



Congestion Charging in London: Any Environmental Benefits?

By Peter Wells

At the UK 'Green Fleet' conference in 2002 there was a debate on the issue of congestion charging in London. A speaker provided arguments in favour, followed by another who provided arguments against. Then, in the instant democracy approach loved by the producers of television programmes like Big Brother, the audience were asked to vote. With the exception of myself and my colleague, the entire audience voted against.

For some people it is a trivial matter, applying to an area of land that constitutes only about 2% of London and affecting only a tiny proportion of the 25 million-plus vehicles around the UK. The contribution to reduced emissions, reduced fuel consumption, lower noise, reduced traffic accidents and of course faster trip times count for very little in comparison to the wider picture.

Critics highlight the socially regressive nature of the charge, the lack of alternative means of travel, the displacement effects creating congestion around the zone but not actually inside it, the lack of 'fit' with anything like an integrated transport policy, and the operational difficulties of enforcement. In short, for some this is a policy that will not work, and even if it does it will not help.

For others this is the beginning of the end. Other cities around the UK are already investigating the application of schemes based on that applied in the City of London. The Congestion Charge is, for many, yet another restriction on personal freedom alongside items like motorway tolls. It is the start of an era where the infrastructure controls the car in order to minimise social and environmental burdens.

And to the extent that the Congestion Charge has stimulated this debate, it must already be considered a success. Politics is often about symbolism as much as substance, for environmental matters as much as any other. Remember Brent Spar? It itself the Congestion Charge is not going to resolve major problems – cities are almost by definition congested, although there has also been plenty of research done to suggest that some cities are more sustainable than others. However, what the Congestion Charge does achieve is the symbolic statement that as a society we face difficult and sometimes painful decisions over our future.

While we may indeed yearn for the day when we can ride off into the sunset of a sustainable future, the message from the Congestion Charge is that we are unlikely to do it in a car.

Perhaps, unwittingly, Ken Livingstone has also raised a rather more fundamental issue about the long-term viability of our industrial urban structures. Are these ponderous cities, creatures of an era when economies of scale and centralisation of power were the defining organisational paradigm really suited to sustainable living? The Congestion Charge can perhaps ameliorate some of the worst excesses of our home-commute-work-commute culture, but it cannot change the basic assumptions that underpin this culture. The new political economy of sustainability might just mean that decentralisation, disaggregation and the small-scale distributed economy are the long term solution.

Meantime, Radio 5 Live will doubtless be swamped by calls from 'irate from Peckham', the Sun will have pictures of stockbrokers riding horses to work, and plenty of examples will surface of hapless individuals getting fines for not paying the entry charge even though they actually live in Llandudno and last went to London to watch England win the world cup. The bigger issues will get swamped by the details and the Congestion Charge will have lost its symbolic value. Until that happens, we should thank Ken Livingstone for once again having the courage to initiate a definitive policy, and for sparking the debate.