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MPs demand abolition of tolls

Both Labour and Conservative MPs called for the abolition of tolls on the Forth Road Bridge when the public inquiry into proposals by the Government to increase charges continued in Edinburgh yesterday.

Dr Gordon Brown, Labour MP for Dunfermline East, said the charging of tolls was totally indefensible on grounds of logic, equity and economic rationality.

The Government had justified its policy on the grounds that the bridge conferred exceptional benefits on its users. But, Dr Brown asked why were the benefits of the Forth Road Bridge any more exceptional than those of the Kessock or Ballachulish Bridges, neither of which had tolls.

Mr Barry Henderson, Conservative MP for North-east Fife, told the inquiry: "The clearly inconsistent application of tolls is indicative of the unsound basis of the policy and for that reason I would favour the abolition of tolls."

Mr Dick Douglas, Labour MP for Dunfermline West, said the Government's policy amounted to a mere opportunism — tolls would be charged except where they were likely to cause traffic to divert to other routes.

"In other words, the government are, in effect, saying 'we will charge tolls where we can get away with charging them,'" Mr Douglas said.

"This amounts to the opportunistic exploitation of a particular class of captive road users and I believe this to be indefensible on any reasonable grounds."

By JAMES JOHNSTON

Dr Brown said the Forth Bridge, which last year was used by 12 million vehicles, was one of the most important strategic road links in Scotland.

"It is time for the Government to recognise that the policy of charging tolls on the bridge is a bad policy and it should now redeem the promise made in the Conservative Party manifesto of 1974 and remove the tolls forthwith," he added.

Of the proposed increases Dr Brown said that, "to use a phrase beloved of this Government," they were "excessive and unreasonable."

Even if the Government was not prepared to abolish tolls it should review the present

financial arrangements, and in particular, inclusion of the bridge approach roads in the capital debt incurred in building the bridge. Also, Dr Brown said, there had never been an adequate explanation of why the Forth Bridge should clear its debt in 30 years when other major bridges had much longer repayment periods — in the case of the Humber Bridge 60 years and 40 years for the Severn Bridge.

Mr Henderson said: "My constituents find themselves uniquely sandwiched in the trunk road system between two tolled bridges which makes them particularly concerned about the level of tolls. They feel that they are being treated as a captive market making a wholly disproportionate contribution to the financing of the national road system."

Professor Donald MacKay, chairman of PEIDA, planning and economic consultants, maintained that the approach roads should never have been included in the debt inherited by the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board. The cost of the approach roads should have been borne by the Government and in those circumstances it would be possible to discharge the debt by 1994 under the existing tolls' structure.

However, Prof MacKay stated: "I understand that the Reporter considers the issue of abolition as being outwith the terms of reference of the public inquiry, but I would wish to place on record my view that the case for abolition remains extremely strong."

The inquiry, in Lothian Regional Council's Parliament Square building, continues today.