

THE COURIER & Advertiser

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POPULISM OR POLICY HINT?

LIBERAL Democrats have a reputation for being all things to all men—a trend, it has to be said, that can increasingly be found in all parties.

To the surprise of many, Lib Dems opposed congestion charging when a referendum was held in Edinburgh. It seemed to be against the grain of what they favoured nationally. Another chance to clarify their position comes in connection with the Forth Road Bridge.

FETA (Forth Estuary Transport Authority) says in its local transport strategy that the current toll regime expires in March. The authority has already raised the prospect of a £4 rush hour toll. This is clearly aimed at encouraging car-sharing and public transport.

So when the Lib Dem candidate in the upcoming Dunfermline and West Fife by-election (caused by the death of popular MP Rachel Squire) says FETA should be shown “the errors of their ways”, it is inconceivable that he would have stuck his neck out before checking with his party at Edinburgh.

The fact that the Scottish Transport Minister, Tavish Scott, is a fellow Lib Dem makes it all the more implausible that a parliamentary candidate would be out of line on this. At least, that is what one would think. There are just a couple of reservations.

The first is that the candidate, Mr Willie Rennie, needs a 14% swing to take the seat, so he can't afford to upset too many commuters. And, as we already know from the party's opportunism in Edinburgh, they are capable of ditching principle at the drop of a hat.

Secondly, were Mr Rennie to triumph at the polls he would be packing his bag for Westminster, which does not have a say in respect of Scottish tolls. So, in a way, he can say what he likes about bridges over the Forth because he cannot be held accountable for them in the legislature to which he aspires.

The same goes in respect of his stand on teachers and Queen Margaret Hospital. Mr Rennie admits openly that he is tackling issues over which he will have no competence. His excuse is that local voters raised the subjects with him and that is good enough.

For the purposes of trying to overturn a hefty Labour majority, perhaps the Lib Dem tactics are apposite. Time will tell. Unfortunately, it is also true that incidental blurring of the line of responsibility as between Holyrood and Westminster is detrimental to the electoral process as a whole.