



Communicating road pricing: lessons to date

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VIEW FROM THE TOP

Mayor Livingstone tells Gidon Freeman about his PR gamble with congestion charging

Ker's reputation at stake

Despite the bluster, the gritty public image and the evident contempt he has for the secret machinations of New Labour spin doctors, Ken Livingstone is a deeply message-conscious politician. His staff as they demand he make a move the Greater London Authority relocated to the sparkling new City Hall earlier this year was that his office should look east towards the poorer parts of the capital. He had no interest in facing the Westminster village that had provided the platform for a 25 year political career and a clear intention to both physically and symbolically turn his back on the image obsessed national politicians.



Livingstone... To avoid his anti-car measures bringing a massive PR backlash, it's all-out-ship-up and this is how he knows whether a product or

It is a controversial but not a wholly convincing one. Apart from anything else, the view over Lower Bridge and across to the City is far more dramatic than the murky Thames winding its way towards NW.

Last month saw Livingstone and the GLA embark on an ambitious public information campaign on the issue of congestion charging. The charge comes into force next February and will see almost 600,000 drivers paying £5 if they wish to enter the charging zone between 7am and 6pm a week day. With an anticipated cost to GLA of £10m and a similar £10m operationally geared to warning Londoners over to the benefits of the charge, Livingstone does not want to think of him, and consequently his party.

He is fond of telling a story about his not so many's commitment to the UK two years ago, in which his fellow mayors expressed incredulity that he was set to face through charges for driving a city as keen on the motor car as London. The consensus was that they would wait to see whether Livingstone got himself elected before following the lead.

Public opinion is absolutely decisive for the congestion charge, he says. In the same way that Thatcher ignored public opinion about the Poll Tax until it was too late, the charge you are asking people to make is so substantial that you have to take consent. "I am not just opposed against such a determination."

That determination mostly includes most of the 33 London borough mayor, and civil rights organisations, and the Tory opposition. It also includes sections of the London media, and in particular an increasingly sceptical *Financial Standard*. Livingstone plays down the impact of negative editorial coverage, but that's exactly what papers such as the *Standard* have such an ability to influence opinion with no responsibility to exercise. Whatever the media says will be ignored by the public if it is contrary to people's personal experience. If charging turns out to be a success it won't matter what the papers say about it.

Despite this dismissive attitude, Livingstone has picked up a greater understanding of PR than he had in the past. Among the criticisms levelled at him after he addressed the PR Greater London Group earlier this year was the claim that he did not know the difference between PR and advertising - at that time he used the terms interchangeably, describing 'a space as PR and placing the team for their great work in rising him'.

It is a mistake to have moved beyond that, to a more subtle grasp of the communications challenge ahead. A key problem is that this issue was initially covered by political correspondents and then some time last year it seemed to be handed to marketing specialists. I think they have a full understanding of the issues but they have to tell their readers what they want to hear.

Whatever journalists cover the issue, the stark fact is that Livingstone has invested so much personal capital in the project that he must follow in as big as it goes belly up. On this point he is right. And even on a technical level, he will prove very unpopular and accept that his own risk in this reputation is being a success.

As a campaign, the public information drive for charging law included a bold advertising-led effort, including event groups and roadshows to show the possibility of exemptions to show them how to make their claim. With £12.7m on advertising the campaign's clipped element by far has been the PR operation run from within the GLA. By the press team with special to former Labour communications director Jay Johnson. The cost covers tens of thousands of information packs sent to disabled badge holders, fleet managers, central road controllers and so on. It also covers some degree of support from the charge.

The details of the charge are complex enough for Livingstone to have relied on using PR to communicate

them. The campaign to explain why it is happening, how to get your exemption, who you can and who you can't, that sort of stuff can't be done by public relations - you've got to buy the space. But then I wouldn't waste my own money trying to convince people charging is a good idea, it's about to happen and they'll soon know for themselves whether it's good or not.

Some would say this tactic has gone so far as to ignore the basic principles of managing public expectations. But he is scuffling about the suggestion that left communications can reduce the negative impact of the charge.

He says: "If I produce a bucket of piss, what can I do to make it taste better? I can't stop it from being a bucket of piss, but I can make it taste better."

When does central London Congestion charging start?
17 February 2003.

Where exactly is the Congestion charging zone?
Central London only.

Information campaign... designed to ease an awareness of the basic details

'I had two-and-half years of stupidity from the Labour PR machine, which created so much anger'

Ken Livingstone
London Mayor

"If I produce a bucket of pigeon shit and pour it over your head, then spend several thousand pounds on PR to explain to you that it is wonderful, I'm not going to persuade you"

Ken Livingstone
PR Week
January 2002

- Political leadership – the Mayor
- Local powers – TfL & London's roads
- National framework - hypothecation
- Infrastructure – public transport
- Empirical evidence – congestion!

**End this
class war on
motorists**

Road to madness

£5 'toll tax'

This dastardly plot will ruin London

**'A tidal wave' of
road restrictions**

**'Don't let the charges
divide our community'**

Don't take away my car!

Ken's road to ruin

**I want to
punch Ken's
lights out**

Congestion is wonderful



- Congestion a serious problem – 72%
- Unprompted, 1 in 5 raised as a key problem
- 2001 – only 35% in favour of the congestion charge
- Revenue spent on public transport – 53% for
- Greater use of / favourability on public transport

Stakeholder opinion critical

- business
- motoring organisations
- environmental groups
- local residents
- public sector / shift workers and unions
- disabled groups

- 'Needed, workable and fair'
- Consultation (not referenda) – 2000 - 2003
 - Draft Transport Strategy
 - Transport Strategy
 - Draft Scheme Order
 - Scheme Order
- Public acceptability – key 'conditions'
 - Re-investment of revenues
 - Choice and alternatives
 - Exemptions
- *Clarity* about proposals (ROCOL)

- London opinion formers in the zone
- Evening Standard
- Kennington Lane Resident's Association
- The boroughs
- A Judicial Review

- Backed by £12m marketing & ad campaign
 - civil disobedience?
 - systems collapse?
 - confusion

‘C’ is for calm

**Capital
gain**

Chaos, mayhem, dead cyclists
...well, no, the streets are empty

**Congestion charge is a winner as
drivers breeze through the rush-hour**

London has that Sunday morning feeling

D

congestion Day

**Whatever happened
to rush hour?**

Day the air filled with bird
song instead of fumes



- 55% for; 40% against (UK)
- 59% for; 36 against (London)
- Two-thirds (67%) believed it had been effective in reducing traffic congestion
- One in five (20%) did not think it effective

March 2003 (ICM)

- London is unique
- Metropolitan areas diverse
- Politics complex
- National / local approaches?
- Technology moved on

But

- attitudes have shifted outside London
- environmental issues have risen up the agenda
- congestion is an increasing problem in urban areas
- there is broad national political consensus on RP

The objections

Big brother (No. 10 petition)

- concern at government holding data on movements

Double tax

- suspicion that only impact will be to raise money for government

Unfair

- hits the poorest hardest
- negative impact on business community, especially freight

Unworkable

- Links to strategic highway network
- What technologies?

- A new transport strategy
- Linked to major projects e.g. New Street, Metro
- Upfront public transport improvements key
- Focus on economic growth and regeneration
- The facts about congestion

- Stress conditions
 - Re-investment
 - Public acceptability
 - Fit with national scheme
 - Join up with motorways

- Congestion considered serious problem
(4.3/5 score, Accent research, July 06)
- Congestion seen as affecting urban areas *and* motorways
- 42% WM support for road pricing (ICM poll, Mar 07)
- WM support increases if linked to PT investment

- Mainstream business supportive
- Local media realistic and balanced
- Political coalition in place

- A critical 6 months ahead



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