

QUIRY AND NO IDEA



by those working on repairs to the structure

COMMUTERS squeezing onto packed trains and motorists fuming as they sit in lengthy tailbacks should cast their minds back to a time when crossing the Forth Road Bridge cost them just £1.

As tens of thousands of Scots struggle with transport chaos, the roots of this extraordinary crisis can be found in a piece of political theatre from 2007.

In May of that year, a cynical manifesto pledge to abolish the £1 toll on the bridge helped Alex Salmond end Labour's long political grip on Scotland – winning the election by a solitary seat.

Months earlier, during a bad-tempered debate on the matter in Holyrood, Lib Dem Transport Minister Tavish Scott made a prescient speech. 'The SNP will say anything for votes,' he said.

The toll policy was the first many of many populist ideas dreamt up by the Nationalists in a bid to increase support: free prescriptions; free university tuition; the council tax freeze. The tactic has, undoubtedly, worked.

But there are consequences: drugs available on the NHS in England are not on offer in Scotland; 140,000 college places have been cut; and councils have introduced stealth charges that hit the poorest households hardest.

The consequence for the Forth Estuary Transport Authority (FETA), which ran the bridge, was the loss of £12million in annual toll revenue that paid for maintenance projects. And it came at a time when the list of necessary repair work was growing.

Alastair Andrew, a previous bridgeworker, said this week: 'When I was in charge we obviously had the toll revenue.'

'That's gone now but that was £12million a year towards a growing list of maintenance demands from a bridge long outliving its projected lifespan.'

What followed, under the stewardship of the SNP Government, is a catalogue of further budget cuts, delayed projects and a privatisation agenda that saw FETA abolished earlier this year.

As the crisis continues, the demands for an independent investigation will grow louder.

When it opened in 1964, the Forth Road Bridge had a planned lifespan of 120 years. But by the time it was 40 years old, the number of annual journeys – 24million a year – was already more than double the design capacity of 11million.

There was a reason that tolls were in place on the Forth Road Bridge. FETA was in fact so desperate to find ways to alleviate the pressure, that it even announced plans for

How cynical pursuit of popularity has finally taken its toll



ANALYSIS
by ALAN
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'variable' tolls, which would rise to £4 during the evening rush hour. Naturally, it was controversial and the SNP sensed a political opportunity.

But modelling tests showed removing the tolls would raise traffic levels 21 per cent, leading to 'congestion and environmental damage far beyond that already experienced'. The warnings were ignored, the £12million revenue vanished, FETA ran up a larger deficit and, unsurprisingly, repair projects were mothballed.

As the Scottish Daily Mail revealed yesterday, a report by consultants warned as far back as 2006 that 'the stiffening truss is currently theoretically under strength and will require some major strengthening soon'. The truss is the horizontal stiffening system below the main deck, which is affected

by long queues of heavy vehicles, and there is a 'truss end link' system at each tower.

Work to strengthen the truss end links, originally slated for 2008/09, was delayed four times and is still not complete. A £10.3million contract was put back at least six years.

THEN, as FETA still struggled from the loss in tolls revenue, Finance Secretary John Swinney quietly pushed through a 65 per cent cut to its capital budget in 2011. The move went almost unnoticed as he gave the go-ahead for a new bridge around the same time.

The warning signs for the SNP have been there in black and white for more than a decade. As far back as 2004, the first full inspection in the bridge's history uncovered broken steel wires and corrosion in the support cables, triggering the demand to build a new crossing.

One year later, working as a

local news reporter, I revealed the dire warnings from FETA sources who believed the bridge could close in as little as ten years. What was at the time branded 'irresponsible reporting' by Transport Minister Nicol Stephen demonstrates the extraordinary level of expertise that could be found at FETA.

But Transport Scotland is now left to rely on the word of Amey, rather than the experts at FETA, as a result of an extensive privatisation agenda that would surprise many SNP supporters. In one of its final board papers before it was dissolved, FETA warned that 'deferral of part or all of these projects does increase the risk to the long-term structural integrity of the bridge'.

Nobody liked paying the bridge tolls. Nobody liked paying prescription charges or extra council tax every year.

But there are consequences of political opportunism, and those consequences can now be seen on packed station platforms and in motorway queues that have brought much of Scotland to a halt.

Haulage firms face £600k in extra costs



Impact: Delays are costing hauliers money

SCOTTISH hauliers are facing spiralling costs from the Forth Road Bridge closure with an estimated £600,000 extra operating cost hitting the industry every day.

The Road Haulage Association (RHA) calculated the huge economic burden based on the longer, delayed journeys hitting the 10,500 trucks that regularly use the bridge.

Since the vital link was closed, some companies have been forced to increase their rates by £100 per load, and others have had to cancel all journeys from Fife to Edinburgh as they are no longer cost-effective.

Lorry drivers reported that journeys that would normally take 30 minutes took two and a half hours on Monday.

Richard Burnett, RHA chief executive, said: 'The knock-on effects for hauliers are already beginning to bite. The additional

by Laura Lambert

cost to hauliers is immense. For a single HGV to replace a 2.5 mile journey with a detour that can amount to a 60 mile round trip, this will add an extra £30 in fuel costs alone.

'With an estimated 10,500 HGVs using the bridge each day, the additional operating costs for the industry will be in excess of £600,000 per day.'

Chris White, of Cowdenbeath-based Collier Haulage, said: 'We have stopped all journeys to Edinburgh because it's not cost-effective.'

'If all work dries up in Fife and around here it could be catastrophic for us, and we don't know what is going to happen.'

Mr Burnett said: 'This current state of affairs is unsustainable and we shall be pushing the Scottish Government for compensation.

Hauliers already work to tight margins and simply cannot absorb these extra costs.

'We need answers. Why, despite regular inspections, were these defects not picked up before? And why did they become so serious so quickly?'

The Department for Transport has decided to temporarily relax EU driver hours regulation for those affected by the Forth Road Bridge closure. It means lorry drivers can now drive 11 hours every day rather than the normal limit of nine.

Deputy First Minister John Swinney said: 'There is no doubt the closure of the Forth Road Bridge will have a significant effect on the economy. That's why we have worked quickly to implement a travel plan that helps firms mitigate, as far as possible, the inconvenience of the bridge closure.'