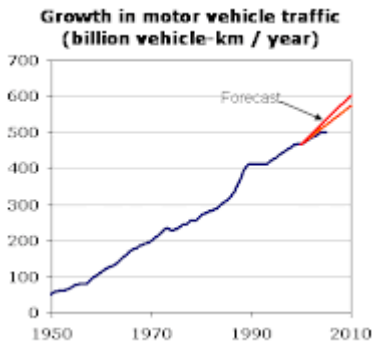


No 10 road pricing petition - beware what you wish for...



[A new system for citizens' petitions](#) on the Prime Minister's web site has attracted well over 1 million signatures for a motion to: "[Scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy](#)". Extensive news coverage [[BBC](#)] and ministerial response [[BBC](#)] have followed. Despite a recent speech on [Winning the debate on road pricing](#), Transport Secretary Douglas Alexander looks as though he may in danger of losing it.

The idea of the petition is great in some ways, but flawed in others:

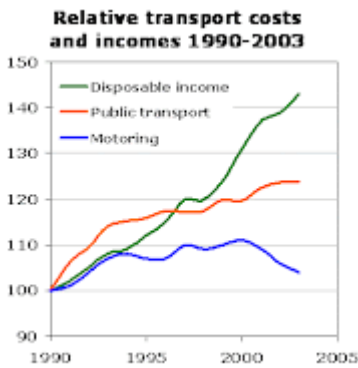
It allows propositions that are incomplete or misleading, or leading questions in a way that polling companies would never permit. For example, the proposition doesn't encapsulate the problem or choice of how to deal with rising traffic - see chart above [[data from DfT](#)]. In this case, the effort for a petitioner to find a counter-proposition is much greater because the home-page for the petitions lists the most popular, whereas a search is required to find counter proposals - creating an amplifying advantage for popular petitions. There are in fact several counter petitions to anti road pricing one, but with tiny numbers of signatories:

- [We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Don't Scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy](#) (sic) - 345 signatures at the time of writing
- [We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Introduce road pricing nationwide and channel the money into improving public transport and conditions for walking and cycling](#) - 137 signatures

...and there are others, *if you look hard enough for them*. Perhaps the system could be improved by linking counter-petitions from the main petition (at least those that have the home page advantage - so a that a minority can more easily find its voice. There are well over 1,000 live petitions now - a [search](#) on 'road' reveals a really nasty set of angry motorist petitions.

But what is the right thing to do?

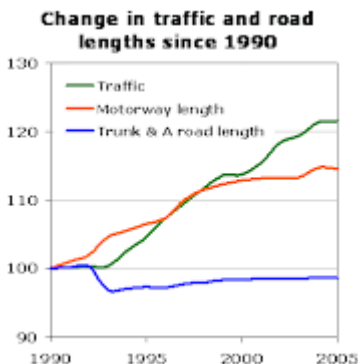
1. Recognise the powerful underlying drivers of demand



The government's [policy on road pricing](#) and the recent Eddington Review [[Exec summary - 64 pages!](#) / [index](#) / [BBC coverage](#)] favour road pricing - and are grounded in some difficult realities. As the chart shows, real incomes have risen rapidly, the cost of motoring has been relatively flat, costs of alternatives have risen - so motoring has become far more affordable see chart [[data from DfT](#)]....

Economic growth, falling motoring costs and the convenience of the private car mean that motoring will continue to be Britain's transport of choice for many of the trips we need to make. But if road traffic levels continue to rise in our urban areas and on our national road network, traffic congestion will become an increasing problem. [[Road pricing background](#)]

2. Understand the consequences for infrastructure - and accept that road capacity is limited by other things we want land for



At the same time, the road network has not and cannot expand to keep pace with this growth. The statistics are quite hard to follow as definitions have been repeatedly changed, and road length is not the same as road capacity, but it seems unlikely that the development of roads could ever keep pace - see chart [[data](#)]. It would itself generate more traffic by effectively reducing the time cost of travel (this being a prime objective of roads policy) - an '[induced demand](#)'. Even where there is space to expand road capacity, it funnels traffic into places where there isn't - shifting congestion to 'pinch points'. The last time we had a road building programme that was attempting to do build out of congestion, it ended in huge protests [see [history of Reclaim the Streets](#)] as people concluded they also didn't like to have everything concreted over.

3. Recognise that some sort of instrument is needed to control demand and congestion



The map of congestion (left - click for larger version)) cannot easily be redrawn by physical extensions, but it can be managed with prices and other interventions that manage demand at the point of greatest stress. Road space is a scarce and valuable asset, its suboptimal (ie. excessive) use imposes costs on its users - and time penalties do not discriminate between high value and low value uses of the same road. Placing a price on its use at the margin where it is used excessively has to be the right way to allocate the scarce resource. The best outcome will only be achieved if the prices faced by motorists reflect external costs - including congestion. This does mean pricing some people off the roads, promoting cost saving measures like car-sharing, and redistributing demand by time of day and year. This is necessary but not sufficient for dealing with the pressure on the road system. A proper transport pricing strategy is needed...

4. Introduce a new transport pricing strategy

Introduce a package of pricing measures that more accurately reflect costs for different aspects of motoring:

1. Road tolling to pay for infrastructure and maintenance
2. Congestion charging to ration scarce road space
3. Fuel duty and regulatory standards to address pollution (not just CO₂, but NO_x, particulates, noise etc)
4. Higher rates of Insurance Premium Tax on motor insurance to reflect accident costs and burden on the NHS
5. As a revenue base that is less distorting and damaging to the economy than taxing income or investment

These measures should be seen as a package, and not traded off amongst each other - for example, fuel duty should not be reduced to accommodate a congestion charge as these are pricing different aspects of the impacts of transport.

5. Embed it in a wider behaviour change strategy

However, this cannot be enough - as the No 10 petition shows. In line with the Sustainable Development Strategy approach to behaviour change [[see chapter 2](#)], as well as 'encourage' through pricing incentives, ministers need to also 'enable' people to make better choices, and (above all) 'engage' the public in a big

discussion about how these problems will be faced and solved. See posting on [*Soft paternalism: changing behaviour for the greater good without giving orders.*](#) Ken Livingstone pulled it off with the congestion charge because he did a deal with Londoners: control the traffic for those that need to use the roads, provide better buses and make the city a better place to live in.

Whilst an attractive idea in theory, I'm not sure the provision of a petition facility by No 10 helps that much - creating a sort national bar room for incubating mass opinions into mob opposition. Perhaps it's useful to remind ministers that they have a lot of work to do to take people with their rhetoric on climate change and the environment without getting booted out of office.