect on most of those who decided to continue its imposition. This additional tax is unjustified when road users (in UK) already pay nearly £50 billion a year in taxes, with only one seventh spent on roads.
8. Tolls on the two bridges raise a gross amount of about £16 million, (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 £29 billion for 2006/07.
9. The removal of these two tolls, would enable Scotland to promote to potential new businesses and tourists the complete absence of tolls, and thus gain a competitive economic advantage over other areas of the UK and abroad that suffer from tolls.
10. If tolls have all the benefits that are claimed by the Executive, then why are these blessings largely confined to the people of Fife? Or is the Executive retaining a toll tax on Fife as it wants to keep a "bridgehead" for inflicting more tolls on Scotland and aiding the Westminster Government's plans for tolls on all roads?

Economic impact of Tolls

11. The Executive in their reports on the Tolled Bridges Review said that removal of tolls "*could have a detrimental effect on ... economic growth objectives*". There is no foundation for this assertion particularly as they also say "*We are not aware of any commissioned research specifically examining local economic impacts of the bridge tolls, or of their removal*".
12. Our own view is that tolls inhibit economic activity in the areas where they are situated. Businesses where road transport is important will locate elsewhere. Tourists and shoppers will go to areas where there are no tolls. Our view was shared by some of the business organisations who made submissions to the tolls consultation in 2005-

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

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

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*".

13. The Highland Council commissioned from Napier University an "Economic Impact Study" on Skye bridge tolls in 2002. This report confirmed the negative impact of the tolls - <http://www.napier.ac.uk/depts/eri/research/skye.htm>

14. The Executive referred (para 6.2.3.) to the Napier study in their report on Phase One of the Tolled Bridges Review, and said that the "*report commissioned by Highland Council found the tolls had considerably reduced the positive impact of the bridge on the local economy. The Scottish Executive had concerns about the methodology used in this report and questioned the robustness of the results.*" We are disappointed that the Executive did not accept what others would regard as common sense. The Executive commissioned their own "Socio Economic Impact Evaluation" report in 2000 from DTZ Pineda consultants. That report was supposed to be on the Executive website, but we can't find it, and don't know what brief the consultants were given, and don't know if it even attempted to assess what the economic impact of tolls was.

15. More recently there was a study commissioned by West Dunbarton and Renfrewshire Councils - 'The Erskine Bridge and the Regeneration of the River Clyde'. The study concluded that removing the Erskine tolls *would "lead to the creation of some 20,000 new jobs"* - <http://www.wdcweb.info/news/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=9959> . After the tolls were removed at the end of March, Andy White, leader of West Dunbarton Council said, (apparently with the endorsement of the First Minister) - "*We know tolls have acted as a barrier to businesses locating in this area so it's a tremendous boost financially to the wider economic area here in the West of Scotland.*" - <http://www.wdcweb.info/news/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=10205>

16. We are not aware of any other studies in Scotland of the impact of tolls. There are a few studies elsewhere in Britain - but as they are mainly sponsored by organisations that want tolls, they tend to gloss over the negative impact.

17. The most recent (end of 2004) British economic study that we are aware of is one undertaken for a new crossing in England (Mersey Gateway). Several earlier economic impact studies had calculated substantial benefits, but had been done on the basis that the crossing would not be tolled. When the effect of

tolling was eventually determined, it was on the basis of a sample survey of businesses. The businesses were told that the toll was going to be a figure which was a fraction of the existing toll for lorries on nearby crossings. 71% of the surveyed businesses (some of whom might be very distant from the crossing or might not use transport or might have given a different answer if given a more realistic toll figure) said that the toll would have a negative impact on them.

18. Apart from the negative general economic impact of tolls, there are collection costs and indirect costs from delays and queues at the toll booths. These delays have a knock on effect which prolongs peak periods.
19. Where there is a choice, drivers will tend to avoid toll roads and use other roads to go to the same or even an alternative destination. This causes longer journeys, more fuel consumption and more emissions. These alternate routes may be less suitable, less safe and more congested. Drivers' aversion to tolls exceeds their financial impact, and drivers and businesses will spend time and money to avoid them, if they can.
20. Those who support tolls claim that there is an economic benefit to drivers and business because they reduce congestion. This is bizarre when most drivers and businesses do not want tolls and the worst congestion is on the approaches to the tolls. Supply of road space throughout the UK is artificially restricted. Road users are contributing £50 billion in taxes, and thus indicating that they want increased supply, but the authorities only spend one seventh of those taxes on roads and often reduce space available for cars, vans and lorries. Congestion is usually in the peak periods, and drivers on the road at that time will be unaffected by tolls unless set at punitive rates. Drivers are more likely to be influenced by tolls when there is an alternative untolled road choice. The main example in Britain is the M6 Toll. That road was built to relieve congestion in the Birmingham area. But the M6 Toll is virtually empty, while the existing roads are still heavily congested. This is an inefficient and ineffective use of road assets. Further details - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/m6.htm>.
21. Supporters of tolls also cite the example of the London Congestion charge as reducing traffic levels and increasing average traffic speeds. This is a myth; even Transport for London in their January 2005 impact report admitted that "*Of those respondents who report change in Inner London, a slightly higher proportion say more time is spent travelling now than before the introduction of the charge*". Since January 2005, the volume of traffic in the zone has increased, to the extent that at the end of June this year a GLA member said of the London Mayor "*Londoners have been badly let down. His congestion charge is a charge on congestion that we once got for free*". The charge has

also had a negative economic impact on retail and leisure business in central London, as has been confirmed in numerous reports. Further details - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/london.htm>

Social impact of Tolls

22. The Executive report on Phase One of the Toll Review said that tolls would remove problems due to traffic "*causing significant economic, social and environmental problems that need to be addressed. These problems include time delays, unpredictable journeys, noise, poor air quality and motorist frustration.*" It is not explicit which of these are the "*social*" problems. But most drivers would be amazed at the suggestion that tolls are there to alleviate their "*frustration*".
23. The negative economic impact of tolls obviously has a direct social impact on all those in the area but particularly on the poorer drivers who the tolls are aimed at.
24. With any crossing there tends to be one side which is the "wrong side of the tracks". It may or may not have higher levels of unemployment, but it will have less facilities and less job opportunities and people will have to travel further to work. If the crossing is tolled there is a perverse effect in that people will be forced to travel more than if the crossing had not been tolled and the local economy had therefore been stronger. In the case of the remaining two tolls, it is of course the people of Fife who are on the "wrong side of the tracks".
25. Tolls create a psychological as well as a financial barrier between two sides of a river. This makes it less likely that people will cross outside of working hours to visit family and friends. Pro tolls campaigning, e.g. by the Edinburgh establishment, can cause antagonism between the two sides of a river and cancel out the unifying effects of a crossing

Environmental impact of Tolls

26. The Phase One Toll Review report said that the Executive want tolls to improve "poor air quality". They add that "*traffic growth also has implications for climate change, through its contribution to carbon emissions*", and this will also be tackled by tolls. If the Executive aim is to reduce vehicle emissions, it is strange that it advocates tolls which will have the opposite effect, rather than proposing changes to vehicle manufacturing regulations or fuel taxes.

27. Similar claims to those made by the Executive about vehicle emissions were made by the tolls side during the Edinburgh Toll Poll campaign. We dealt with them at some length and refer to our web site at - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/edinburghair.htm>.

Amongst the points that we made were:-

Vehicle emissions increase because of toll queues, and drivers diverting on to longer less suitable routes.

Contrary to the myths, air quality in London deteriorated after the "congestion" charge was introduced.

Executive Reasons for keeping Tay tolls

28. When on the 1st March, the Executive said that they would be keeping the Tay bridge tolls, their stated reasons were: a) tolls help to relieve congestion, and b) the bridge is not yet "paid" for.

29. As everyone else knows the main cause of congestion in Dundee is traffic queuing during the evening peak to pay the tolls. This was again pointed out to the Transport Minister on Thursday 16th March following a written question from Iain Smith MSP. The Minister replied "...The construction costs of the Tay road bridge have not yet been recovered. That was the primary reason for the decision not to remove tolls..."

30. The Tay bridge opened in August 1966, and it cost £4.8 million to build. The tolls income is £3.6 million EACH year. It does not need an accountant to calculate that the construction cost of the bridge must have effectively been "recovered" long ago. NAATS were told by the finance officers for the bridge that *"the current outstanding loan debt of £13m will only include a small proportion of the original debt taken out when the bridge was constructed in 1966. The vast majority of the £13m debt is in respect of borrowing for capital repairs and enhancements that have been carried out in the last 20 years."*

31. So the "construction costs" of the bridge have in effect been paid off. On the basis that the users of this road have to pay all costs ad infinitum starting from 1966, it may be that the costs will never be "recovered" and that people will never be freed from the imposition of tolls.

32. We have asked for the evidence (on Tay and Forth bridges) for the claim that removing tolls would increase congestion. We were referred to reports and data that were carried out by the Transport Model for Scotland. These reports only show congestion for the A.M. peak. Both bridges have one way tolls that are

paid on the journey into Fife, and thus the delays caused by the tolls will mainly be in the P.M. peak. We asked the Executive for the brief that was given to those producing these reports and for the congestion data for the P.M. peak. We were refused access to the brief and told that the data was in the TMfS reports that have been made public. (The reports do show estimated traffic levels for the P.M. peak, but unlike the A.M. peak they have nothing on the congestion.) We appealed against the decision of the Executive and were given a similar answer and will be appealing to the next level (Information Commissioner).

Executive Reasons for keeping Forth tolls

33. On the 1st March, the Executive said that they would be keeping the Forth bridge tolls because: a) tolls help to relieve congestion, and b) a new crossing may be needed. The Transport Minister told the MSPs *"The issue of most concern is cable corrosion on the Forth bridge"*.
34. There are numerous ways that congestion can be eased, and at various times we and others have suggested them. See our web site for details- <http://www.notolls.org.uk/scotland.htm#forthcongestion> .
35. One of these ways is improvement to the A8000 / M9 spur, which is at last going ahead, though it looks as if most of the cost of this *"strategic road for Scotland"* will in effect come from bridge tolls. Despite what MSPs were told it is clear that the bridge authorities realise that the A8000 problems causes - *"congestion for southbound traffic during the morning rush hour (as traffic) back-ups onto the bridge."* and *"delays for drivers heading for the bridge during the evening rush hour"*. There is more detail on our website at - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/a8000.htm>.
36. As well as the effect of the inadequate A8000, there are also queues northbound in the evening peak caused by the tolls. The authorities are currently spending millions on a new tolls plaza, though they haven't yet got planning permission for the location where they are building it and local residents have objected. It remains to be seen what effect the plaza will have.
37. If people are on the road at a busy time, it is because they need to be. Only the most exorbitant of tolls will cause them to change their journey (or home or work). This has been recognised even by the Executive.
38. Cable corrosion on the road bridge was identified by the authorities as a potential problem in 1998 or earlier. The authorities have recently given

varying statements about the seriousness of the problem, but a consulting engineer's report was commissioned by the Scottish Executive and completed in January this year-

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/95418/0023097.pdf> .

39. We were initially not allowed to see this report, but it was published on the 7th March (i.e. after the statement to MSPs) following a Freedom of Information request from us. The report concluded that corrosion was only *"of serious concern if left unchecked"*. It has recently been reported that the cable corrosion problems seem to be slightly worse on one of the Severn bridges. We have contacted the Highways Agency about this and been told that they *"will take the appropriate steps to maintain the structure, including repair work if necessary"* and that there are no plans to close the bridge.

40. The suggestion that tolls need to be kept because of the possible need for another road bridge over the Forth is a red herring. We deal with this on our website - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/scotland.htm#newbridge> . One of the main points that we make is that a new tolled bridge would almost certainly be intended to be built using the infamous Private Finance Initiative that was used for the Skye bridge. But such a bridge would require a toll of about £7 a vehicle. At this rate, the bridge would be a white elephant. Potential PFI contractors would realise this and there would be no bids, no finance and no bridge.

END OF NAATS SUBMISSION