

Speech Tamar Bridge Protest march - 25/7/2026

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome, and thank you all for taking the time to join us today as we gather here in the 65th anniversary year of the opening of the Tamar Bridge to traffic. Thank you in particular to any of you who brought your families with you. Also, to the team from Brunel Recycling whose trucks are sporting our banners as they cross back and forth, paying their toll each time. It's also great to see so many Councillors here, we have all of the Joint Committee Councillors from Cornwall, most of the South East Cornwall county councillors plus one Plymouth City Councillor and both our current and our former South East Cornwall MP.

I mention families as we all have our reasons for being here today, some of them short term, others longer term. My own principal reason for pushing this campaign forward is a hope that we can avoid leaving the same everlasting financial burden to our children as we have borne from those who came before us. Those who were instrumental in drafting the legislation that govern these crossings. We simply must do better as the bridge was built with a life expectancy of around 120 years, these crossings are Southeast Cornwall's lifeline east and Plymouth's primary route west so unless we act positively for change now, it will become the albatross around our region's neck as the cycle of costs begins again when it needs to be replaced. Whilst careful management and proper upkeep may extend the approximate 2081 deadline, as sure as night follows day, the time for its replacement will arrive.

Whatever we achieve with this campaign, we must ensure that when its replacement date dawns, that burden of cost is borne nationally rather than locally.

Gathered here, we should also acknowledge the benefits of the legacy our forebears left us as without the Tamar Bridge, our region would not have developed in the manner that it has over the intervening decades.

But today, we are here to send a clear message that we want, no, **WE NEED**, fundamental change on the way these crossings are funded.

With changes to other infrastructure and services over the same period that our toll has been levied from us, we now pay:

- A toll to access our hospital, and increasingly also more routine medical services.
- A toll to send our children to school.
- A toll to get to work in Plymouth, or for people to access work in South East Cornwall.
- A toll to access goods, retail, and services.
- A toll to pursue leisure activities in Plymouth, Devon or Cornwall
- A toll to attend church. Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, not even the church gets toll exemption.

In fact, for almost anything you can imagine, the people of our region, and in particular South East Cornwall, now pay a toll to access it.

It has been argued by various people over the years that the Tamar Bridge Act defines a “user pays” principal, but in fact “User Pays” does not feature anywhere in the Act. Nor does the Act make tolls mandatory, it simply gives permission to levy tolls. It also gives the right to stop taking tolls, expressing that if that **were** to occur, I quote, “It shall become a highway maintained at public expense”. That is exactly what we seek.

Over those same 65 years ladies and gentlemen, we have stood by and witnessed a number of events that I shall detail. Events that have increased the tax burden on us all, but without parallel support of the same nature being provided here:

- In 1998 we saw a Labour government write off debt of £62 million from the Humber Bridge Board.

- In 2004 we saw the Skye Bridge tolls abolished when the Scottish government purchased it from the builder.
- In 2006 we saw Tolls abolished on the Erskine Bridge over the Clyde.
- In 2008 we saw the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Act gain royal assent. Tolls were abolished on the Tay and Forth bridges. This meant Scotland was entirely toll free.
- Also in 2008, The Dartford crossing was made free to all users overnight and local users were given 50 free crossings per year for a low fixed price of £10. That's just 20 pence per crossing.
- In 2011 we saw a second debt write off given by the Conservative / Lib Dem coalition government to the Humber Bridge Board. This time, the debt written off was a colossal £150 million. Their toll did not increase again for another 15 years.
- In 2014 We saw the Dartford Crossings local user discount scheme amended to provide unlimited free crossings for £20 per year.
- In 2017, the list goes on ladies and gentlemen, we saw the Mersey Gateway Bridge open at a construction cost of £600 million. Local users' resident in Halton are given unlimited free use of both it and the Silver Jubilee Bridge. To support that free use, we, the taxpayer, are funding a subsidy scheme to the tune of £427 million over 27 years.
- Also in 2017 we saw the opening of the South Queensferry Crossing over the Firth of Forth. This was constructed at a cost of £1.35 billion. Given the 2008 Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Act, there have never been any tolls for anyone using it.
- In 2018 we saw Tolls abolished on both the Severn Bridge **AND** the second Severn Crossing.

- In 2019 we saw tolls abolished on the Cleddau Bridge in Pembrokeshire. Wales then joined Scotland and Northern Ireland in being toll free on all national and local authority owned crossings.
- In recent years, we have seen billions spent on HS2 and the lower Thames crossing.
- Even today, discussion continues over whether the Government will be providing significant funding support to repair the local authority owned Hammersmith Bridge over the Thames in order to reopen it to motor vehicles.

We have stood by and watched all these events paid for from our taxes over the last 28 years, yet **still** we have paid our toll.

Across those years Ladies and Gentlemen:

- We have lacked solidarity as people.
- We spoke with multiple voices aiming our frustrations in multiple directions and without common purpose.
- Consequently, our voices were not heard.
- Those who submitted public questions at Council or Joint Committee meetings and those who wrote to their MP asking for change, were often pointed in other directions to seek answers, answers that frequently, never came.

In return for our questions and requested support, we have received nothing but platitudes from transport ministers. Our former MP, Sheryll Murray, engaged with and supported TTAG, raising the issue in parliament on our behalf on more than one occasion, but like the responses her successor has also had when making representations, the issue was not taken sufficiently seriously. I cite for example, a Transport Minister's response to Anna Gelderd when ANNA was advised by the minister that "*it is government policy that estuarial crossings be funded through tolls*". We put the question back to Anna asking her why this applies to us, but not to the dozens of un-tolled crossings over the

Thames. To give Anna her dues, she did raise that back in Westminster. We ask, what pressure is she now bringing to bear to highlight this inequity and seek redress for it? Why Ladies and Gentlemen? Why does this government policy apply only selectively? Why here but not on the dozens of local authority owned bridges and two ferries that cross the Thames? The Thames is estuarial for a full 95 miles inland! Now those two Woolwich ferries, they've been free for about 140 years. They are near comparable in size to our ferries, why is it acceptable for public money to subsidise them for free use whilst we have to pay to use our three ferries? That to me is not acceptable.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have watched all these events and not understood why all these other crossings are in receipt of public funding of one kind or another whilst nothing has been provided here. We must all continue to make clear to the MPs of this region that we require them to act on this to seek a fair deal on our behalf.

Our research on this though goes back further than just the last 28 years I have just covered. In fact, we have identified

- 7 tolls abolished in the 21st century. Ones that I mentioned just a moment ago.
- 48 tolls abolished in the 20th century.
- 57 tolls abolished in the 19th century.
- We also observed that 29 of these abolished tolls were paid on bridges or ferries over the Thames.

To those who continue to believe this cannot be achieved here, or in some cases, rather inexplicably, even that it is right and proper that we continue to pay a toll here, we offer these 112 examples of where toll abolition has been achieved. We ask all who can genuinely influence this matter and bring about change, **“why there, but not here?”**.

Historically, public frustration on this issue has been aimed locally.

- Aimed at representatives of the two local authorities.
- Aimed at members of the Joint Committee.
- Aimed at Tamar Crossings senior management.

Arguably, there **has** been good reason for frustration about some past decisions taken locally, but to make progress we must move on from that. Even if we don't forget it. So here today Ladies and Gentlemen, after our tolls have risen by 100% in just over 5 years and both our and the Joint Committee's appeals for Government financial support have been brushed aside again and again, today, and from here on, we must aim higher and send our message demanding change directly to Westminster as, to quote Poldark's Jud Paynter and put our own Cornish twist on it, ***T'int right, t'int fair, t'int fit, t'int proper.***

Today, we ask for nothing but to be treated equitably and receive the same levels of support as local users of other tolled and formerly tolled crossings elsewhere in the UK. When addressed under the current arrangement, the budget necessary for our crossings to be funded locally is significant to individuals and businesses; but not significant when the load is spread more widely by funding them nationally. In fact, we estimate it at no more than £0.50 per annum per UK taxpayer if funded nationally. Barely a rounding error on a ledger sheet of government spending.

Today, things are not as they were in the past

- **Today, we have that previously missing strength of common voice!**
- **Today, the public, the Joint Committee and the Tamar Crossings must be united in our demand for change!**
- **Today, we will no longer accept being brushed aside!**
- **Today and from here on, we will not take "no" for an answer. This cause will continue until a fair, equitable and just solution is agreed.**

- **Today, we are here to send our local and nationally elected representatives a message about what we want!**

SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT LADIES AND GENTLEMEN?? - NO MORE TOLLS!

To conclude ladies and gentlemen, change of this nature is only ever delivered when the cause is just and the numbers supporting it are significant. I challenge anyone to argue that this cause is not just and today we show the numbers desiring it are very significant. This is a political issue that requires a political solution. So, when you have some time in the coming days, we urge you to put pen to paper.

- Write to Luke Pollard,
- Write to Fred Thomas,
- Write to Anna Gelderd,
- Write to Sir Geoffrey Cox,
- Write to Rebecca Smith.

Whomever your MP is, please write to them. Tell them you support our campaign. Ask them what they are doing to deliver change. Ask them if they have considered, or will consider, raising a private members bill. Ask them if they will lobby for a debt write off. Ask the Labour MPs among them to better define “Cheaper Tolls for locals”, for example:

- What does that mean?
- How will it work without an agreed definition of local?
- Will they be lobbying government for funding to make it feasible?
- Are they working to lower or abolish tolls for locals, by a means such as happens on the Mersey and Dartford crossings for example.
- If they are, what are they doing and what timescale are they working to?

One last request before I sign off. Please consider visiting Saltash regatta on completion, I know the stall holders there will greatly welcome your custom. Thank you all for listening, I now hand you over to Councillor Dan Rogerson, Portfolio holder for Transport for Cornwall Council. If anyone has any questions for me, they are welcome to ask me in person, or send them by email addressing them to contact@tamartollactiongroup.org

Scott Slavin
Chair
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