

## **NATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TOLLS – SCOTLAND**

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### **Scottish Executive - Tolled Bridges Review - Consultation 2005**

#### Introduction

1. On 15th May 2003 "A Partnership for a Better Scotland" was published. The Transport section included "Reviewing existing bridge tolls in Scotland and entering into negotiations with a view to ending the discredited toll regime for the Skye Bridge." Various organisations were consulted in July 2004 as part of the review. SKAT (Skye and Kyle Against Tolls) was one of the consultees, but SKAT replied that they feared that the exercise might be used as an excuse to delay the ending of the Skye bridge tolls.  
A report on "Phase One" of the review was published on 29th October 2004, and the Skye tolls were removed on 21st December 2004.  
In April this year, the Executive issued another "consultation" document. The document asks various questions which presuppose that the other three bridges will stay tolled.
2. The National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) was formed by groups, including SKAT (since wound up), protesting against existing tolls in England, Scotland and Wales. NAAT took part in the Edinburgh Toll Poll campaign, and gave evidence at the Inquiry into the last toll increase on the Forth road bridge.
3. NAAT believe that all tolls should be scrapped. Roads are an essential feature of a civilised state. There should be free movement not impeded or discouraged by barriers or tolls. We see no point in tinkering with the toll regimes, this is not what the people or most MSPs in the affected areas want. Our response therefore sets out why the tolls should not continue.

#### Bridge Tolls were intended to be temporary

4. There are some 100 road crossings of tidal waters in UK, of which nearly 30 are in Scotland. Most crossings are not tolled because either tolling was never practical / economic or because the toll has been removed. Including the Erskine, Forth and Tay there are only 14 UK crossings which are tolled.
5. Tolled crossings have generally been promoted in the UK Parliament on the basis that tolls would only be levied for a limited period, during which the original cost of construction would be recovered. Some tolls remain, because promises have been broken and the goal posts moved to keep the income from tolls.

6. Paragraph 13 of the Phase One Report said "Tolls on each bridge were originally set up to pay for construction, ongoing and future maintenance and operational functions at each bridge."  
This implies that these tolls were meant to be permanent. This is not correct.
7. Under the original legislation, tolls on the Erskine Bridge were to have ended by 1991, and the Forth Bridge by 1995. (There was no fixed date for an end to tolls on the Tay bridge, the tolls were to cease when construction cost had been recovered but the Secretary of State can continue the tolls indefinitely if there would not otherwise be adequate provision for the operation of the bridge.)
8. Though tolling periods have been extended, under the existing law, the existing statutory power for tolls on the Erskine Bridge ceases on 1 July 2006 and on the Forth Bridge ceases on 31 March 2006. Tolls will end unless MSPs decide to keep them.

### Tolls are Unfair

9. Tolling just some roads is discriminatory and unfair to those who have to use these roads. Tolls are regressive. A poor person pays the same toll as a rich person. The driver of a small car pays the same as the driver of a large car.
10. UK road users already pay considerably more (over £40 billion) in taxes than is spent on roads (£7 billion). People and businesses that use the three bridges should not have to pay even more.
11. The three bridge tolls are unfair on workers who have to travel long distances to work and who even without the tolls burden already spend a disproportionate amount of their income on roads taxes.

### Tolls are Uneconomic

12. Tolls inhibit economic activity in the areas where they are situated. Businesses where road transport is important will prefer to locate elsewhere. Tourists will tend to avoid areas where there are tolls. The Highland Council commissioned from Napier University an "Economic Impact Study" on Skye bridge tolls in 2002. The study concluded that there would be an increase of 6% in jobs if the tolls were abolished.
13. In the particular case of Scotland, the removal of these three tolls, would give Scotland a competitive advantage in attracting business from other areas of the UK and EU that suffer from tolls.
14. Tolls collection causes delays and queues, and prolongs congestion periods as traffic is on the road longer than it would otherwise be. Queues in the evening for the Tay bridge tolls cause problems to people in Dundee who are not even using the bridge.

15. Where there is a choice, drivers will tend to avoid toll roads and use other roads, causing longer journeys, more fuel consumption and more emissions. These alternate routes may be less suitable, less safe and more congested. Driver's aversion to tolls far exceeds the financial impact, and drivers and businesses will spend time and money to avoid them, if they can.

#### Tolls Income is an infinitesimal part of Scotland's budget

16. Paragraph 14 of the Phase One Report said: "Phase One of the review highlighted that Erskine, Forth, and Tay all have significant commitments that must be funded to meet current and future maintenance and upgrading work. It is important that long term arrangements are in place to ensure that adequate funding is available to meet essential commitments and responsibilities."

17. It is in the nature of tolls, that as soon as there is any question as to their future, massive spending requirements materialise from almost nowhere. This is used to justify the tolls and the separate administrative arrangements that often exist for toll roads. If the bridges were assimilated into the normal road network, then there would be large savings in administration, and any maintenance needs would be judged more objectively.

18. Tolls on the three bridges raise a gross amount of about £21 million, (Erskine £5m, Forth £12m, Tay £4m). This is a great deal of money to the few who carry the burden, but it is insignificant in relation to the Executive's budget of £27 billion for 2005/06, or its budget underspending of £280 million last year, or the £4 billion which would be Scotland's share of UK taxes on roads users. Even the £21 million is reduced by the cost of collecting tolls which will probably be about £2 million a year. Toll collection equipment on Forth and possibly Tay is being replaced, wasting even more millions on an unproductive function.

#### Traffic growth should not be used as an excuse for keeping tolls

19. Paragraph 15 of the Phase One report said "This Review is being undertaken during a time of public concern about the implications of traffic growth and congestion on the economy and the environment. Given the traffic conditions we now experience in some parts of Scotland, it is important to consider bridge tolls in the context of the wider debate about congestion charging and road pricing."

20. Paragraph 16 went on to say "We are striving to stabilise road traffic volumes at 2001 levels by 2021. If traffic levels continue to rise then congestion, increased journey times and reduced reliability will continue to act as constraints on the economy..."

21. A desire to have universal tolls is no justification for keeping tolls that penalise a minority now.

22. Aiming to have 2021 traffic levels the same as in 2001 is a meaningless target. It implies that travel is a vice that is to be restricted. The inclusion of this in the Tolls Review report can only mean that the intention is to achieve this target by forcing poorer drivers off the road.
23. The long term UK trend has been for the number of miles travelled to increase. Economic growth may be the main cause, but it is not possible to predict whether future changes in lifestyle and where people live, work, and shop etc will cause a growth or reduction in miles travelled. The amount of travel by road vehicle in UK has already reached 89% of person miles, which to some extent limits future growth due to people switching to road travel from walking, bikes, trains, trams and planes.
24. The vast amount collected in roads taxes is more than sufficient to ensure that people's needs in this area are met rather than avoided. The latest available figures show that between 1972 and 2003, the average distance travelled per person increased by over 50%, but the annual amount of travelling time had only gone from 353 hours to 362 hours. Whether that record is maintained will depend on adequate roads provision in Scotland and not on tolls on 3 bridges.
25. Tolls themselves reduce roads capacity. Traffic slows down as it approaches toll booths, even where electronic charging is in use. During peak periods this is the main effect of tolls, as they do almost nothing to deter those travelling to work. The four lane bridge over the Mersey at Runcorn carries 5 million more vehicles a year than the Forth bridge. The Runcorn bridge is not tolled.

### No Support for Tolls

26. The majority of road users if asked in an unbiased way will reject tolls. An RAC Foundation survey published in January 2004 found that most drivers rejected road charging. Drivers thought that fuel taxes were too high, but they said that if the road fund licence were scrapped they would prefer the tax to be added to fuel duty.
27. In February, the people of Edinburgh rejected tolls by a margin of three to one. They rejected the idea of tolls despite vast efforts to sell the idea, and despite 42% of Edinburgh households not having a car. Even those who are endeavouring to keep the three bridge tolls, will realise that they would lose if the tolls issue was put to a vote of the people. Dislike of tolls is not new. We have attached two of many comments against the tolls. One dates from 1776, the other from 1991. The sentiments expressed are as true now as then.

### Conclusion

28. The three bridge tolls should be scrapped without further delay. The cost to the Scottish Executive will be insignificant, but it will remove from Scotland a major source of injustice and irritation. It will also boost the economy, not only of the areas affected but Scotland as a whole.



## Two Quotes

29. *"Whatever exigency of the state therefore this tax (turnpike tolls) might be intended to supply, that exigency would be chiefly supplied at the expense of the poor, not the rich; at the expense of those who are least able to supply it, not of those who are most able."*

(Adam Smith from *Kirkcaldy* published in 1776)

30. *"If the hon. Gentleman had ever been to Scotland, he would appreciate how much the entire economy there depends heavily on road transport. Indeed, there is no alternative to road transport in much of Scotland, and the condition of the road network is deplorable in many areas. The Scottish aspects of the Bill relate to toll roads, of which we have a number, or at any rate a number of de facto toll roads, namely, the bridges. I do not know how one can separate bridges from roads, of which they form a part. We must pay tolls to cross the Firth of Forth on the Forth bridge, the Firth of Tay on the Tay bridge and the Erskine bridge, and in due course the Minister proposes to have a privately funded road bridge built from Kyleakin to the Kyle of Lochalsh to form a road link to the Isle of Skye, and that will be a toll bridge.*

*I regard the imposition of tolls on those essential sections of road as a totally unreasonable imposition on the affected communities. It is a fiction to say that people have a choice because they can use an alternative road to get from one place to another. Try telling that to the people of Fife, who must pay to get in and out of the region, and perhaps that will apply even more so to the proposed bridge to the island of Skye. When that is constructed, it will be the only way on and off the island. People will have to pay to use it and they will have no alternative.*

*Toll roads represent a discriminatory and unfair imposition on people and businesses in areas which are dependent on toll links. I suspect that the experience of the financing of the Forth road bridge shows that the whole toll system is more bother than it is worth. It is an expensive undertaking to continue collecting the tolls, with all the hassle involved in that, and I doubt whether all that much has been achieved...*

*There may be a case in principle for establishing tolls. Equally, from my point of view, there is a case in principle for not having tolls. Either the whole network or none of it should be covered by tolls. It is wrong that it should be discriminatory and that unfortunate people in some areas should have to pay to travel about...*

*I reiterate that I am not happy about the principle of tolls. They should be done away with, ... However, I am not optimistic."*

(John Home Robertson MSP speaking in the Commons on 5th March 1991 when he was a Westminster MP)