

Britain: government plans peak-time road charges

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In a speech to the Social Market Foundation last month, Transport Secretary Alistair Darling laid out the government's intentions to introduce charges for using roads at peak times.

To justify the measure, Darling employed "green" rhetoric about environmental concerns, painting a picture of Britain as an unsustainably crowded island with its main urban arteries clogged with peak-time traffic. He also fleetingly mentioned the abysmal state of public transport across the UK, before insisting that the only answer was a "pay-as-you go" road pricing scheme.

"We have a choice in the next 25 to 30 years: either we build more and more motorways—astronomically expensive, environmentally damaging, and I doubt if we could actually do it—or we take a radically different look at how we manage the system. That is where road pricing comes in.... The advantage is that you would free up capacity on the roads, you would reduce the congestion that we would otherwise face and you would avoid the gridlock that you see in many American cities today," he said.

Darling has announced plans for trialling the road tolls within two years.

Only a truly cynical bunch of ruthless pro-marketeers, indifferent to the basic requirements of the populace in a complex mass society, could have dreamt up something so fabulously iniquitous and still seek to dress it up in socially progressive clothing.

Charges could rise to £1.34 per mile for motorways at peak times. This would mean a 171 mile (275 km) journey from the city of Leeds to London would cost the average motorist £230, not including fuel costs. This would be a prohibitive expense for working families. The blunt message is: If you can't afford to pay, get off the roads.

The suggestion that travelling off-peak is an option is false. The "rush-hour" is when most workers are travelling to and from work, and when millions of parents are taking their children to and from school. The only alternatives are to rely on a patchy public transport system that has been undermined over two decades of privatisation and is expensive to use—or leave for work even earlier and return home later.

In 2002 when Professor David Begg, chairman of the government's Commission for Integrated Transport, suggested introducing national toll roads, the government still feared widespread political opposition to such measures. A year later, Mayor Ken Livingstone introduced congestion charging in central London, and recently increased the charge from £5 to £8 a day. He is also planning on extending the charge to other parts of the capital.

In December 2003, Britain's first privately financed toll road opened—the Birmingham North Relief Road—originally proposed by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The new toll road carries just 20 percent of the traffic of the existing motorway, despite reducing the charge to £2 for cars. In July 2004, Darling announced plans to open a private toll road between Birmingham and Manchester, claiming that this would extend "choice" to motorists. Motorists could either pay to drive on a relatively traffic-free route, to be known as the M6 Expressway, or they could drive on the old, heavily congested M6 for "free"—i.e., after already paying taxes that are used to maintain the transport network.

Now, even the choice of using or not using a better road is being eliminated through the introduction of compulsory charges for the use of existing roads.

The government's latest proposals are an attempt to fleece the public for as much money as possible, while

effectively making roads paid for out of universal taxes the exclusive preserve of those rich enough to afford the additional tolls.

Even more significantly, the proposed measures are a grave threat to civil liberties.

A number of different technologies have been mooted to track motorists as they move along different roads, including vehicle number plate recognition cameras. But a satellite tracking system seems the most likely means of enforcing the toll. Eventually, the government intends to install integrated black boxes in some 30 million vehicles on Britain's roads. The black box will function like a tachograph—the device that monitors the speed and hours driven by delivery trucks—but it will also relay information such as the identity of driver and the vehicle's location to a government-controlled satellite.

The insurance company Norwich Union is hoping to collaborate closely with the government in getting drivers to adopt the black box technology, currently estimated to cost each driver £200. It will also be marketed as a means of reducing insurance costs for low-usage drivers since the company plans to charge for insurance by the mile, taking into account the time of day and type of road being used; penalizing those driving on high-risk roads at high-risk times.

Over the past nine months, Norwich Union has been piloting a scheme with 5,000 drivers whose cars have been fitted with black boxes. Spokesman Douglas Vallgren said, "We are very confident that we can take this product to market by the end of 2005 or the beginning of 2006."

The black box is linked to satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS) which can place the vehicle within five to 10 metres. Journey times, routes and distances travelled can all be logged electronically.

The Department of Transport has also begun a trial of black box technology with motorists in Leeds.

With satellite tracking, the government would effectively be in a position to track, store and use information on the movements of over 25 million people. A spokesman for Liberty, the civil liberties group, commented, "You wouldn't be able to go anywhere in a car without the government knowing. Without proper technological and legal safeguards this could become an enormous snooping machine."

The Automobile Association (AA) said, "It is

something that smacks of big brother. The government would know where and when everybody in the country was travelling."

To illustrate just how much control this technology potentially gives the government, one trial that has been running for several months is for an advanced system that tells a black box linked to the car's engine when the vehicle has entered a speed restricted zone and prevents it being exceeded. The Freight Transport Association believes the equipment will be used to put speed limiters in every car. "You won't be able to go faster than the limit, no matter how hard you press the pedal," said Gavin Scott, the association's policy manager. It could just as easily be programmed to immobilise a vehicle.

Linked to other data about a driver, such as their political affiliation or union membership, the state could potentially track all those it considers of "interest."

The Department of Transport may consider introducing legislation to circumvent the privacy protections of the Human Rights Act and the Data Protection Act. Under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, the planting of a tracking device in a car requires the "authorisation of a senior police officer" and is only to be contemplated when there is reasonable evidence that the car owner may be involved in serious crime, for which you might expect a prison sentence of over three years for a first offence if convicted.



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