

Comment

Past errors compounded by current thinking

Need for a new approach to fund greater road investment and curb congestion is becoming ever more apparent and many believe that road charging has a part to play," says John Cox. "I agree that some form of restriction is required in some urban situations, but unless adequate public transport exists, people have no alternative but to use their cars. Personal mobility is now a fact of life and dealing with it is vital unless we are prepared to accept gridlock as the price of under investment.

"Financing inter-urban motorways and trunk roads should not be a problem if the political will is there. But successive governments have preferred to put our money in current spending in the belief that there are votes in social security but not in roads. Consequently, the income from road vehicles has increased year on year but the percentage allocated to maintenance and new construction has declined. Vehicle taxation generates around £41,000M each year but the

£4,000M of this that is actually spent on transport is rather paltry in comparison.

"Present thinking is compounding errors of the past. When Sir James Drake proposed the first UK motorway – which later became part of the M6 – he wanted to build dual three lanes, and although he was forced to build a dual two lane route he included a 10m central reservation. This enabled the economic building of a third lane within eight years because no bridges had to be demolished.

"By 1994, traffic growth on the same stretch required a fourth lane and needed large scale bridge reconstruction. The cost for this widening was 22 times the cost of constructing the original motorway.

"The parsimonious approach of governments to transportation problems has cost us dearly and is the price we pay for ignoring the advice of professional engineers. I am now concerned that this lack of foresight is being compounded in the decision earlier this year to widen the M1 and M6. Far more effective use



John Cox was Managing Director of Tarmac National Contracting before he retired and now spends much of his time lobbying for 'completion of the motorway network'.

of resources would be to build new two lane motorways with a wide central reservation to allow for later addition of a third lane as Sir James did 40 years ago.

"Cheaper finance could be provided by the hypothecated transport bond. I cannot believe that tolls on inter-urban motorways and roads are the way forward, but we will have to await the outcome of the new M6 Toll Road. Had it been built in 1988 following the public enquiry, the cost was estimated to be £185M, but in 2003 costs have soared to £487M. This increase will hardly worry its concessionaire which has the licence to charge what it likes for the next 50 years.

"Surely our grandchildren will not be very happy with this profligate spending."