
Road Pricing – the Key Issues

On the 27th April 2007, I appeared for the ABD on the Daily Politics BBC TV show. This has an interesting format in that they have a live panel of people watching the programme who record their instant reactions (positive or negative) to the arguments put forward by the speakers who appear. I was debating with Steven Joseph of Transport 2000, a long standing campaigner on environmental issues, so I was expecting a good fight.

In reality it proved somewhat of a walkover with him consistently scoring negatively to my positively – in fact the only time he got near “neutral” was when he started apologising for the Government’s actions.

Anyway, in case you get into similar debates, here is the note I prepared to brief myself on the issues and which I used in the initial three minutes of speech which we each got:

Key themes:

It Won’t Work. The ABD’s position is that road pricing will not cut congestion significantly, and it is enormously expensive. It almost certainly means that the total tax taken from road users will rise. We already pay about £50bn in taxes on road transport, whereas less than £8bn per year is spent on the roads – this unbalanced equation would clearly worsen with road pricing.

Privacy. Road pricing almost certainly will involve constant surveillance of your movements which is an invasion of your privacy.

Regressive. Road pricing is a regressive tax that impacts the poor more than the wealthy and is not something which a country that believes in equality should put up with.

Sub-themes:

London. A good example of the failure of congestion charging schemes is the London one. An enormously expensive nightmare where 90% of the regular charges paid by motorists get consumed in operating it. And traffic speeds are almost back to where they were before the scheme was introduced.

Councillor Brian Ashton from Canada took a look at the Congestion Tax system in London. Here are his comments: “There will be headlights shining out of my butt before we ever see congestion charges in Toronto”.

Environment. Neither is there any real environmental benefit from congestion charging schemes – in fact with people driving further on minor roads to avoid congestion charges on main roads, they might actually make things worse. In London, air pollution has risen, not fallen.

Solution. How do we solve congestion? Simply by improving existing roads and tackling congestion hot spots. As the Eddington report pointed out, there is a fantastic return on investment by doing so because building roads is cheap in comparison with the financial return. Improving public transport might help but it really is not economic in comparison and the public prefer not to use it anyway.

Costs of national road pricing: £62 billion to set up and £8bn per year to run. That is about the same as the existing motorway network in capital cost so the network could be doubled in size if we spent the money on that instead.

Voting. The Association of British Drivers calls for a referendum on all road pricing schemes and suggests that the Government should stop bribing local councils to introduce them.

Joining. And anyone who wants to fight road pricing should join the ABD.

Note: the BBC have been running polls which ask “If all the revenue raised from road pricing was spent on public transport, would you be in favour?”. This is a ridiculous question. It’s rather like asking turkeys if they would vote for Christmas if they weren’t invited to dinner. There is no way that all the revenue can be spent on public transport because a lot of it will go in setting up and operating the system (most of it in the case of the London congestion charge for example).

Roger Lawson

www.bromleytransport.org.uk, www.abd.org.uk