

The DA and their roads mess

If one does a little bit of research in the daily press around traffic congestion in our cities, one quickly comes to the conclusion that Cape Town is the worst performer in this regard. No matter where you are heading on the road in and around Cape Town, chances are you will get stuck in traffic. I have experienced this first hand on a number of occasions whether heading out to the Overberg on a Friday afternoon on the N2, heading into town on the N1 on any normal weekday morning, dashing to the airport to catch a flight or simply taking a drive to Noordhoek via Ou Kaapse Weg. It simply is a lottery. This has an impact on the quality of life of everyone relying on the roads to make a living. Talk to any Cape Town resident who has to commute some distance to work and you will quickly "get the picture". And ultimately this impacts on businesses and the economy. In a recent article BDLive quotes the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry as saying that: "*growing congestion on Cape Town roads was having an adverse effect on businesses and forcing many to consider relocating or changing office hours to avoid the worst of morning and evening peak-hour traffic*". How do we reconcile this image of traffic congestion and road chaos with that of Cape Town as "the best managed city in the country"? For me the two images simply do not gel. To make matters worse, I will wager that the traffic situation in Cape Town will get a lot worse for a lot longer before there is any real improvement. In the mean time, the citizens, tourists and businesses will simply have to suffer through this all. What is the problem? There are many contributing factors to this dire situation but to my mind the DA (who is in charge of both the city and the province) are the main culprits. I will explain why.

According to various sources (including the article referred to above) the city will spend R750 million over the next 5 years to "ease its mounting traffic problem". Let us put this figure of R750 million in context. This is analogous to saying the city will address the current housing shortage by laying one brick everyday for the next twenty years. Would that have any impact on the housing shortage? No it would not - and neither will R750 million over the next 5 years have any real impact on the traffic situation. My wager above is safe.

The problem is that the infrastructure in place is simply not up to the job anymore and to upgrade it would be expensive. Take the N2 route out of Cape Town towards Mosselbay, George, PE and from there the Free State and Gauteng. This is a major and significant economic arterial but it still travels through the Somerset West-Strand complex with a number of robot intersections. Free flowing traffic? Just forget it! It can take more than an hour to travel less than 5km. To remedy this nightmare of a few running kilometers will gobble up the city's R750 million and then some. Granted, this would not be for the exclusive account of the city, as the upgrading of the national route lies in the domain of SANRAL. The main problem is that SANRAL and the DA do not see eye to eye as to how the solution should be funded. In fact, to really address the problems and to provide an integrated and holistic solution will require the cooperation and joint activities of the city, the province as well as SANRAL.

Such cooperation should not be too difficult to achieve? Unfortunately it is and in my opinion it is caused by the intransigence of the DA. What seems to be the problem? The government, through its agency SANRAL, has taken the position that a significant portion of the funding of certain key national (and provincial) roads should be sourced through the “user-pays-mechanism”. We are all highly familiar with this mechanism as it applies to our water consumption, electricity consumption, sanitation services as well as refuse removal. It is very simple: you use, you pay. It also applies to most other things in life when we consume goods or services. When it comes to roads infrastructure, the user-pays-mechanism is implemented via tolling. There are a number of private toll concessions operating in this country - the N3 route from Heidelberg to Durban and the N4 route from Pretoria to Maputo are two prominent examples. SANRAL also operates a number of toll routes in its own right. Tolling is an efficient mechanism to raise funding for new roads infrastructure and to maintain a higher level of service on the road than what would have been achieved without tolling. So, on a number of key roads and routes in this country, tolling has effectively established the user-pays-mechanism since its introduction in the early 1990’s. I also firmly believe that the frequent users of most of these routes (such as myself) have benefitted significantly from the higher levels of service, improved road surface quality, reduced congestion, reduced frustration and enhanced safety that these roads provided. If anything, I would like to see more private toll concessions being issued.

While tolling has proven internationally to be very effective on routes traversing rural areas with few interchanges, it has traditionally not been appropriate for urban areas. The main reason for this is that tolling booths on each on – and off ramp would simply not be feasible. In urban areas, tolling booths would generally cause congestion rather than eliminate it. This created a significant dilemma, as urban areas generally require significant road infrastructure to cope with daily peak demands. It is thus in urban areas where the greatest funding need exists - Cape Town and surrounds is a prime example of this. To overcome this dilemma, there are “indirect” user-pays-mechanisms that can be employed. A fuel levy is probably the best example of such an indirect user-pays-mechanism and indeed is employed in South Africa. While such mechanisms do have a definite role to play, they remain a poor alternative to direct tolling for various reasons.

Modern technology has presented us with the solution to this dilemma: e-tolling. Through e-tolling, direct tolling can be effectively established in urban environments and have indeed been introduced successfully by SANRAL. The Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project (GFIP) that was completed around the time of the 2010 soccer world cup was enabled through this technology. To my mind, there have been few infrastructure projects implemented in this country that has impacted so positively on the lives of so many people than the GFIP. In Gauteng, we have gone from the daily snarl-ups and congestion that turned a peak-hour trip from Pretoria to Johannesburg into a three-hour, gut wrenching journey to enjoy world-class road infrastructure that is second to none. These days a trip from Pretoria to ORT International is a breeze whereas just a few years ago it was an

absolute nightmare and the cause of many a missed flight. Given our experience in Gauteng, the solution for Cape Town and surrounds is obvious. But, this is where the DA steps into the frame....

Protests against e-tolling in Gauteng was opportunistically driven by corporate transport operators that had only one concern and agenda: their own bottom lines. These transport operators hid behind the general public and funded efforts to mobilise resistance against direct tolling. Populist arguments against tolling quickly found favour with the general public – when would the public not be in favour of lower costs? The DA however spotted an opportunity to score political points. In its rush to score politically it shamelessly sacrificed one of the basic tenets of the party's DNA: capitalism. The support of the DA lent credibility to the resistance against tolling in Gauteng and has directly contributed to the number of people who claim a moral right not to pay tolls. The recent local government elections may create the perception that this stance have benefitted the DA in the short term, but I believe it will hurt them in the long run and that the chickens are now coming home to roost....

Why do I say the DA has forsaken capitalism? It is quite simple: the user-pays principle is one of the basic tenets of capitalism. Under capitalism, governments strive to minimise taxes and consumers rather pay (read: are taxed) when they consume goods or services. I find it so ironic that in South Africa we now have a government under the ANC (that is in alliance with the Communist Party and Cosatu – the most vociferous sworn enemies of capitalism) that is preaching a key principle of capitalism and the DA, the main opposition party in the country who are sworn capitalists, are rejecting it.

But why will this anti-tolling stance be bad for the DA? In the first place, this stance has removed the only feasible way (in my opinion) that the traffic problems in and around Cape Town can be rectified. In the short term, Cape Town residents (the voters) may back them and even approve of this position, but in the long term, as the situation continues to deteriorate, such sentiments may shift rapidly. In Gauteng, it was easy to take the populist, anti-tolling position as the opposition. But now that the DA is in charge in Johannesburg and Tshwane, the shoe will be on the proverbial other foot. I expect the ANC (and the EFF) to use exactly the same populist, anti-tolling rhetoric against the DA. And it is not going to stop with tolling of the roads. No, why should it? It is going to be applied to water supply, electricity supply, sanitation and waste removal....Trying to run these cities may yet turn out to be a nightmare.

Are government and SANRAL blameless in all of this? No definitely not. Lots of mistakes and serious blunders were made. It is for this reason that I much prefer the private concession route rather than SANRAL's own and operate model. I find it exasperating that SANRAL is seemingly unable to properly defend and explain the need for direct tolling where its merits are so clear cut.

My advice to the DA in all of this is neatly summarised by a quip I recently heard on British TV: “*when you are in a hole, stop digging*”. The DA must find a way out of this hole and it must do so quickly.