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Andrew Coyne
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Toronto mayor John Tory discusses his proposal for toll roads on Thursday Nov. 24, 2016. Dave Abel/Postmedia Network

The mayor of Toronto, John Tory, is today being lauded as a hero in some quarters. In others he is being cursed as a bum. These are not the sorts of terms one would ordinarily hear applied to the mayor, but then these are no ordinary times in the city that dares to be careful.

The issue that has the whole town in a mild lather? The mayor has proposed to charge a toll to use two of the city's larger arteries, the Don Valley Parkway and the Gardiner Expressway. The toll could be as high as two dollars for a 10-kilometre trip. To put that dizzying sum in perspective, that is two-thirds the price of a bus ticket. It is slightly less than the price of two litres of gas. It is one-half the price of a grande cinnamon latte at Starbucks.

Well no, it's not very much at all, is it? But it is more than zero, and for a city that is barely aware the rest of the world exists, the notion, common in other locales, that motorists should pay to use the roads strikes here with the force of a thunderbolt. Yet the human mind is a nimble thing, so the moment it is proposed something should be done that has not been done before, people who have never given the matter so much as five seconds' thought can instantly summon about a dozen objections.

The most common of these is that a toll of 20 cents a kilometre would price the roads out of reach of the poor — the automobile-owning poor, but let that pass. If the thesis is that attaching

any cost to driving a car is an affront to social justice — if, in the name of the poor, bus tickets should be \$3 but driving should be free — then it is a puzzle why gas should not be free as well. Not only gas, but tires. And cars.

It's nonsense, of course. It's simply a convenient rationalization for a much more reptile-brained objection, summarized as follows: roads have always been free. Therefore roads should always be free. Which not only doesn't follow logically, but isn't even true.

Gentle Torontonians: you pay to use the road now. Every time you park on it, in the centre of town at least, you pay a fee, and the longer you use the road, or the busier the time of day, or the more heavily trafficked the road, the more you pay. And nobody makes a fuss about it, notwithstanding the impact on that section of the community that can afford to buy a car but not to park it, and even though — to anticipate another objection — we've already paid to build the roads.

Because everyone with an ounce of sense knows that if we didn't, if we gave away the space for free, you'd never find a parking spot. Or to be slightly more technical, we do it because one person's use of that space imposes a cost, over and above the cost of its construction or upkeep, on others who might like to use the same space, and so like any other cost it is good economic policy to charge a price to cover it.

Well, the case for charging people to drive on the roads is basically the same as the case for charging to park on them. Whether your car is standing still or moving, it's taking up space. While the impact of not charging for parking may only be hypothesized, we can see every day the impact of not charging for driving, in the ever-worsening congestion in our major cities, of which Toronto is arguably one.

My complaint with the mayor's plan is that it doesn't go far enough. A two-dollar toll on two roads is unlikely to make much of a dent in congestion levels, even on the roads in question. To the extent it does it may simply shift traffic on to other arteries, and to the extent it reduces overall traffic flows coming into the city may simply be offset by downtowners driving more: a familiar pattern known as "induced demand."

Indeed, it's unclear the mayor even wants it to, as the purpose of the toll is avowedly not to reduce traffic but to raise revenues, to finance his otherwise unfunded transit plans. That's debatable as policy, but it's terrible politics: the worst way to sell road pricing is as yet another way for governments to pick your pocket, rather than cut their costs. Tory's plan may simply wind up discrediting the whole idea of road tolls.

Or will it? We take you now to the Greater Vancouver region, whose mayors have a more ambitious plan in the works known as "comprehensive mobility pricing." The details are still to be hammered out, but may include GPS-based on-board transponders that would charge you to use the road network rather as you now pay to use your cellphone: a monthly bill based on usage, with different prices at different times on different roads.

Vancouver's traffic is as bad or worse than Toronto's. But what may help sell the plan is that Vancouverites already pay hefty tolls to use certain bridges. They're a powerful demonstration both of the effectiveness of tolls, and of their limitations, when applied selectively: people will drive for miles to avoid them, clogging other routes. So there's some receptivity to the idea of spreading the burden more evenly, by tolling everybody rather than a few bridge crossers.

Mayor Tory, people are accusing you of many things you've never been accused of before. Let me add another: I accuse you of being crafty.