

“Mersey Gateway” Inquiry 19 May 2009 – NAAT Opening Statement

1. Good morning, my name is John McGoldrick and I am here on behalf of the National Alliance Against Tolls. We are grateful for the opportunity to make an opening statement. We have many reasons for opposing this scheme and I suggest that those interested should look at our proof of evidence.
2. In this statement I will briefly say why we oppose tolls and mention a few of the main problems with this “Mersey Gateway “ scheme.
3. When our alliance started, the two biggest groups were one that was opposing the Mersey Tunnels tolls and a group opposing the Skye bridge tolls. The Skye group were the longest established and the most active. Under the legislation for creating new tolled roads or crossings it is a criminal offence to refuse to pay the tolls. In Scotland the result was that over one hundred of the protestors were given criminal convictions, with the Skye general secretary going to prison. Though the treatment handed out to Skye toll protestors was light compared with what happened in Wales in 1840 when the leaders of the toll protests there were sent on a permanent holiday, to Australia.
4. The opposition and hatred of tolls goes back even further than 1840 as Magna Carta in 1215 described tolls as “evil”. But the practice of charging tolls spread, till in the late 1800s MPs passed a series of Acts which removed all the turnpike tolls. At about the same time almost all of the bridge tolls, such as those on the London bridges, were bought out by the local authorities. Unfortunately modern day MPs seems to have other concerns and between 1991 and 2008 have passed various Acts which have put the clock back over 100 years and made it easier to toll new or existing roads and bridges.
5. **Tolls** are popular with politicians but we believe that most ordinary people do not like them and recognise that they are indiscriminate and unfair.
6. **Tolls** are a regressive tax which takes no account of the ability to pay or the size of a car. The driver of an old Mini is forced to pay the same toll as the driver of a new Mercedes.
7. **Tolls** are an additional burden on top of the other taxes that all road users pay, which amount to about **fifty billion pounds a year** – very little of which is spent on the roads or bridges.

8. **Tolls** are a **random** tax that depends on where you live. Northern Ireland has no tolls and there are almost no tolls in Wales – you can drive from here and cross the Dee on a free bridge and then go under the Conwy using a free tunnel and then over the Menai Strait to the Isle of Anglesey without someone demanding that you stop and hand over your money. And following campaigning by our alliance there are now no tolls on the Skye Bridge or anywhere else in Scotland.
9. Even in England most people are not normally affected by tolls, but the Government with the collaboration of the local authorities in this area seem intent on erecting a toll barrier stretching eighteen miles from Liverpool to Warrington.
10. The proposals to be considered at this Inquiry are **particularly iniquitous** as they involve **the first ever imposition of a toll on a free bridge**, and **Halton will be the first local authority in Britain where you will not be able to move from one side to the other without paying a toll tax**.
11. The Council has completely lost the plot. A new bridge was originally intended to improve communications and remove any constraint on cross river travel. Instead, when the bridge opens, the result of tolling is that there will actually be **less traffic, less traffic** across the river than there is now with only one bridge.
12. One would perhaps have expected mass protests from local residents, businesses and bridge users.
But the promoters of this scheme have gone to great lengths to obscure the issues and nip opposition in the bud.
Is the lack of mass protests because people support the Council's plans?
Or is it because of the success of the authorities and their Public Relations firms, in mesmerising people with artist's impressions of a new bridge, thus distracting them from the facts. Facts which are hard to come by.
13. The most salient fact is that the tolls and the reduced cross river traffic will be an **economic and social disaster** for the region and particularly for the people of Halton.
Businesses will find that employees, suppliers and customers are reluctant to pay a toll to reach them.
People on low incomes will think twice before paying a toll to visit family and friends.

14. This disaster will be compounded by the damage that is planned for the existing bridge. In our view it should be left as it is, but instead they plan to halve the number of lanes and make other changes, so that almost all of the traffic is routed across the new bridge. This will cause a major problem if the new bridge ever has to be temporarily closed. But it will also cause a problem **every day** to many people in Runcorn because the traffic will be routed through the middle of the town.

With the existing bridge most of the through traffic takes either the Weston Expressway or the Daresbury Expressway which are largely on the periphery of the main residential areas. But with the Council plan this through traffic will be routed along the Central Expressway which will be changed beyond its intended purpose to try to cope with the weight of traffic. The hard shoulder will disappear and many of the existing trees will be cut down. The increased traffic will also bring more noise and more emissions right into the centre of residential areas.

15. To try and sweeten this poisoned chalice, the Council at one stage were saying that their aim was that local people would not have to pay a toll.

This was later changed to promises of a “discount”. But the Council can not say what this discount will be. Apparently because they have to agree this discount with the **private** operator who will control both the new bridge and the existing bridge, which the Council will hand over to them.

Apart from not knowing what this discount might be there is a **bigger** problem in that no one knows what the tolls will be **anyway**.

The Council are asking the Government to agree that the tolls for a car to make a return journey across the river could be **anywhere** between two pounds **and five pounds**, This would make the bridges the third most expensive tolled crossing in Britain.

There is a possibility that those who do not get this hypothetical discount will claim that it violates their human rights.

But even if there is no legal challenge, how strange that people should be given the sop of a discount when they are currently able to cross the river without paying anything other than the normal road taxes.

16. Another bizarre feature of this plan is that the Government have done a Pontius Pilate and said that a new bridge is “**nothing to do with us**” and should not be provided out of the fifty billion pounds a year that they take from drivers in taxes, as **it is only a “local” matter**. If this is a local matter, then it is strange that sundry Government agencies have

been heavily involved in this plan for bridge privatisation for many years and that all the authorities and Government quangos are saying that the crossing is vital and of “regional” or even national significance. If this is so, then the proposed bridge should be a trunk road **paid for out of road taxes and not a private bridge with drivers milked for even more money.**

17. Five years ago when we were asking about a new bridge we were told that the estimated cost was about two - hundred - million - pounds, that the expectation was that it would **not** be tolled and it would be open by 2000 and **8.** ..

Now it is 2000 and **9.** There is **no** new bridge and the estimated cost has rocketed.

18. Local people and bridge users have been told that “**There is no alternative**”. “**NO** alternative” to a private toll bridge with the existing bridge handed over and most of the traffic routed through the centre of Runcorn’s residential area. I suggest that if this is the only alternative that the Council and the Government can come up with, then they should give the job to someone else.

19. In Edinburgh and Manchester when the authorities wanted to bring in tolls, the people demanded that they be given a vote on the issue. We hope that the people of Halton and all bridge users will demand and **be given** the same democratic rights to have their say. If instead the authorities and the Government go ahead with this scheme as it stands, **our alliance will fight this in every way that we can.**

20. The authorities and the Government seem to be hell bent on imposing more tolls wherever they can, without regard to the economic, social and environmental damage that they inflict and do not even seem to care that they are committing political suicide. We hope that all the people who may have been in the dark up to now, will make sure that the Inspector at this Inquiry is made aware of what they think about the scheme, and that the evidence that the Inspector will hear from us and others will lead him to recommend to the Minister that this scheme be rejected.

21. Thank you all for listening.

Main web page - <http://www.notolls.org.uk/runcorn.htm>