

How to Ruin a Good Idea

Capitalism tends to encourage good ideas and weed out bad ones, so charging for road use, in particular, is a good idea. However, like any other good idea, it can be ruined by being implemented in the worst possible way and with the worst possible objectives. That is what the British Labour Government now seems **determined to do**:

Transport Secretary Alistair Darling wants to set pay-as-you-drive charges using satellite tracking devices fixed to cars.

The tolls would be highest for rush hour traffic – including commuters, motorway users and school run parents – and on busier routes...

The minister told the paper: "We have a choice in the next 25 to 30 years: either 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. I am convinced that unless we look at the possibility of road pricing, then future generations will not forgive us."

But he conceded the technology meant implementation was probably 10 years away.

Mr Darling said the government would not want to make money out of the scheme.

This justification for the scheme is based on environmental pseudo-science. In reality, motorways are good: they enable people to move about more easily. They take up negligible land and need do little or no damage to the environment. The idea that we can't build more of them is just silly: we did it in the past and we have become far more prosperous since then.

The fact that the system will be government-run is also a bad omen. Giving the government the means to track every car in the country has a horrible potential for abuse. Even the assurance that the government will try to avoid making money out of road

charging is a sign of the wrong attitude. When a business makes a profit it is because people want its services. For the government to avoid making money means they will avoid making roads easy and pleasant to use and that won't benefit anybody.

Tue, 06/10/2003 - 06:11 | [permalink](#)

Unnecessarily Intrusive

I thought I remembered seeing articles in Reason magazine about toll roads that could read stickers on cars at the entrance. And a quick search found a reference from **1996**:

Today's electronic toll collection technology makes it possible to charge people in real time. A small electronic tag affixed to the car can be "read" by a radio signal as the car passes a toll collection point at normal speed. Depending on the type of account, the fee is charged either to the user's credit card or to the user's account with the toll company. This system makes it easy to charge prices which vary by time of day, permitting more sophisticated forms of road pricing, including congestion pricing. Such fully electronic congestion pricing is now in use on the (private) 91 Express Lanes on the Riverside Freeway in Southern California.

I assume that this technology has significantly improved since 1996. Tracking every vehicle's location via satellite seems unnecessary and intended for other purposes.

I am a bit confused, however, about **The World's** position on governmental motives. Sometimes you seem to assume that moral purity motivates the actions of the British and American governments, and at other times you exhibit skepticism about the motives (e.g. "A horrible potential for abuse").

I prefer the latter.

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 16:46 | [reply](#)

No Contradiction

Gil wrote:

"I am a bit confused, however, about **The World's** position on governmental motives. Sometimes you seem to assume that moral purity motivates the actions of the British and American governments, and at other times you exhibit skepticism about the motives (e.g. "A horrible potential for abuse")."

It just happens that *in fact* the government has good theories in some areas and bad theories in others. Alastair Darling is clearly an idiot when it comes to roads and seems determined to set up a system that would give the government a large amount of unnecessary power which could be abused, and would be abused by this government since the pursuit of a screamingly stupid transport

policy like this is abused. Whether it would be abused in other ways only time would tell.

It's quite easy to discriminate between when they're being honest and when they're not quite a lot of the time. When it comes to terrorism you can tell that Blair and Bush mean what they say because it actually makes sense. When it comes to ID cards you can tell the British government are talking nonsense because they want to hide the fact that they're control freaks because the stated reasons for wanting ID cards are rubbish.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 17:14 | [reply](#)

How To Ruin A Good Idea

Okay, perhaps I'm missing something obvious here. But if the British government wants to encourage people to travel during non-peak periods, what's wrong with setting up ordinary toll booths? Pick up a ticket when you enter the roadway, pay when you leave the roadway (with your ticket indicating how far you've traveled). Make the fees higher during peak periods, lower during offpeak periods.

Why is it necessary to track where specific cars go in order to collect money from them?

Daniel in Medford

by [Daniel in Medford](#) on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 20:02 | [reply](#)

"They take up negligible land...

"They take up negligible land and need do little or no damage to the environment. The idea that we can't build more of them is just silly: we did it in the past and we have become far more prosperous since then."

OK, armed with a pencil and a back of an envelope, some criticism.

A 4 lane divided highway requires about a 50 m wide right of way (Roughly, 4 lanes by 3 meters, another 10 for the median strip, 10 on either side of the right of way, 12 more for shoulders= over 50m). 20km of that accounts for a square kilometer of land, and one'll need a couple interchanges at least that take up land *at least* 200m on the side, for another 0.08km².

1.08km² of land isn't negligible, I think - particularly in an area where there is congestion - meaning there are people there - meaning the land is probably being used. Highways in the Mojave Desert aren't so congested.

Now, putting aside environmental concerns, which I am not qualified to address, we can go into the practicalities of actually building the thing.

The land (negligible or not) making up the right of way will be

privately owned. And will have to be obtained from the owner. Now, states mostly use eminent domain for this - but I think that this would count as a difficulty! I don't think libertarians like the idea of the state expropriating private property.

Now, if a private entity were building the highway they would have to encounter the truism that my perceived value of my property is $\max(\text{its utility to me, its utility to other people})$ - which makes it rather difficult to deal with Mr. Smith who figures if his filling station is on land key for a \$1bn expressway project that he ought to get at least \$10mn - even though if it were not on the key right of way he'd be happy to take \$1mn.

So I don't think that the quoted statement is valid. Moreover, arguing that in the past we built roads and have become more prosperous doesn't necessarily work now - the situation has changed. Mainly because where roads are property values have gone up, the land is being used (because of the roads!) and it's fairly useless to build a new road where nothing at all is right now - it has to connect to something at some point.

by a reader on Wed, 06/11/2003 - 16:56 | [reply](#)

um

a(nother) reader writes:

1.08km² of land isn't negligible, I think

Uh, by comparison to what? Nothing is "negligible, I think" if you don't compare it to anything else (or perhaps, only to itself). Yes of course if one sits and ponders a 1.08km² piece of land by itself, it Seems Large. But, by your calculation you've got this 1.08km² coming from a stretch of road 20 km long. Why can't I chime in and say don't worry, that 20 km road is crossing a square patch of land 20 x 20 or 400 km²? (Well, it is.) So we're really talking about carving out 0.25% of that patch for road. Zero-point-two-five-percent of a square patch *is* Negligible, I Think.

What's that? You don't want me to compare road to the square patch that it's crossing? What then? You gotta compare it to *something*.

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 05:48 | [reply](#)

i know!

lets compare the road to 1/100th of the square patch it crosses. now it's 25% of the area, which is clearly lots. ^_~

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 05:54 | [reply](#)

Too many calculations for me!...

Too many calculations for me! What's the bottom line?

by [Sylvia Crombie](#) on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 08:34 | [reply](#)

The World right (*gasp*)

Sylvia,

The bottom line is that roads take very little space, as the original entry says.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 09:43 | [reply](#)

Not at all. To take an ext...

Not at all.

To take an extreme case, it's very difficult to drive into Manhattan. Ah, let us build another road. A square kilometer of land taken out of Manhattan, however arranged, up north or under the river into New Jersey, would take up an enormous amount of Manhattan.

Congested areas generally are congested with already-economically-productive land, not just road.

More to the point, nobody's bothered to address how such 'little' land is supposed to be purchased.

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 16:33 | [reply](#)

wow good point

Well, it is true that a square kilometer coming from Manhattan is a more significant amount of space, relative to the size of Manhattan (about 59 km², and 21.5 km long, according to [this](#)). Almost 1.7% of its land area! So yes, to put a new 4-lane divided highway (your example) running the length of Manhattan would represent a slightly more significant amount of land. (1.7% is not an "enormous amount", though...) Wow good point!

Even better, just imagine carving that square kilometer for our 4-lane divided highway out of just the area between 23rd and 34th street. (It could curve back and forth like a snake, or something.) Even *more* less negligible!

Question: why are we still carving 1.08 square kilometers out of these smaller places?? Can't we make a shorter, skinnier new road? Do roads come quantized in 20 km, 4-lane-divided chunks? Is the issue *really* whether it is affordable (price-wise and area-wise) to put in a 4-lane divided highway running the length of Manhattan? *That's* the test of Whether Roads Take Up Negligible Land?

At some point if you want to start convincing people of something,

you're going to have to talk about concepts such as "density". Also about road usage: how much new road do we *need* to carve out of Manhattan? By continually insisting on carving this 20 km long 4-lane divided highway out of smaller and smaller areas (a shopping mall? my bedroom?), obviously you're eventually going to wind up with a conclusion that it's "not negligible, I think".

(P.S. The fact that land values and current usage vary from place to place have no bearing on the the rebuttal I was trying to make, nor on the original point of whether "roads take up negligible space" is a true statement, which it is, I reckon.)

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 18:12 | [reply](#)

Not Always Negligible

The problem is that we shouldn't be talking about roads in terms of the space they consume. We should be referring to the cost of building them. A road through my suburban neighborhood will be cheap, in terms of cost to build, maintain, and lost economic output, compared to a same size road in Manhattan. This is because, if you are to build a road of any useful length in Manhattan, you'll have to move something else, which more than likely produces some economic output. It's all about displacement. That said, 99% of the time the best solution is probably to build another road.

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 21:08 | [reply](#)

And one more time... from the same dude...

OK! So, the space taken up is not necessarily negligible. It can be expensive. Because there are things there!

All right. Now -for the third time- how do you get the road built without expropriating people's property for less than they feel like selling it? Recall $\max(\text{utility to me}, \text{utility to someone else})$ pricing function. I'm sure this kind of thing has been brought up before and I'm unfamiliar with the standard Libertarian approach to this situation.

My main point in bringing up all these things is that it really detracts like heck from a site that does a decent job of bringing up silly unqualified things that people say to be saying things that are themselves.... dubious...? Dubious to the point where in my opinion anyway it sort of negates the whole point the root post was attempting to make.

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 22:49 | [reply](#)

Come again

A...whaaaa?!?!?

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 23:31 | [reply](#)

The problem is that we sho...

The problem is that we shouldn't be talking about roads in terms of the space they consume. We should be referring to the cost of building them.

Well why not both? Yes, cost is an important consideration as well. Surely you are correct, some road projects cost more than others. And this changes World's original point.... how?

That said, 99% of the time the best solution is probably to build another road.

Well then it looks like we all agree. Splendid.

by a reader on Fri, 06/13/2003 - 01:03 | [reply](#)

taqveem

i have went on your site and i have been trying to find why is it a good idea for a motorway i needed it for monday why don't you write about the popullation will increase and i need a good a good idea for pollution is going to be there but something will happen... [what will happen]

by a reader on Sat, 10/16/2004 - 10:29 | [reply](#)