

1st April will be a day of celebration for the people of Renfrewshire and West Dunbarton. It will be the first day that they can freely cross the Erskine bridge after paying tolls for 35 years.

But for the people of Fife and Tayside the 1st of April really is April Fool, with them as the fool. The tolls on the Forth road bridge were due to end on the 31st March, but at the beginning of the month the Executive announced that though they would allow the Erskine tolls to end they would keep the other two. The Minister signed the Forth tolls order on 9th March.

The Executive's decision created uproar on the east coast. People, businesses and most politicians were united in their opposition to the tolls. Or so it seemed.

The MSPs had an opportunity on Thursday to prove their condemnation of the tolls. This was due to an SNP motion that the Tay tolls should be removed. It only needed one MSP to move an amendment to add "and the Forth bridge", and there might have been an end to all tolls. Instead Labour and Liberal Democrat MSPs united to vote for an Executive amendment which effectively lets them off the hook.

The Executive said that they needed more "facts" to justify any decision to remove the tolls.

The "facts" that the Executive used on the 1st March were not facts at all. They said that removing tolls would increase congestion. The reverse is true, as the tolls cause delays particularly in Dundee as was proved on Tuesday when toll collectors were on strike. The Executive congestion "facts" were based on AM peak traffic figures, and they have still not revealed the PM peak figures. PM is of course the time that people are queuing to pay the tolls.

Another "fact" was that "The issue of most concern is cable corrosion on the Forth bridge". Well before that was said, the Executive had in their hands a report, which they only published after a Freedom of Information request from NAAT Scotland. That report indicated that corrosion, which exists on all bridges, was only a serious concern "*if left unchecked*". This was later confirmed by the Bridgemaster.

Yet another "fact" was that the construction costs of the Tay bridge had "*not yet been recovered*". The bridge collects in tolls, every year, almost as much as the bridge cost to build 40 years ago. Any debt is because of recent expenditure.

Why are the people of Fife and Tayside treated by the Executive and some MSPs as if they were fools? It is obvious that the Executive don't want the tolls to slip through their fingers and will use any excuse that they can find to keep their grip on tolls. And a miserly grip it is as the authorities only get £16 million a year in tolls,

before the cost of collecting it. The Executive spends £30 billion, some of which will come from the £4 billion that Scotland's drivers pay to use the roads.

If the politicians relented then, unlike the rest of Britain, Scotland would be toll free. That would help to sell Scotland to tourists and businesses. Wouldn't that not only be fair and just but be a greater benefit to all of Scotland?