

NATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TOLLS - SCOTLAND

Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill - September 2007 submission to Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Introduction

1. The National Alliance Against Tolls was formed by groups, including Skye and Kyle Against Tolls, protesting against existing tolls around Britain including at Erskine, Forth, Skye and Tay. We took part in the Edinburgh Toll Poll, gave evidence at the 2004 Public Inquiry that considered the proposed toll increase on the Forth road bridge, submitted a tolls removal petition to the Parliament, gave evidence to various toll consultations and raised the issue at the 2006 Dunfermline by-election by fielding a "No Tolls" candidate.
2. The nature of tolls is that they tend to affect the few, we were therefore pleased when on 31st May, MSPs recognised that the remaining two tolls were an unfair and unwanted anachronism and that there was unanimous support (with two abstentions) for the motion that included "*bringing forward proposals leading to the removal of the tolls as soon as practicable*".
3. Those who want the tolls to be kept suggest that this is in one way or another for the benefit of the people in the area. Despite this suggestion the people of Fife and Tayside have made it clear through their elected representatives that they want the tolls removed.
4. It is our view that the two bridges would be most economically and efficiently managed, and decisions made on any future crossings, if in the long term they are integrated into the trunk road network* that is managed by Transport for Scotland (TfS). However in the short term we believe that the removal of the tolls should be the priority.
*Apart from 3,500 kilometres of road, the TfS "bridges inventory" consists of "some 1900 bridges and footbridges (including) A898 Erskine Bridge, A9 Kessock Bridge, M8 Whitecart Bridge, A87 Skye Bridge, M90 Friarton Bridge, A876 Kincardine Bridge, A876 Connel Bridge, M8 Kingston Bridge, A82 Ballahullish Bridge".
5. All the then tolls and "*exactions*" in Scotland were abolished by Section 33 of the Roads and Bridges (Scotland) Act, 1878. That abolition and the almost complete removal of bridge and road tolls that took place around Britain in the late 1800s and early 1900s reflected the general view that tolls are a bad tax. Tolls were reintroduced into Scotland on some new bridges, though the

intention was that these tolls would be temporary. The Forth Bridge tolls should have stopped by 1995. Tolls on the Tay bridge were to cease when the construction cost (just under £5 million) had been recovered, which in effect was some years ago as the remaining loans are due to subsequent works.

6. Tolls are a regressive tax that penalises most those that are the least able to afford them and who are already paying very high fuel duty and other taxes that exceed the amount spent on roads by about seven to one. 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 at various times have decided to continue their imposition.
7. Tolls on the two bridges raise a gross (before collection costs) 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 small in relation to the Executive's budget of £29 billion for 2006/07.
8. The removal of these two tolls will make Scotland "toll free". It will be able to promote this to new businesses and tourists, and thus gain a competitive economic advantage over countries that have tolls.

Economic impact of Tolls

9. Tolls inhibit economic activity in the areas where they are situated. Businesses where road transport is important will locate elsewhere. Tourists and shoppers prefer to go to areas where there are no tolls. This view was shared by 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".*

10. The Highland Council commissioned from Napier University an "Economic Impact Study" on Skye bridge tolls, which was published in 2002. The report confirmed the negative economic impact of the tolls and forecast an increase of *"around 6% of current Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise area employment"* if tolls were removed.

11. In 2006 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"*. After the tolls were removed at the end of March 2006, the leader of West Dunbarton Council said - *"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."*
12. The only other tolls study that we are aware of is the one that in 2006 was commissioned by the former Executive. This study was produced by an English firm that had previously produced studies on English tolled crossings justifying the retention or increase of tolls. The study concluded on the removal of tolls that - *"In terms of total employment the effects are negligible .."*. You will not be surprised that we do not agree. But then based on their submissions to the last Toll Study neither would the Chief Executive of Fife Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise who on behalf of the chamber said - *"If the Scottish Executive is serious about the development of the Scottish Economy in a positive and equitable way it will remove the tolls on both bridges."* Nor would the Scottish Policy Convener of the Federation of Small Businesses who in the FSB submission said that tolls removal would *"allow them to invest more in their businesses, and ultimately benefit the Scottish economy."*

Congestion

13. Toll advocates suggest that removing tolls on Tay and Forth bridges would increase congestion, and refer to the Transport Model for Scotland (TMfS) report that was produced for the then Minister and published in March 2006. This gives the claims an aura of being established fact, but the output from a model is based on the assumptions that are fed into it - assumptions which are probably based on the past and which probably ignore local factors affecting trends in traffic and congestion. The Forth Bridgemaister suggested to the Committee on the 13 September that traffic modelling was *"something of a black art"*.
14. We made Freedom of Information requests following the claims based on the TMfS model, but the information that we requested was not released. In particular there has been no publication of any modelled congestion effects in the PM peak (both bridges have one way tolls that are paid on the journey into Fife). The belief of most users of the bridges is that the congestion in the PM peak is largely due to the toll collection and that congestion will actually fall if the toll is removed.

15. Even if the effect of removing the interruption to smooth traffic flow caused by removing toll collection is ignored, the claims that there will be an increase in congestion do not stand up. Apart from toll collection the main delay on the Forth bridge has been caused not by the capacity of the bridge but by the inadequacies of the A8000 / M9 spur. This was recognised in various statements issued by the bridge authorities about the problems caused by the A8000, which referred to - "*congestion for southbound traffic during the morning rush hour (as traffic) backs-up onto the bridge.*" and "*delays for drivers heading for the bridge during the evening rush hour*". This problem should very soon be removed by the road works which are almost complete.
16. The impression is given that there is an infinitely increasing traffic flow on the bridges. This impression is not confirmed by the official figures for southbound traffic on the Forth bridge - (2003 - 12.00 million, 2004 - 11.78 million, 2005 - 11.90 million, 2006 - 11.84 million). The new bridge being built at Kincardine on the Upper Forth will also have some effect on the traffic flows.
17. As we told the Forth toll increase inquiry in 2004, there is a bridge in England over the Mersey that was completed in 1961 with 2 lanes, but was modified in 1972 to 4 lanes, i.e. the same as the Forth. Each way it carries about 2.5 million more vehicles a year than the Forth Bridge. In this case the difference in flow is probably partly due to the absence of tolls enabling a smoother traffic flow and partly due to untolled crossings having a greater proportion of off peak traffic.
18. In general the effect of tolls on the volume of peak period is negligible. This is so even with the London Congestion charge of £8 a day. Figures published by Transport for London (TfL) show that though there has been a fall in traffic, it is not in the peak period but in the interpeak period. TfL 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*". Based on the latest TfL report (Fifth, published in July) the overall effect (or more accurately the non-effect) of the London charge is that traffic speeds in the charge area after four years of operation were the same as before the charge was introduced.

Environmental impact of Tolls

19. If the aim is to reduce vehicle emissions or reduce fuel use, then the best way is through changes to vehicle manufacturing regulations made in Europe or through fuel taxes. Tolls can not readily reflect things such as engine size and efficiency, or how a vehicle is maintained and driven.

20. Tolls have the opposite effect of that claimed by toll advocates - vehicle emissions increase because of toll queues, and some drivers diverting on to longer less suitable routes. A study of drivers in the Sydney (Australia) area that was published earlier this month showed that many drivers were avoiding the toll roads even though it meant that their journeys took much longer and that on average they were using 33 percent more fuel.
21. The bulk of air pollution and of CO₂ is not caused by road transport as can be seen from the UK National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory. And a large part of that caused by road transport is not caused by cars as can be seen in the Air Quality Plan produced by Edinburgh City Council at the end of 2003 which for example indicated that for the Haymarket only 8% of Particulates and 13% of NO_x was from cars, (the rest came from buses and goods vehicles).
22. The London Congestion Charge is probably the flagship for those that advocate tolls. But despite the fact that nationally - "*the dominant influence on emissions of key air pollutants over recent years has been vehicle technology improvements*" (page 57 of TfL's own Fifth Annual report), the measured air quality in London has not improved since the "congestion" charge was introduced. TfL themselves admit - "*trends in measured air pollution remain broadly static*" (page 72 of Fifth annual report).
23. We emphasise measured air quality because the myths that suggest that London air quality has improved come from estimates and not the actual measured figures which can be seen at section 4.11 of TfL's Fifth annual Report.

Social Impact of Tolls

24. Any form of road pricing obviously has a direct social impact on all those in the area but it particularly affects drivers on low incomes.
25. With any crossing there tends to a "wrong side of the tracks". It may or may not have higher levels of unemployment, but it will have fewer 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 may 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".
26. 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. Crossings unify people, tolls divide them.

Some sources

27. We realise that the committee will not have the time to refer to sources, but we have listed some of them here.

Transport for Scotland bridges -

<http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/defaultpage1221cde0.aspx?pageID=690>

Napier University report on Skye tolls -

<http://www.napier.ac.uk/depts/eri/research/skye.htm>

Economic effect of Erskine tolls -

<http://www.wdcweb.info/news/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=9959> and
<http://www.wdcweb.info/news/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=10205>

London Congestion Charge -

1. Bow Group report September 2007 (page 16 - 21) -

<http://www.bowgroup.org/harriercollectionitems/LondonUnderLivingstoneFINALv2.pdf>

2. Impacts Monitoring Official update report January 2005 (people's view that more time was now spent travelling is on page 19) -

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/impacts-monitoring-report-january-2005.pdf>

3. Fifth Annual Official report July 2007 (Measured air quality is pages 67 to 73) -

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/fifth-annual-impacts-monitoring-report-2007-07-07.pdf>

Report of 17th September on Australian drivers using more fuel to avoid tolls -

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/go-with-flow-or-be-damned-to-the-jam/2007/09/16/1189881342908.html>

UK National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (select a pollutant e.g. Pm10) -

<http://www.naei.org.uk/>

Edinburgh City Council Air Quality Plan 2003 (Haymarket figures on page 3) -

<http://download.edinburgh.gov.uk/AirQuality/ActionPlanSummary.pdf>

NAATS -

<http://www.notolls.org.uk/scotland.htm>

END OF NAATS SUBMISSION