



1 February 2018

Dear Councillor,

Dave Loudon, chair of MTUA, recently sent you a letter about the tolls. Unfortunately due to his work he was not able to be at today's meeting of the Transport Committee. I was there with another MTUA committee member and have the following comments.

### Toll Setting process

We went realising that the recommendation would be agreed because the budget was prepared on that basis. But we were pleasantly surprised to see that there were six members of the Committee who voted against the tolls increase and we thank them.

There were various comments about the process of setting the tolls in Dave's letter of the 28th. He referred to our unanswered complaints of last year including the difficulty that the public has hearing what is said at your meetings. This year was not as bad as last year but the sound amplification is still inadequate.

Last year we also commented about the failure of those with a Tag to declare an interest. This matter came up near the start of today's meeting. Advice was given by an officer. We could not hear this properly but the gist of it seemed to be that members with a Tag did not have to declare it because Tags would affect most people in the area. If that was the advice then it seems that the Authority wishes you to believe that most people or at least most people who use the Tunnels have a Tag. That is almost certainly not so. According to Merseytravel's figures just over half of journeys are made using a Tag, but those who use the Tunnels the most frequently are more likely to have a Tag, so it is undoubtedly true that the majority of drivers who use the Tunnels at some time in the year do not have a Tag. The MTUA still believe that it is wrong for councillors not to reveal whether they are one of the beneficiaries of their decision.

There seemed to be some self congratulation that somehow Merseytravel now had the power to set differential tolls, and was recommending a lower toll for Tags from 7pm to 7am and all day on Sundays. There are no new powers, there are only the same very wide powers in Subsection 1 of Section 92C of the 2004 Act (re-enacting previous legislation) that we have been pointing out to you for many years and which

Merseytravel never mention in their Tolls reports.

Indeed those powers were the basis of the proposals (including off peak reductions) that we put to Merseytravel in Autumn 2004 - "[A New Way Forward For Tunnels](#)"

Those 2004 proposals were backed by local MPs including Frank Field, Stephen Hesford and Bob Wareing, by the Leader of Liverpool City Council (Mike Storey), and by Lords with a local connection including Lord Alton of Liverpool, Lord Chan of Oxton and Lord Hunt of Wirral. They were also backed by the AA Motoring Trust, the Forum of Private Business, the RAC Foundation and the Road Haulage Association.

They were not of course backed by Merseytravel, who also rejected similar proposals that we put forward in later years. It has been clear since 2004 and earlier that Merseytravel's main interest in the Tunnels is to make money.

Some of the claims made at today's meeting

**a) Tolls are high because of 'investment' in Tunnels**

It was implied that the tolls had to be as high as they are because of 'investment' and there was reference to the £10 million Capital programme for the Tunnels.

The Tunnels are expected to make £12 million profit AFTER any 'investment', so it is misleading to use this claim to support high tolls

Oddly the biggest item in the latest Tunnels capital programme is £3 million for 'Bidston Moss Viaduct Resurfacing'. This of course is not a tunnel, but when the Wallasey Tunnel was built the local politicians agreed that the Tunnels should be billed for what is in effect the last stretch of the M53. That included not only the capital cost but also maintenance and repair. This is an example of loading as much cost as possible on to the Tunnels account and excluding as much income as you can such as not crediting interest earned on Tag payments in advance.

**b) Tolls are high because of the need to pay off debt**

The Birkenhead Tunnel cost £7 million to build and the Wallasey Tunnel cost £37 million. Tolls so far exceed one billion pounds and the profits or transfers from the Tunnels accounts to the Authority's general funds from 2004 to March 2017 total over £130 million. This compares with outstanding Tunnels debt that we estimate is about £18 million. There would have been no Tunnels debt if Merseytravel had been paying

it off rather than taking the money.

We have had to estimate the Tunnels debt because since 2016 the Authority seem to have stopped publishing accounts for the Tunnels.

**c) The tolls recommendations "fulfil Steve Rotherham's pledge" and will benefit shift workers**

What the Metro Mayor said in his 2017 manifesto was "We are the only City Region in Europe where there will be no free cross-river road routes for residents and businesses. We need to be more flexible and creative in finding ways to remove burdens and barriers to travel and support business growth and ease of movement. This will include plans for a reduction in the fast-tag tunnel fare to £1 and lobbying Government to review the unfair and detrimental impact of current tolling proposals for the Mersey Gateway Bridge."

The above clearly referred to all journeys using a Tag, but the reduction of Tag tolls to £1 between 7pm and 7am Monday to Saturday and all day Sunday will only affect a small proportion of Tag journeys. (Merseytravel will know the exact figure, but they have not revealed what it is.)

More importantly the Metro Mayor implied that he opposed tolls, but he now supports an increase in the cash tolls and the continuation of profit taking.

As to benefiting shift workers, even if all their journeys fell into the lower rate hours, they will still be paying up to £500 a year more than drivers in other areas pay.

**d) There have been numerous requests by Merseytravel to Tory Governments for them to take over the Tunnels and these have all been rejected**

This is an often repeated claim. It is never explained why Merseytravel did not make any requests to the Labour Government from 1997 to 2010. In any case the authority have never been able to produce evidence that such efforts have been made apart from five years ago, when there was a derisory attempt.

It is obvious that Merseytravel and the Authority do not want the Government to take over the Tunnels as they would lose their power over the Tunnels, its users and the tolls. As was mentioned in the letter to you of the 28th, the MTUA has attempted to get from Government departments, details of what has been discussed between the Authority and the Government and they have refused to answer. It is reasonable to assume that far from seeking help with the Tunnels or the tolls, the Authority wants the Government to let them continue as now, making profits.

**e) It is hypocritical to support Tunnels tolls and oppose tolls on the Gateway**

This is a claim that might apply to what some people have said.

The fact that the road crossing of the Mersey from Runcorn to Widnes which has been free for over half a century is now tolled is mainly due to the Tunnels tolls and those that benefit from them. The untolled bridge was a thorn in the side of Merseytravel as some traffic that would otherwise have used the Tunnels and paid tolls instead used the Silver Jubilee bridge.

The last thing that Merseytravel would have wanted was more free road capacity over the Mersey and ideally they will have wanted the existing free crossing removed.

We know nothing of any confidential discussions that took place between the two authorities and the Government. But when doing some research for the Public Inquiry in 2008 we found the minutes of a meeting of Halton Council's Executive Board in 2001 which was deciding whether they should back the Tunnels Bill. The minutes say "there was a possibility of a significant reduction in Mersey Tunnel tolls that would increase the use of the Tunnel crossing and the economic case for a new crossing (at Runcorn) could be seriously jeopardised. The uncertainty could also adversely affect the attractiveness of the New Crossing Project to private investors".

Without the 2004 Act, Tunnel tolls might have gone down rather than up, and Halton Council decided to support the Bill that became the Mersey Tunnels Act 2004. At the time Halton were saying that they wanted an untolled bridge, but the decision implies that they expected the crossing at Halton to be a tolled PFI scheme.

The MTUA again invite you to tell us if you think that anything we say is untrue, inaccurate or misleading.

Yours sincerely,

John McGoldrick  
Secretary  
Mersey Tunnels Users Association

To Councillors on Transport Committee  
copy to Council Leaders who are full members of the Combined Authority