

The Mersey Gateway Public Inquiry 2009

SUMMARY of PROOF OF EVIDENCE OF NATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TOLLS

Introduction

1. This proof of evidence is from John McGoldrick, Coordinator for the National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) which was formed in 2004 by groups protesting against existing tolls in England, Scotland and Wales., I am also Secretary of the Mersey Tunnels Users Association (MTUA) which was formed in 2003 to oppose plans for toll increases and a new tolling regime on the Mersey Tunnels.

Background to our interest in the scheme

2. The MTUA became interested in the Runcorn bridge as part of our opposition to a Private Bill promoted by Merseytravel which would have the effect of perpetuating and increasing the Mersey Tunnel tolls. Halton Council supported this Bill though it not only increased the chances that a new bridge at Runcorn would be tolled, it also increased the benchmark as to how much any bridge tolls would be.

Why NAAT oppose Tolls in general

3. Tolls are a regressive tax which also reduces the effective capacity of a road or crossing and inhibits economic activity. Whether you have to suffer tolls is an unfair lottery depending on where you live and work. As the Government collects about £50 billion a year in taxes from roads users, it is an extortion for this Government to refuse to pay for an adequate road system and for the authorities to accept and repeat the mantra that "there is no alternative" to a tolled crossing.

Consultation and people's views

4. There is massive opposition to tolls around Britain as evidenced by the 1.8 million people who signed a petition to the Prime Minister against "road pricing" and the massive defeats in local polls on "congestion charge" plans in Edinburgh and Manchester. At various stages Halton Council have gone through what they called "consultation" exercises. In our view this was just a process to sell what had already been decided. People and businesses in Halton may have been lulled by statements saying that the Council aim was that those in the Halton Council

area would not pay any toll or that failing that they would receive a substantial discount. Information about the effect of tolls and overall traffic flow has been as difficult to find as a needle in a haystack and residents and bridge users may have not been fully aware of the plans.

Toll Income

5. The only place where we found a clue to the expected toll income was the "Traffic Forecasting Report Volume 2: Tables and Figures". For the period 2015 to 2030 the toll income adds to £647 million. If extended for the full 30 years assuming an annual traffic growth rate of 1.5% then we calculate that the total toll revenue is £1.4 billion at November 2006 prices. If tolls are increased as per the Draft Order at the rate of RPI plus one percent, and RPI is assumed to increase by 3% a year we calculate that the tolls will be £3.1 billion. These are staggering figures and few bridge users will have any idea of them.

Tolling of a previously untolled highway

6. The tolling of the existing bridge seems to be the first time that a toll has been put on a previously free one. It is the equivalent of proposing say the building of a new school or hospital or park or library etc to fill an identified need and then not only charging for the new facility but also putting a charge on the existing school or hospital or park or library etc to make sure that the new facility gets some customers.

Change in law affecting tolling of the existing bridge at Runcorn

7. The existing bridge is being tolled using powers in the Transport Act 2000. That Act was amended by the Local Transport Act 2008 which removed the requirement that local authorities needed approval before introducing tolls on any highway. The timing of the Commencement Order and the draft Order for the tolling of the existing bridge means that Halton will be the only Council that is affected by the older legislation, which raises a question as to why.

Legality of discounts

8. The Council has been saying that bridge users who are "locals" will either not pay or will get a substantial discount. It is quite possible that discounts for

“locals” will be challenged in a British court or the European Court of Human Rights.

Doubt over legality of Tolling the planned bridge at Runcorn

9. The tolling of a crossing is usually through an Act of Parliament. In the case of the planned new Runcorn bridge, instead two general acts are cited including the Transport and Works Act 1992. Though that Act includes tolling powers it was not intended for roads or crossings and in our view citing the 1992 Act as the authority for the Order raises doubts over its validity. It is possible one or other of the parties that object to this scheme on one ground or another will challenge and challenge successfully any decision of the Minister to agree to a TWA Order.

Toll and Road User Charges Order and Explanation

10. The provisions in the Road User Charging Order as to making payments to the Council's general fund, for wide ranges of tolls, for automatic price increases and the absence of any provision for the tolls to be removed are most unusual and even unique. If this Order is agreed with these provisions it will be clear that the Government and the Council are determined to get all the extra money that they can from already overtaxed drivers and businesses.

The impairment of the existing bridge at Runcorn

11. The existing bridge which takes more traffic than the Mersey Tunnels is to have the number of lanes reduced and be "delinked" and traffic will mainly use the new crossing. This has led to concerns from Runcorn residents about the effects of the extra traffic on the Central Expressway. Their concerns include deterioration in air quality, removal of trees converting the hard shoulder to traffic lanes and taking more land.
12. It would be better if a new bridge was four lanes only and the existing bridge was left as four rather than as planned to have a six lane bridge and a two lane bridge. This is the equivalent of putting most of your eggs in one basket. There will be occasions when there are problems with the new bridge and traffic is diverted onto a bridge which has had two lanes removed, this will cause chaos over a wide area.

The stifling of traffic

13. Most businesses and individuals may have the impression that the crossing capacity will be approximately double what it is now. In fact the daily traffic on the existing bridge in the "base year" of 2006 was 83,667. The equivalent for 2015 assuming that the new bridge is built and both are tolled is on the existing bridge 12,696 and on the new bridge is 61,559. In other words the effect of the toll is that there will be about 10,000 a day less journeys than now.

Cost of the bridge

14. The impression has been given that a tolled crossing is far cheaper to build than an untolled one. This is the opposite of reality. A tolled bridge needs tolling plazas and additional lanes on the approaches, it also needs tolling equipment and collectors.

A bridge too far

15. Various reports concluded that the maximum economic benefit was a western route starting at the end of the A5300 (Knowsley Expressway) and crossing the river to the south east joining the Weston Point Expressway. Another more direct line would be to cross the river and connect directly to the M56. This route might cost a lot more but that should be weighed against the economic gains and the gain of taking traffic away from the main residential areas.

Use of Private finance

16. The new bridge is to be a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme. The usual suppliers of the bulk of the "private" finance are in trouble and some have been virtually taken over by the Government. This has made a mockery of claims that this can only go ahead with "private" money.

Economic effects

17. A new road or river crossing would normally bring economic benefits. The early research indicated that these economic benefits would be substantial and that a bridge would pay for itself very quickly. But that research was on the basis of an untolled bridge. Studies elsewhere have concluded that removal of tolls has significant economic benefits.

Socio–Economic Impact

18. The Council research into the social effects found that people and businesses believe that tolling would have a negative effect on them. The Council say that they will mitigate the adverse effects somehow. But the nature of this scheme is that it is uncertain, and it may be that the PFI contract will not give the share of profit that the Council is hoping for. This scheme may not only result in tolls depressing the area with traffic, people and businesses going elsewhere, it could also mean no profits to try and relieve the effects on those who remain in the area.

Conclusion

19. The original aim of a new crossing appears to have been completely lost and the main driver behind this scheme is now not to improve the river crossing capacity but seems to be extending the tolling regime which already exists down river.

20. This is not a “local” bridge and the Government should accept the responsibility for it. A new untolled bridge could by now have already been built for little more than what the Government takes from drivers in just one day.