

Book review

ROAD USER CHARGING: ISSUES AND POLICIES

S. Ison. Ashgate, 2004. ISBN 0 7546 3216 4, £50.00, 208 pp.

This book addresses the issue of the role of charging to help deal with the problem of road congestion and, to a lesser extent, traffic pollution. It does not deal with road track costs. The ten chapters cover the theory of road-user charging, theories of decision-making, general attitudes to charging as a means of dealing with road congestion, and the Cambridge and London charging initiatives, and then draws conclusions for policy-making.

The central question the book addresses is how to secure implementation of this controversial policy. The description of the theory is familiar to those versed in the subject, but clear. However, it fails to deal with the economic theory of the use of revenues. The chapter on the international perspective picks up useful overseas literature but is rather weak on international attempts to introduce road-charging schemes; for example, it omits the Dennis Agreement in Stockholm and the abortive plan for Bogotá.

A relatively novel feature in a book dealing with road pricing is the section reviewing the theory of decision-making. This posits both a rational approach and an incremental approach to decision-making, and concludes that the incremental approach is the most relevant to road pricing. In the course of this, ten criteria are specified for successful policy implementation. In the chapter reporting results from a survey of the opinions of different actors on the effectiveness of road pricing and other policies in combating congestion, the author does not comment on how well the results stand up to technical scrutiny, and

readers should beware assuming that popular policies are the same as effective policies.

The chapters on the Cambridge congestion charging trial make up over a fifth of the book, and provide a comprehensive assessment of the scheme and why it was not implemented. The author concludes that the complexity of the proposed charging system, the retirement of the officer 'champion', and the lack of a strong political consensus were sufficient to block what could have been a very effective initiative. The chapter on London is much shorter, presumably because the book went to press in the early days of the scheme's operation, and amounts essentially to a brief assessment of the scheme against the ten criteria set out earlier, along with a few other relevant factors. It contains nothing on the extensive history of attempts to introduce road-user charging in the capital. For a book examining implementation issues it would have been fascinating to compare the successful implementation of congestion charging in 2003 with the failed attempt with its progenitor, supplementary licensing, in 1973. The policy conclusions follow readily from the main text, and for the most part are uncontroversial.

Overall, the book is an easy read and contains a useful discussion of road congestion charging and the implementation issues associated with it. It is, however, a less than comprehensive treatment of the subject and misses some important points; for example, the park-and-ride scheme in Singapore was a miserable failure, and the London scheme required close cooperation with the DVLA.

DAVID BAYLISS