

GPS:

Motoring - Mobility Matters - A message from Big Brother Spy in the car, or congestion solution? The ...

By PROF DAVID BEGG.

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Motoring - Mobility Matters - A message from Big Brother Spy in the car, or congestion solution? The Government's proposed road-pricing black-box system, outlined last week by Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, has created a heated debate. Here, Prof David Begg, chairman of the Commission for Integrated Transport, defends the scheme, while Telegraph Motoring contributor Austin Williams takes it to task.

There are two hi-tech devices that are small enough to fit in the palm of our hands. Both are designed to make our lives simpler and more convenient.

Both can pinpoint exactly where we are at any time. One is in daily use by more than 90 per cent of the population. The other, the "motoring at all costs" lobby wants to ban.

The two devices are the mobile phone and the GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) based nationwide road-pricing black-box system that the Commission for Integrated Transport proposed this spring and which Alistair Darling has said needs serious debate.

The mobile phone can be a motoring menace - making us four times more likely to have a car accident - and its use, when driving, is banned in many European countries.

Conversely, the GPS-based charging technology can be a real winner for drivers. We have the worst congestion in

Europe but CfIT's research has shown that a GPS-based system could cut congestion nationally by some 44 per cent, without increasing the overall motoring tax take by a single penny.

While every road would be covered by the satellite network, drivers would be charged on only 10 per cent of main corridors - and then only when they were congested. Two thirds of trips would still be free.

Revenue from the scheme would be used to reduce the cost of petrol and vehicle excise duty for every motorist - cutting the overall costs for rural and off-peak motorists. And it's not as off-beam as recent press coverage suggests. An RAC Foundation survey showed that 76 per cent of the population supported such a proposal. It's exactly the same principle we use for other transport modes and public utilities. Namely, you pay at the point of use and the price depends on whether you are travelling at peak time or not. Trains, planes, ferries and buses all use it. It's the best way of balancing supply and demand and creating order out of the chaos we currently have on our roads.

But this proposal has fallen foul of the civil libertarians in a way that the mobile phone has not - and this hostility has been fuelled by the more extreme elements of the motoring lobby, who do not seem to have any solutions of their own.

It is fair to say that it will be technically possible for "Big Brother" to know where we are at any time. But why on earth would he want to, and why should the details appear on our computerised bill every month?

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The likelihood is that there can be two forms of charging for our travel - deducting money from a stored-value smartcard fitted to our in-car unit, or a monthly invoice to be paid by direct debit.

Records would need to be kept for, say, three months, in case we challenged the size of the invoice. But the bill would merely need to indicate how many miles we had travelled at different charging rates. What's so "Big Brother" about that? And many thousands of motorists already attest to the value of GPS when using satellite navigation technology. Now, if we really have an issue about personal freedom, let's look at that mobile phone again. Every telephone number that we call is logged on our invoice - ready for every cheated partner or policeman to check. Worse still for the libertarian, our phone calls can already be used by the police to place offenders near the scene of a crime. Each service provider and the police are able to pinpoint our travel around the country through the use of our phones - just as our credit card use does in a less sophisticated way.

So, if there is no fuss about mobile phones and "Big Brother", let's stop trying to pretend it is a big deal for the car driver.

We have a deep-seated tradition in this country of rubbishing any attempt to improve our transport network without being challenged to come up with any solutions of our own. The situation we face on our roads is stark. We are desperate for solutions. The RAC Foundation has calculated that unless we introduce national road charging, we will need either five times the amount of spending on road building planned today or a five-fold increase in fuel duty - just to keep future congestion levels the same as they are today. Some alternative!

In those circumstances, a solution that cuts congestion by 44 per cent at a stroke, cuts costs for drivers using quieter roads and gives shorter and more assured journey times to those using busier roads is worth some serious examination.

Our proposals are supported in principle by a group as diverse as the RAC Foundation, the CBI and the Freight Transport Association. If they are prepared to look seriously at it, so should the rest of us.

To the motoring dinosaurs still looking for clear roads ahead that don't include some form of radical demand restraint, please stop clutching at civil libertarian lifelines. Give the GPS proposals a serious look or come up with something better of your own.