

McQuaid, R.W. (2005) "Thoughts on the wider implications of the rejection of the City of Edinburgh's proposals", *Scotregen Newsletter*, Issue 30, p. 7, Spring

Some implications for the rest of the UK

Despite the 'No Vote' in Edinburgh, congesting pricing in the UK is not dead - as with the Monty Python parrot, it is 'just resting'. The 'polluter pays principle', including not just polluters but the generators of other 'externalities' such as congestion, is well established as a basis for policy both internationally and in the UK. A broad spectrum of political and ideological views, from environmental lobbies, government bodies and to 'market driven' think-tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute, all support congestion pricing. The Edinburgh vote will cause some rethinking about the tactics of introducing road pricing, but probably not about the basic direction of local and national policies.

One issue that the Edinburgh situation highlights is the role of national versus local approaches. First, a national approach often makes more sense - much of Edinburgh's worse congestion is actually on the trunk roads leading to and from the city, and the same is the case around many other cities such as Glasgow. Second, politically it may be easier for road pricing in a local area to be introduced by national bodies, where the danger of a voter backlash may have relatively less importance, although issues of good governance may arise.

Even though the voters convincingly rejected the scheme on offer, the City of Edinburgh Council are to be congratulated on having had the courage to try to introduce road user charging in order to help combat the problems of increasing congestion. But will the vote set back possible schemes elsewhere in the UK? This remains to be seen, although there are some possible lessons from Edinburgh that we need to investigate and learn from.

We need to unpack why the voters said 'no'. How much of their antagonism was due to the characteristics of the scheme itself (the timings of the outer cordon and the choice of cordon rather than area based charging meant that it would probably have had less impact on congestions than some other choices, so many felt it was not really 'about congestion at all'). Or was it the consultation process (neighbouring councils threatening court action was bound to spread concerns even among Edinburgh residents). Or was it equity issues in their various guises; or the belief that the actual future public transport improvements would be delivered. Or was there a partial breakdown in trust (a hostile press and, as in London, accounts of 'traffic lights being set to reduce traffic speed' or 'extra' road works being done in the run in to the referendum, may have had no foundation, but anecdotal evidence suggests these may have increased peoples' suspicions, no matter how unwarranted). Or was it people fearing their own local streets becoming 'rat runs' etc.?

Whether or not each of these complaints had real foundations is not the question, rather if they were perceived to be issues then they must be dealt with fully and openly. Dismissing or attacking complaints is not the answer

(and fortunately this rarely happened in Edinburgh). Potential losers will nearly always fight louder and harder than potential winners (especially when the reward is some way off). So fundamentally we need to build the trust of local people.

What are the lessons for elsewhere? Asking people to vote for an extra 'tax' (for that is how it was often perceived) is always going to be hard. Being totally honest and open with all the evidence (for *and* against) and convincing people that, on balance, this is the best solution is essential – the trust of the public is more effective than short-term 'spin' which only focuses upon the plus points. Getting the media 'onside', or at least not being antagonistic, is easier said than done - but is crucial. We urgently need research into understanding why people voted the way they did, so we can bring these lessons to other cities (or indeed to national initiatives). It is unlikely that cities will wait for a full national scheme, as the necessary new technology is still a long way from being workable. Road user charging has a long way to go and, while being first to hold a referendum has had its drawbacks, Edinburgh provides useful and positive lessons into how we can better approach it elsewhere. We need to learn these lessons now.

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