

# What is the future for congestion charging?

CAROLINE PIDGEON *wants your views ...*

London led the way on road pricing when its then independent Mayor Ken Livingstone introduced Congestion Charging in 2003. The Liberal Democrats alone among the major political parties backed the move. Tories prophesied doom, Labour sat on their hands. The scheme successfully reduced traffic entering the Central Zone by 18-20 per cent, and that reduction broadly continues to this day.

Elsewhere in the UK, attempts to introduce congestion charging schemes have failed. Both the Greater Manchester and the Edinburgh schemes were overwhelmingly rejected. Arguably both were flawed schemes. In London the elected Mayor had a mandate to introduce the charge, but clearly voters elected him for many reasons other than the congestion charge.

What is the purpose of road pricing? There seems to be some confusion. At least three aims come to mind: first, to reduce congestion and avoid gridlock; second, to improve air quality and reduce harmful emissions; third, to raise revenue for transport improvements.

These three aims are not necessarily incompatible. In London, the primary aim was certainly to reduce congestion. Although the scheme reduced the amount of traffic in the central area, congestion has been creeping up again as Thames Water has a massive programme of renewing London's sewers. Current congestion levels would be very much worse had the scheme not been introduced.

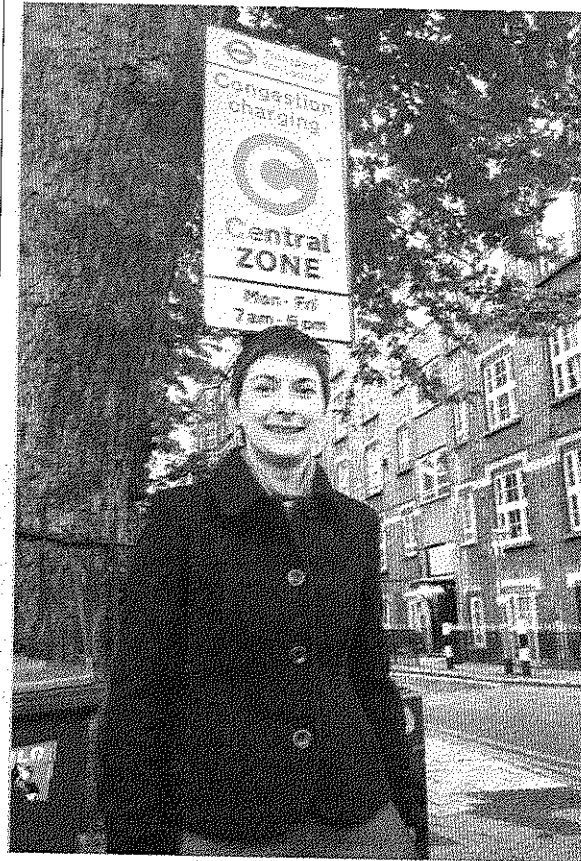
Then, back in 2004, Liberal

## "We need more sophisticated technology"

Democrats floated the idea of doubling the daily congestion charge (then £5) for oversized 4x4 vehicles. Ken Livingstone went into the 2008 election advocating a £25 daily charge for high-emission vehicles. Boris Johnson campaigned against that and won the election. Now he is talking about exempting vehicles with low CO2 emissions, including diesels. As electric cars and alternative fuel vehicles are already exempted, Johnson's proposals risk a huge number of drivers not paying the charge.

If congestion charging has the primary task of reducing congestion, arguably no types of vehicles should be exempted from the charge, whatever their size or type of fuel. After all gridlock is gridlock, whatever the type of vehicles that are on the road.

However, each year in London 3,000 people die prematurely due to the capital's poor air quality – with diesel vehicles contributing because of the dangerous particulates they generate. While diesels generate less CO2



greenhouse gases than many petrol engines, they do churn out dangerous amounts of nitrogen dioxide and PM10s. Of course it is easy to attack oversized 4x4 vehicles in urban areas and blame them entirely for harming the environment. The harsh fact is that high-emission black cabs, diesel cars and vans also contribute to poor air quality in London.

Ken's congestion charge scheme is a rather basic system with many limitations. It can only be extended

into areas bordering the original Zone which aren't necessarily the most congested areas. It relies on perimeter cameras, so once you've paid you can go on driving around in the Zone all day. You pay the same charge of £8 if you drive 300 metres or 30 miles.

We need more sophisticated technology. 'Tag and Beacon' technology has been used for years in Singapore, Oslo and Stockholm and was successfully trialled by Transport for London in Southwark. This system gives drivers the option of having the appropriate charge deducted from an

Oystercard or from a nominated bank account. This cuts out the whole bother of remembering to pay and the danger of £40 penalty fines.

It would also enable TfL to vary the charge in more heavily congested hours and take account of whether your vehicle has high levels of polluting emissions.

Borough councils in Greater London could choose to use this technology to bear down on their own congestion 'hotspots' and perhaps only impose the charge

during peak hours or on one direction of travel. There are other systems involving GPS: what we chiefly need now are technologies that give us many more options.

In London, we feel that better technology, and a charging system that is graded so that the worst polluters pay most, is the way forward. Revenue from congestion charging has by law to be spent on transport improvements for London – an essential element of fiscal transparency sorely needed for national politics.

The national policy on road-pricing, agreed at the 2008 Conference, is a policy to be implemented over two parliaments. In the meantime, there will be plenty of opportunities for different variants of congestion charging to be tried out locally – by councils elected on such a mandate. We need local solutions for local problems.

Congestion charging must develop and I am certain it can deliver far greater benefits in London. However, we need to accept that we are asking a lot from one policy and that an honest debate is needed over the different objectives and the balance that inevitably needs to be reached between them.

I am determined that the Liberal Democrats continue to lead the debate over the congestion charge and road pricing in general. I am keen to hear from party members about how they think congestion charging should develop. Any comments can be sent to me at [caroline.pidgeon@london.gov.uk](mailto:caroline.pidgeon@london.gov.uk). Caroline Pidgeon AM is the Lib Dem Chair of the London Assembly Transport Committee