

Campaigner Claire Mercer speaks on UK government announcement to shelve smart motorway builds

Robert Stevens
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On April 15, Rishi Sunak's Conservative government announced that plans for new, dangerous "smart motorways will be cancelled in recognition of the current lack of public confidence felt by drivers and cost pressures."

Smart motorways, introduced in 2006 by the Blair Labour government, convert the hard shoulder into a live traffic lane. They have been responsible for the deaths of at least 79 people. The Tory government had previously set a target to convert the entire motorway network into smart motorways by 2025.

The Department of Transport (DoT) and National Highways announced that "smart motorways earmarked for construction during the third Road Investment Strategy (2025 to 2030) and previously paused schemes will now not go ahead." However, 10 percent of the UK network is still covered by smart motorways. Rather than reverting to the proven safe hard shoulder system, the government said, "existing smart motorways will continue to benefit from £900 million safety improvements".

Claire Mercer's husband, Jason, was killed on a smart motorway on a section of the M1 near Sheffield, on June 7, 2019. He died along with Alexandru Murgeanu after they were involved in a minor collision. They stopped to exchange the legally required insurance details and were hit by an oncoming Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) lorry.

Claire established the Smart Motorways Kill campaign, to lead the fight to end smart motorways. She spoke to Robert Stevens about the Tory government's decision and the ongoing Smart Motorways Kill campaign.

Claire said, "Well, it's some good news, but they're dealing with the non-urgent ones first. It's the existing ones that are killing us. So why did they deal with the ones that weren't due to be open yet anyway? They're just announcing half measures for the existing ones."

Keeping up the pretences that smart motorways can be made safe, the government announced that on existing smart

motorways it will add in another "150 extra emergency areas across the network... as well as further improving the performance of stopped vehicle detection technology on every all lane running smart motorway."

Claire commented, "More refuge areas is not going to cut it. If your car stops, your car stops. The refuge area could be just a metre in front. But the other problem with refuge areas is it doesn't help the emergency services get through when there's an incident.

"And it's not even all new smart motorways that they've scrapped. There's still two big sections that they're going to open without the hard shoulder, sections of the M56 and M6. Why can't they open it with the hard shoulder closed, with the first lane closed?"

[The government is going ahead with these two major smart motorways on the spurious grounds "given they are already over three quarters constructed."]

Claire insisted, "It would be so easy to create a hard shoulder on every single motorway straight away. You just turn the first lane off. Just flip the switch."

She and other Smart Motorways Kill campaigners have "talked about it and we all agree the same thing. That it doesn't go far enough and that it's the urgent ones, the existing ones, that we need to be dealing with. The campaign continues. My day hasn't really changed. I gave up my job to concentrate on this. I get up every day and still do the interviews or reply to the emails or write content for social media.

"The decision has given me a bit more drive. But we were already planning more action and protests and events, and we've not changed our plans."

Claire feels the decision was made by the "government with the local and general elections around the corner..."

"I think they underestimated the strength of feeling from the public, and we've made the public a lot more aware of what a smart motorway is, what it can do to you, and that you're paying for it.

“They hand out these massive billion-pound contracts to private contractors that then donate to the Tory party, it's all legalised, backhanders. These decisions are made by the CEOs of these contracting companies. They're saying, 'Don't you dare stop smart motorways! We want these big contracts.'”

Speaking of 79 lives lost due to the removal of the hard shoulder, Claire said, “That's the ones that are directly attributed to smart motorways. And it's basically only us and the media adding that up, because National Highways do not record what happened on a smart motorway and what happened on a conventional motorway.

“So what data are national highways looking at? They don't even record the data. The police don't record the data. They all record it locally and they don't differentiate between smart motorways and normal motorways. The *Telegraph* journalist who's been working with me from the beginning says he wants to start looking at the data. He says, 'I want to see that data now'. They look at the data and then announce this. They've done this so we don't look at the data.

“They fudged that. They said we'll stop them [smart motorways] until we have five years of worth off data. And they said they've already got three years, so they would only need two years to get the five years of data. So, they weren't even planning to pause them for five years. They just announced everything was substantially complete and carried on with it and barely anything was paused.

“Regarding these 14 plans that they've scrapped about nine of them are currently 'dynamic' motorways, which is where they turn the hard shoulder on and off. They were going to convert them to 'all lane runnings' which never has a hard shoulder. They've scrapped that step so there's still going to be a smart motorway, which they declared dangerous and confusing on TV two years ago and said they were going to scrap.

“And I still can't get them done for corporate manslaughter! My boss used to say to me, 'No, Claire, you can't operate that overhead crane because you haven't had the training and if I let you do it and something happens, I will go to jail.' In an industrial setting, he's responsible. I try and get them done for corporate manslaughter and the Crown Prosecution Service [CPS] agrees with the case put forward by National Highways.

“National Highways wrote it all up and sent it to them, and the CPS just agreed with it, saying that because of this reason; this reason; this reason; this precedent; this case note from 1847; that National Highways do not owe the motorist a duty of care. Therefore, the Crown Prosecution Service cannot prosecute them.

“Instead of spending my time pushing for corporate manslaughter, I've now got to go and get a bill of

amendments and get the law changed. Then we have to wait for somebody else to die because it can't be applied retrospectively. We have to get the law changed, sit and wait for someone to die and then bring action.”

Claire drew attention to another major road safety issue and more profiteering taking place. “They're putting cement blocks down the middle of all the motorways. Well, when there's a big incident and they need a lot of vehicles and there's a traffic jam, they call it reverse access. They come the wrong way down the other side of the motorway. They cut through the metal barriers to get to the right place. You can't cut through a great big cement block!

“I think again it's to save money. Me and the journalist from the *Telegraph* tried to find out who owned the cement company. That's the type of thing you've got to look for, but I've only got access to Companies House information. And they're all hidden behind shell companies, aren't they? They're putting these great big cement blocks in to save money because they keep having to repair the metal crash barriers, so they're not going be able to do their reverse access one anymore.

“The refuge areas don't allow emergency vehicles to get through, so that's something that a lot of people miss. They don't realise that. They think it's all about having a hard shoulder to pull into if you break down and bad drivers. Yes, there are bad drivers, but the bad drivers don't just kill themselves and the punishment for being a bad driver is not death!

Claire said she found that “if you just keep going, people move out the way. If you don't give up. I'm fortunate that I had the upbringing that I did, and that I was taught all the way along to fight if you don't think something's right. So many people don't feel that they can even be part of change, never mind spearhead it. I was able to. I was in a position where I could just quit my job and focus on it every day.”

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