Road User Charging is back on the agenda again in London. The technology to implement efficient charging mechanisms has been developed. The public are being converted. Government hasn't.

London's not working

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For all its twists and turns the British government has had a love-hate relationship towards Road Use Charging since the 1964 Smeed Report into replacing Vehicle Excise Duty with a variable mechanism. Further studies have repeatedly advertised that lack of available technology to charge motorists accurately was the primary reason for doing nothing. Such an interpretation ignores the fact that the ramp up time from public consultation through evaluation to policy decision on Road User Charging is about as long as the political cycle in the UK. So, perceived as a vote loser, the decision was to defer decision, an option that has become increasingly untenable as London grinds to a halt - demonstrated by longer peak hour congestion and a transport infrastructure that is operating ever closer to the limit of its capacity.

As one of the most dynamic and business-friendly capital cities on the world arena, London needs to maintain a competitive advantage with other international hubs such as New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore – all investing heavily in their transport infrastructure. The flow of goods and people in London is analogous to working capital in a business. Dotcoms and the Millenium Dome presently excluded, slowing down the flow of working capital results in an organisation that lacks the capability to trade. Through inaction London faces this future.

On morning radio, on the day that Ken Livingstone was installed as the new Mayor of London, came policy statements that Road Use Charging was back on the agenda - a reason for a few motorists to choke on their breakfast and for others to celebrate that something would actually be done in London to actively manage traffic demand through pricing mechanisms.

Implementations of all successful transport policies in London have recognised and reflected local needs so it is no less important that a London scheme will have to fit the context of an already complex, multi-layered, multi-modal transport environment. Charging, as a demand management instrument, has little value when applied in isolation but only as part of a balanced and integrated transport policy.

Off-peak travel is cheaper for many modes of transport but roads remain a free-for-all. Inducing modal shift requires investment to develop viable alternatives so maybe the government can explain why the lion's share of the £3.2 billion transport settlement for London has been deferred despite an urgent need to improve London's bus service? Continued underinvestment in the Tube means that motorists will not yet have the incentive they need to leave their cars at home. An isolated threat of Charging cannot be classified as an incentive to take the bus. Perceived savings in travel time on less congested roads - possibly.

In real terms the cost of motoring is cheaper now than a generation ago and this decline is expected to continue, according to the government's 10-year plan, published in July. The termination of the fuel duty escalator leaves a £1 billion hole in revenues. So, whilst the recent ROCOL report concludes that public acceptability would be increased through hypothecation of Road Use Charges, the pressure to refill the public coffers from alternative sources has never been greater.

Public attitudes towards Charging have been largely untested although, through consultation and announced discounts for business and residents, Livingstone is actively developing public acceptance, apparently ahead of demonstrated government support. Like paying for other modes of transport paying a fee to enter London may become a fact of life – the cost of getting London moving again.

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