

Let's level the playing field

EDITORIAL

IT'S NOT TOO OFTEN that the editorial board of The Globe and Mail finds a single issue so important that it occupies two full editorials employing more than 1,450 words. But that's what happened last weekend, the issue being the costliness of Canada's 'free' roads and the reluctance of politicians to make the users pay for them.

The inspiration for the editorial rant was apparently the recent opening of the new Samuel de Champlain bridge in Montreal, the eight-lane, 3.4-kilometre crossing of the St. Lawrence River, between the Island of Montreal and the South Shore.

'Drivers can use it as often as they like, at no charge. That's because it cost you, the Canadian taxpayer, \$4.4-billion.

'While you're there, don't miss the old Champlain Bridge. The annual cost of keeping it from falling down ran between \$28-million and \$104-million, paid for by your taxes. Deconstructing it will cost about \$400-million. That's also on your tab.

'What's unusual about this arrangement? Nothing. What's wrong with it? Just about everything.'

The problem, as the editorial board sees it, is that nearly all of Canada's roads and bridges, tunnels and highways, are being paid for by taxpayers. 'You can drive to the Champlain Bridge from virtually anywhere in Canada, from Vancouver to Cape Breton, on roads that are costly to build and maintain, yet toll-free.'

The contention is that taxpayer-funded roads are economically inefficient, environmentally damaging and encourage urban sprawl by subsidizing driving.

After noting that the Stephen Harper Conservatives had planned to have tolls on the new Champlain bridge and the decision to make the taxpayers pay for it, the editorial went on to suggest erroneously that Ontario's Mike Harris-led Conservatives 'had the courage to toll a highway, and get its costs off the government's books.'

In reality, although Highway 407 didn't open until June 1996, the commitment to make it a toll highway was made a decade earlier by the Liberals under David Peterson and the electronic traffic monitors were installed by the Bob Rae-led New Democrats. All the Harris government did was privatize the roadway, selling for \$3.1 billion a toll road now worth \$30 billion, thanks to a 99-year lease that allows the private consortium to charge whatever toll rates it wishes.

Although the editorials made some good points and the first instalment last Saturday generated more than 300 letters, enough to occupy Monday's entire Letters section, they missed entirely one of the worst anomalies in Ontario's road system.

What could possibly be more anomalous than the fact that while the cost of building and maintaining some highways is borne entirely by the province's Ministry of Transportation, the cost of others carrying just as much traffic is borne entirely by property taxes?

One need not look any further than Dufferin County, where Highways 9, 10 and 89 are all financed by provincial taxpayers while Airport Road, former highways 24 and 25 plus former highway 9 west of Orangeville are all county roads paid for by property taxpayers.

Of all those roads, perhaps Airport Road is a classic example of an artery that was built and continues to be used primarily as an escape route for Torontonians heading for Georgian Bay in the summer and Blue Mountain ski resorts in the winter months.

Back in the 1990s, when the Harris government downloaded thousands of kilometers of provincial highways, the contention was that

the roadways in question were primarily for local use and thus should be paid for by local taxpayers. But missing from the process, which was really designed to save the government untold billions, was any supportive statistics on actual traffic volumes.

As we see it, what's really needed is a level playing field, with the cost of maintaining provincial highways and county or regional roadways being shared based on regular monitoring to determine what portion of the traffic comes from outside the county or region.