
Debate on Road Pricing

On the 1st May 2008 the Institution of Civil Engineers held a debate on road pricing in Cambourne, Cambridge. There were three speakers for the motion that “road user pricing is the only sensible solution to road congestion”, and three speakers against. The latter included your editor. This is what I said (there was not time for an academic discussion of the issues so I focussed on a personal view):

“I live in London and I regularly pay the London congestion charge – and what a nightmare that is.

I have an office at home, so I don't have to travel in the rush hour. I also drive a Jaguar XJ Sovereign so you can see I am very happy to pay the authorities to deter people from using the roads and obstructing my progress – which is of course the essence of road pricing. So I should be one of the main beneficiaries of road pricing or congestion charging schemes.

In fact when they were first proposed, I thought they might be a good idea. I've been to Singapore and Bergen where such schemes seem to operate successfully, although of course in Bergen it is used to finance more road building. The concept can even be made attractive by using the dismal science of economics. But now I am adamantly opposed to any form of road pricing.

2. Why do I oppose road pricing:

A – Firstly it won't stop traffic congestion.

B – Secondly it's a regressive tax that impacts poor people more than the rich. In fact it impacts the vast majority of ordinary working people and only benefits the idle wealthy.

C – It is also bound to require continual monitoring of people's location and a massive camera based enforcement apparatus, both an unnecessary and unreasonable infringement of people's privacy.

D – And it cannot be made to work without massive additional costs imposed on the motorist. And I would like to reinforce the point “additional”. In fact to implement national road pricing in the UK could cost as much as building the whole motorway network over again. What would you prefer?

3. Fuel duty is one of the most efficient ways of raising tax – a miniscule amount of the revenue is spent on collecting the tax. But road pricing systems are notoriously expensive – for example at least 75% of the normal operating revenue in London is spent on collecting it, and in reality it has barely generated any surplus cash at all to invest in public transport (total about £14m according to one source when total expenditure on operating it has been £600 million over 5 years). It's simply a myth that introducing road pricing will not result in a very substantial increase in the total tax take from motorists.

4. Let's take the example of London as a good demonstration of the ineffectiveness of such schemes.

After 5 years traffic speeds are almost back to where they were before the charge was introduced). Private cars are down, but buses and taxis are up, with little net benefit. Air pollution is no better than it was before the charge was introduced – look at the real data, not the misleading “estimates” used to claim an improvement by TfL. View the report on our web site (www.freedomfordrivers.org) if you want more data.

Charges have crept up from £5 per day to £8, and may soon be £25 for my vehicle. And today Mr Livingstone and his administration are about to be booted out, as a result (today is the London Mayoral elections).

5. Just paying the charge wastes more time than it saves the user, and there are enormous problems with infringement. Despite what some people say, the whole system has been an abject failure.

6. Will people support road pricing more generally? Absolutely not as you only have to recall from the on-line petition set up by one of our members who got 1.8 million signatures, or the results of a recent survey in Greenwich (16% for, 77% against).

7. Will traffic become gridlocked if nothing is done to tackle congestion? No it is a myth. People adapt to congestion when there is an excess of demand over supply, as has happened in London for the last 1000 years. And the Eddington report showed that there was a great return on investment from expenditure on appropriate road schemes.

8. The answer to congestion is to tackle particular hot spots, or to invest in increasing capacity. As other countries have done. Demand management by pricing is not a practical or economic technical solution, and is abhorrent to all of us who think that people should be treated equally. So long as they pay for the facilities they use (and motorists pay £50bn a year in taxes when only £7bn is spent on roads), then there should not be any prejudice against poorer people.

In summary, there is no likely benefit in terms of reduced congestion, no environmental benefit and a major cost penalty.

The Government has even realised that it is on such a losing proposition in terms of popular support, that it is having to bribe local authorities using the Transport Innovation Fund to develop local schemes in the hope that people will get used to them – fat chance as you can see from the London experience.”

The result of the vote of the audience of 66 people at the end of the debate was 29 for the motion, 33 against and 4 undecided, i.e. the motion was defeated which shows the strength of opposition to road pricing even among an audience of professional engineers.

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