

Government must stop treating drivers like pariahs

Paul Nicolaou



A challenge for the new government: stop Sydneysiders being used as a motoring cash cow. When political pundits write the history of the recent state election, the cost of living and specifically the cost of motoring in Sydney will figure prominently.

There is no doubt that tolls and parking fees are contributing to the cumulative effect of a cost of living crisis for many Sydney families hit by increased mortgage payments, inflation's impact on grocery prices and soaring energy costs.

Now, there is news of a further two per cent increase in tolls in which the Hills M2 will cost a maximum of \$9.23, up from \$9.05, the Lane Cove Tunnel \$3.84 from \$3.77 and the M5

south west to \$5.41 from \$5.30. The Cross City Tunnel goes to \$6.62 from \$6.50 and the Eastern Distributor to \$9.09 from \$8.94, enough to make motoring battlers cry.

During the campaign, Premier Chris Minns committed to capping motorway tolls for cars at \$60 a week from January 1 next year and to have former ACCC chairman Professor Allan Fels review the state's road tolling system.

Most of Sydney's toll roads are operated by Transurban and, in the interests of transparency, the Premier undertook before the election to release the terms of the operating contracts. Sydneysiders had long ago concluded that governments and councils were using private motorists as cash cows, and that it had gone way too far.

The focus groups must have been telling our newly minted government in Macquarie Street the same thing in the lead-up to the election.

But let's face it, it's not just motorway tolls that are driving up the

cost of motoring for Sydneysiders who've demonstrated time and again they love their cars and need to use them. Tolls on motorways and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, parking charges in the city, at beaches and on suburban streets had already reached saturation.

Charges at off-street private parking stations are prohibitively expensive, in some cases more than \$90, driven in part by the government's car space levy.

Street parking meters aren't cheap either at more than \$26 for four hours in the city, quite a slug for working families. People make choices. They can choose not to come into the city if it's going to cost a proverbial arm and a leg. At the same time, bike riding is lauded, encouraged and facilitated in the city at no cost to riders but the car is treated as a pariah and a convenient revenue raiser.

Parking charges and tolls are a disincentive for Sydneysiders to use their cars and the operating cost of motoring for businesses is inevitably

passed on to consumers. There are few winners. It makes no sense to just keep ratcheting up tolls and charges beyond the capacity of Sydneysiders and businesses to pay.

For many, such as the elderly and others with mobility challenges, public transport is not an option and, while our transport system is good, it is not as reliable as it should be.

The system needs a 95 per cent reliability level or better and, if that cannot be consistently achieved, cars still will be an important mode of transport in Sydney, whether our political leaders like it or not.

Everyone is on board to reduce our carbon footprint but the inexorable increase in motoring charges is a blunt instrument. It is not the solution. It just creates resentment and non-commitment to the cause.

We need to find a balance. Yes, once the Sydney Metro is up and running through our city it will be a public transport game changer that could revolutionise travel habits.

But, right now, we must incentivise

Sydneysiders to visit our beaches, shop and dine in faded high streets such as Oxford Street and Norton Street and in the CBD without feeling they are paying governments and councils through the nose for the 'privilege' of supporting local businesses and jobs.

Think also of the city's point-to-point drivers and the Sydneysiders who use them. It is increasingly difficult for them to find places in the CBD where they can legally pick up or set down passengers.

Business Sydney urges the new government to expand its review of motorway tolls to include the cost of parking, on-street and off-street, overly restrictive street parking time limits and unreasonable regulations for cabs. Any recommendations can be debated and then implemented across Sydney to achieve a fairer and more equitable charging regime that is not an excessive burden on Sydneysiders and business.

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