

The Congestion Charge: Why the Left Should Support It

Daniel Blaney

AT THE time of writing, as congestion charging in London enters its second week, it is still too early to make a conclusive assessment of Ken Livingstone's ground-breaking scheme. But so far, contrary to all the predictions (and hopes) of his enemies, it shows every sign of being a success.

The congestion charge was introduced on the Monday of the February half term ("C-Day") because, with less traffic, London could be eased into the new system, and the system could be eased into the life of Londoners. This reasoning had long been public, but it didn't prevent anti-charging crusaders from accusing Livingstone of "typical scheming" (Kate Hoey) by displaying such obvious competence. There was little else they could say, because the state of London's roads on the first day gobsnacked everyone.

The introduction of London's congestion charge has been a fascinating display of the nature of 21st century politics. The media is dominated by regular car drivers, and it is motoring, as opposed to environmental, correspondents who have been given responsibility for reporting the scheme. This has completely distorted press coverage of transport issues in London, where 50% of inner London households don't have cars, and 85% of people who travel around central London do so by public transport. Under its first directly-elected mayor, London has seen massive public investment in the transport functions under his control (i.e. not the Tube), and this is most evident on the buses.

It was a rare treat that, on the C-day, journalists got out of their cars and asked ordinary Londoners what they thought. The response from regular bus passengers told us what many already knew: buses seem to be getting better. Two weeks before C-day, buses saw a £20 million improvement, involving increased frequency, new night buses and new routes, and this wasn't a stand-alone expansion. Most weeks for the six months before C-day saw an expansion in various services, resulting in 300

extra buses in London every hour in time for the start of congestion charging. Livingstone has therefore easily exceeded his manifesto commitment to introduce 200 new buses.

This has been accompanied by various initiatives to make bus travel cheaper (the cost of most bus passes, which are mainly bought by London's poorest, has been cut by about a third), along with the new Transport Operational Command Unit, which has increased security and safety for users of both public transport and private mini-cabs, and has provided fast track mechanisms for addressing motoring offences that slow up public transport.

According to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee: "London has achieved an expansion of [bus] services and a level of integration of information, ticketing and fares not seen elsewhere in England. The experience in London shows that if large amounts of public subsidy are used to improve bus services, quick and significant improvements can be made."

So the key argument against the London scheme – that it couldn't be done until public transport had been improved – was a false one. Congestion charging has been implemented alongside an improvement in public transport. Furthermore, Livingstone's expansionist policies are continuing. According to Transport for London (TfL), the bus network will receive subsidies of £314 million, £453 million and £512 million over each of the next three years.

The second main argument against congestion charging is that it hits the less well off. It has been most entertaining to see the Conservative Party posing as the party of the poor on this issue. This argument cannot be adequately dealt with by retorting "the poor don't drive", although that is truer in London than elsewhere in Britain. Congestion charging may well hit the pockets of a minority of the lower socio-economic groups, but the lack of congestion charging hits the majority of the poor more. When the costs of

running a car are going down by about 2.5% a year, and the costs of using public transport are going up by about 1.5% a year, congestion charging is a broadly re-distributive mechanism.

Not only will any money raised go into improving public transport, but most of this money will come from the pockets of rich and those who choose to dispose of their money in that way. An interesting argument was put forward by Professor David Begg, of the Commission for Integrated Transport: "if you were to increase a charge on private schools and private hospitals and put the money into the state alternative, no-one would argue that it was regressive." He has a point. The left believes VAT is regressive, but still advocates VAT on private health and education. The argument that congestion charging is a sort of poll tax because it is flat rate is absurd.

This argument is closely related to another argument that will become central to the political debate of the 21st century – whether the polluter should pay. For those who have no suitable public transport available for their work (e.g. shift workers) there are often other alternatives: cycling, car-sharing, electric vehicles, to name but three. Ask the many shift workers who don't have cars. The Left cannot afford to lose this ground on this political battlefield because of occasional examples of injustice. The objective assessment is that social justice can gain from the "polluter-pays" principle, but only if it is led by the Left.

The Right – in the form of the Conservative Party and much of the press – had hyped up the failure of the scheme before C-day itself. This may well have been a mistaken strategy, because after

its first week the notion of scrapping congestion charging lacked any credibility. But it was just one element in a vitriolic campaign of lies and media manipulation aimed at undermining Livingstone.

For example, the saga of the changing of traffic lights has become so embedded in urban myth that it will probably never be overcome. (The truth is traffic lights have been re-signalled over a long period to bring pedestrian crossing-times in line with a national standard – a process started by the Conservative government in 1992.) Changing traffic lights back and abolishing road-works have become "serious" alternatives to congestion charging, but as Professor Begg states: "if it was simply a case of tweaking the traffic lights and trying to keep traffic flowing, getting rid of vans that are parked on yellow lines, it would be a lot easier.... we cannot get away from the fact that the basic problem here is too many vehicles chasing too little road space."

In reality, Ken Livingstone's bold experiment is the accepted solution to congestion, and is passionately supported by environmentalists. 40% of congestion in Britain is in London and 80% is in urban centres. If the London scheme is even moderately successful it will be followed by other cities in Britain and across the world. As we learn from this first major experiment, future schemes will incorporate improvements. Climate change is the big issue of the 21st century and major reductions in private transport are essential. This policy is certainly about much more than the political future of Red Ken, but as the pioneer of congestion charging he could go down in history as Green Ken too. ■

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