

THE COURIER

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FAIRNESS FOR FIFE DRIVERS

ADVANCE indications from Edinburgh suggest that the Scottish cabinet is set to abolish tolls on the Erskine Bridge but retain them for the Tay and Forth crossings.

If that is confirmed as the will of the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition, it demonstrates that it has the hide of a rhinoceros. We have just had a Westminster by-election in Dunfermline and West Fife in which anger at the way crossings over the Forth are charged for ignited a bonfire of protest.

The Liberal Democrat victor demolished a sizable Labour majority on the admittedly false prospectus that he was against a proposed rush hour toll of £4. In fact, the decision rests with Holyrood, as the First Minister quickly pointed out.

Also muddying the waters was the Chancellor. Mr Brown took cognizance of how sensitive the tolls issue was, and its potential to hurt Labour. He therefore intervened to say that the bridge authority's request for a £4 charge had been "abandoned".

It is likely that this will turn out to be the case (although not at the behest of the authority). But if ministers imagine that fixing tolls at £1 for both Tay and Forth will buy them peace, they are deluded.

In the first place a £1 charge on the Tay represents a 25% increase. Secondly, Fifers are hardly going to smile on a master plan which, if passed by MSPs, would leave them paying for two estuarial crossings while users of the Erskine Bridge, and of all the other comparable bridges, pay nothing.

Until now this newspaper has stood by the position that the original debt and interest on the Tay Road Bridge must be paid, which at one point was achievable by 2016. But if the Erskine and Skye bridges are going to be free to use, there is no logical reason why Fife and Dundee should be discriminated against.

Tay and Erskine bridges were built at roughly the same time. Of the two, the Erskine cost more: £10.7 million (in 1971 prices) to the Tay's £5 million. Either they should both be free or they should both be tolled. Anything else is taxation.

The real difference is that the Erskine is the only toll bridge run directly by the Executive. The other two are run by board/authority on to whom responsibility for charges can be conveniently offloaded.

It is said by the Executive that the Erskine reduces traffic at the Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge, whereas the Tay and Forth road bridges create local congestion. Higher or variable tolls would not reduce that; people still have to get to work. But sweeping tolls away might help.

Last summer, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry called for tolls to be scrapped for economic reasons. They pointed out that the £18.8 million generated could "easily" be found from within an overall Executive budget now nudging £30 billion.

If the Executive thinks Fife and Dundee are a soft touch, it will have a real fight on its hands.