

Jam today and jams tomorrow: finance and road transport

Julian Greaves

Having been marginalized during the nineteenth century railway age, the politics and economics of road transportation re-emerged in the twentieth century with the rise of the internal combustion engine. But while the development of the automobile has generated a vast historiography, the resulting need to maintain and develop the road system has not.

Yet road policy provides a window into many areas of social, economic and political development. In twentieth-century Britain the provision of roads has generally been seen as a public good, but their actual usage is often to serve very private ends. At certain times the need to expand the road system been strongly contested. At other times roads have enjoyed widespread public support as necessary instruments of economic development.

One means of understanding these forces is through the financing of the road system. Roads are different from most other aspects of the national budget in that they are linked to both revenue generation (through motor taxation) and to expenditure (reflecting, of course, the need to maintain and enhance the system). This has led to confusion regarding the purpose of motor taxes. In the early twentieth century they were earmarked specifically for road maintenance as costs grew with the rise of the motor vehicle. During the interwar years that special status was gradually whittled away and they became, in theory, just another source of revenue. Yet a feeling remained after 1945 that motor taxation had to be justified partly on the basis of its specific use for road purposes. This is one reason why resistance to road tolling schemes in Britain has been so acute.

The politics of road finance are currently dominated by clichés regarding the supposed power and influence of particular interest groups: the road lobby, the Treasury or whatever. My aim is to re-examine how spending priorities have developed and the political, economic and social forces involved. What has decided levels of road expenditure at different times when set against other priorities in transport and elsewhere? Has the money been spent efficiently? How has a country supposedly in thrall to motor vehicles ended up a trunk road network inferior to that found in many other parts of Europe? Has Britain ended up with the road system it deserves?