

Lib Dems should ignore reactionary shrieks

Stand by for the shields of the privileged. We all know hares are very good at presenting a compelling case against any change that will affect their status and we now have another shameful example involving Kew Bridge which saddles the boroughs of Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow.

The majority who live in the circulation area of this newspaper enjoy huge material advantages. Most are car owners and there is a higher percentage of four by fours, Mercedes, BMW and Rovers than in virtually any other borough in the country.

It was not surprising therefore that a few years back, when Transport for London decided to put a bus lane on the bridge – in line in what it was doing in other London suburban areas – the protest from the local motoring lobbies was loud and vocal.

Even Jenny Tonge, MP for Richmond Park at the time and the most compassionate of politicians, joined the call for it to be removed as her constituents

were complaining it was causing congestion without bringing benefits to bus travellers.

Now the leader of the party most proud of its green credentials, Coon Serge Lorie and other local Liberal Democrats are backing the chorus of disapproval for its suggested revival.

The argument being advanced, that there is no advantage to public transport, is manifestly untrue. During its short life four years ago it enabled buses to get across the bridge in the rush hour much more effectively and onto Kew Bridge Road and Chiswick High Road where existing bus lanes function well.

Its abolition has done nothing to make life easier for motorists.

There is no reason at all why it should not be treated in the same way as other Thames river crossings. The extension of the congestion charge and the immense cost of road pricing are radical moves that all who care about the environment should

welcome. As far as I am aware, the Lib Dems are fully behind such measures. So it is unforgivable to eject the spin-off when it enters their own back yard.

When a bus priority scheme was introduced on the M4 to Heathrow the reactionary forces were adamant in their opposition – just as they were when Ken Livingstone embarked on the congestion charge. Yet few would now argue that access to the airport has not been improved and only madmen would want to go back to a free-for-all for drivers entering into central London at weekends.

The case put forward by Coon Shat Sheehan, the ward member for Kew that there is historical evidence to back their opposition is flawed.

The scheme was never given long enough to allow the advantages to emerge or to make adjustments in adjacent areas.

Kew Bridge is as congested now as it ever was – the only difference being that everyone, including bus passengers, is now

reduced to a crawl at peak times.

I am certain that Transport for London's study will show that Kew is in the same situation as other parts of the capital where restrictions have been introduced on bridges and major roads and there is no justification for an exception to be made.

Motocists instinctively fight any curbs to their freedom.

They understandably get very frustrated when buses and taxis glide by while they are at standstill in their expensive private limousines. But they must be persuaded to look at the bigger picture.

The Lib Dems have taken a lot of sick over their noses to punish Chelsea tractors by introducing punitive parking regulations.

The green lobby has loyally defended them – and quite rightly. But they cannot wriggle out of this just because of perceived delays for affluent residents.

I can speak with passion here as I own a four by four (a modest one but a four-

wheel drive nonetheless) and I am a frequent traveller over Kew Bridge.

I know the area well as I lived in Forest Road, just a stone's throw away for over a decade. Even now while ensconced in Moetake I frequently take that route to the west.

No-one can accuse me of imposing on others what I would not wish for myself.

And by an inconspicuous stroke I was fined £100 for driving on the bus lane in 2003. This was particularly ironic, as I had written several editorials defending the restriction and attacking residents who opposed it.

I had ventured into the lane as the Richmond and Twickenham Times had reported that it had been de-regulated and removed after protest by the then Tory controlled council.

The trouble was I had not read the fine print – for the de-restriction was not coming into force until a month later!