

Going with the flow



INTERVIEW BY [PAUL HUTTON](#)

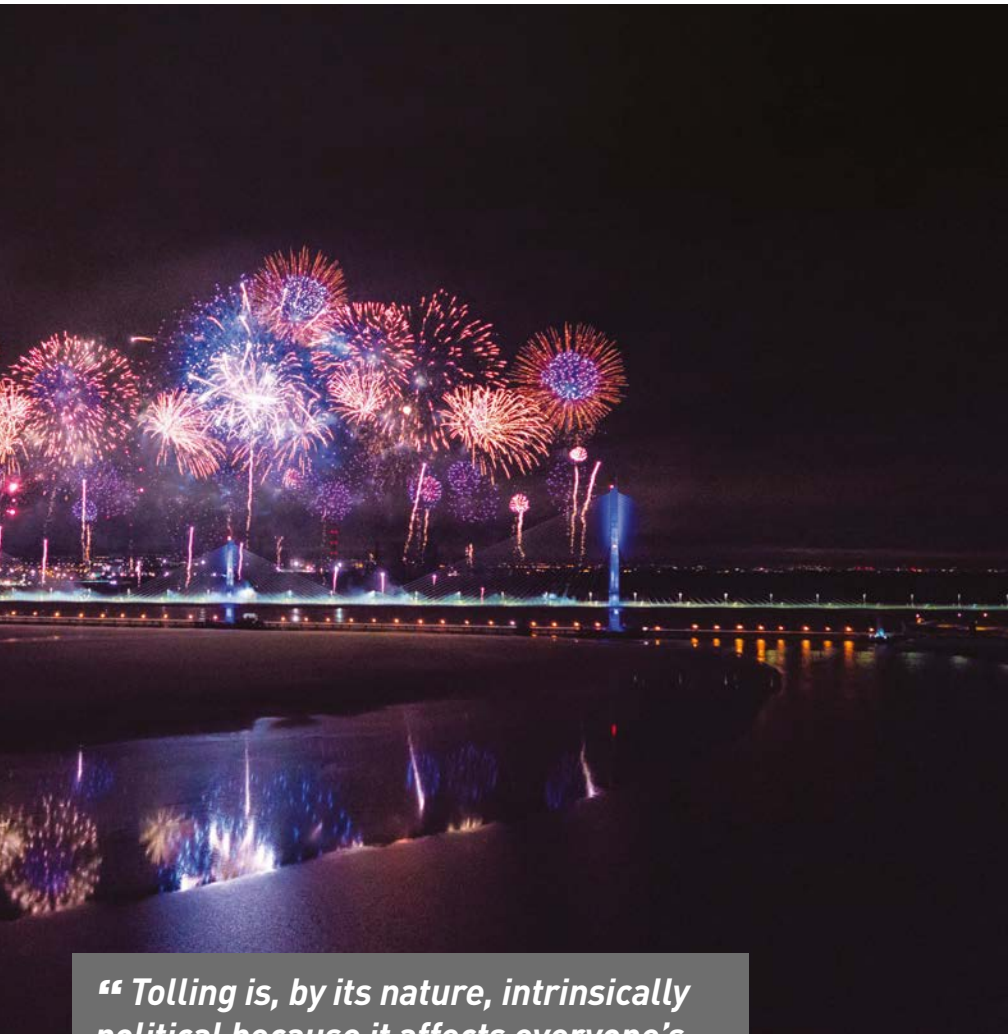
Benoit Rossi is the Head of Communication and Marketing at emovis. He has spent 15 years shaping strategic alliances between Business and Government all over the world, as well as studying at Harvard. As *Smart Highways* widens its scope to take in the whole world, Paul Hutton caught up with him to find out more about a man who defines “much travelled”



Q You’ve always been someone ready to move for work, haven’t you?
Yes. I’ve been fortunate to live and work in various places from Europe and the Antipodes (Australia) to the US and Asia. And the one thing that I’ve learned is that transportation is above all a people business.

Q emovis has the responsibility for supporting the “selling” of the Mersey Gateway bridge concept – a toll road built to replace a free road... has that been a challenge?
The opening of the Mersey Gateway Free-Flow Tolling Bridge in England last October is a true success story. This successful “tolling recipe” consists of three ingredients: smart policy, effective communication and tangible results. Let me explain.
Halton council has wisely devised a tolling policy whereby local residents can travel

Benoit says the Mersey Gateway is a case in point on how toll-based solutions can address mobility issues and social fairness



“ Tolling is, by its nature, intrinsically political because it affects everyone’s life... as with any political decisions, it is subject to change according to the prevailing balance of power in a given country or region ”

for free. The borough funded this initiative thanks to the £250M savings obtained through the competitive PPP tendering.

As the future operator, we developed a dedicated tolling brand, Merseyflow, supported by a proactive communication plan which sought to engage all stakeholders, business and individuals alike. More than 80,000 users were already registered by the time the bridge opened to traffic - a clear proof of the effectiveness of our communication campaign.

Last but not least, thanks to the barrier-free tolling solution, motorists can experience first-hand the benefits of

travelling in an unfettered manner on this new bridge while saving 10 minutes of commuting time each way. We brought them peace of mind and this is key when introducing

a new tolling scheme.

Q The bridge itself is something of a one-off given that a huge project like this has been managed by a local council through a private finance initiative...

This project is a case in point on how toll-based solutions can address mobility issues and social fairness at the same time.

It is a remarkable £1.8bn Public Private Partnership project managed by a local authority to oversee the construction of an entirely new crossing over the Mersey River. This project was very much needed to relieve the congestion of half-a-century

old bridge which was running way above its design capacity and stifling the economic development of the Liverpool area.

We are honoured to have been selected by the Council to operate a free-flow tolling scheme, the second in the UK after London’s Dartford Crossing (which emovis also operates).

Q There is a trend at the moment, though, for governments to scrap toll charges... I’m thinking of British Columbia and Scotland as two examples.

Tolling a stretch of road is, by its nature, intrinsically political because it affects everyone’s life. As with any political decisions, it is subject to change according to the prevailing balance of power in a given country or region. A few years ago, PFIs were very trendy in the UK, but that is no longer the case. The same holds true for tolling. It goes through cycles.

What it is important to remember however is that there is no such thing as a free road. The costs of road transport are multiple (construction, maintenance, congestion, pollution...), and these costs are paid for either by the taxpayers or the user of that road.

There is a profound societal evolution from “asset ownership” toward “usage-based services. And toll roads are a good example of “user-pay” model.

Q Yet we saw only recently experts from ITS (UK) and in Ireland saying that road user charging has to happen at some point...

That’s right, but one ought to remain cautious as there is usually a gap between the world of the experts and the political sphere. Sometimes the two do not orbit on the same plane.

What is true is that every government, be it in Europe or in the US, is facing a sharp decline in fuel-based revenues due to more fuel-efficient vehicles. This decline will only accelerate with the rapid spread of electric cars.

Just to illustrate the magnitude of the problem: UK’s Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting a 20 per cent decline in petrol and diesel duties revenue by 2020. That corresponds to a funding “abyss” of £5.6 billion. Almost the equivalent of the UK’s lottery sales (£7.6bn in 2015).

Quite logically, states are currently looking at new mobility pricing policies that are fairer and more effective. Europe is at the forefront of truck charging schemes. This means charging heavy goods vehicles according to the distance travelled and the externalities they cause (noise, pollution, ▶



emovis has managed the charging scheme on the Dartford Crossing since it went free flow

etc) on a statewide level. The US is looking more into charging private cars for every mile they drive. Several Road User Charging pilots are currently being assessed and we are currently involved in two of them (in the states of Oregon and Washington).

“ Toll concessionaires could potentially boost their toll revenues by establishing premium ‘AC Only’ toll lanes without adding any physical lanes ”

Q As someone with experience of toll road charging in France, what can we learn from that network and is the way the tolling is set up – with stretches paid for and others free – still fit for purpose or does technology allow for a different solution in the future?

About 80 per cent of the French motorway network is tolled, but it should not be seen as a static situation. Quite the contrary. For instance, in 2014 the previously free of use A83 between Bordeaux and Biarritz was successfully converted into a 200km toll motorway in return for a much-needed road widening. French motorways are also experiencing barrier-free tolling. Last but not least, the Ministry of Transport launched

last month a “Mobility Summit” to rethink France’s transport public policies which may result in the emergence of new forms of regional tolling schemes.

Q How will connected and autonomous, or partly autonomous, vehicles change business for tolling companies?

Connected and autonomous cars (AV/AC) are not just a new technology, but a new way to envision the mobility of people and goods. The advent of ACs will radically transform the toll road business model we have known for the past four decades. Renault recently organised a demo of its latest concept car, Symbioz, to show how AC’s car smoothly navigates through a toll

plaza and merges with the rest of the traffic.

As with any game change, there will be both loser and winners.

At the moment, all the focus from the media is on the car technology race. But roads are the critical and universal platform on which all these technologies need to operate, and they have to be ready for this new paradigm.

Highway Operators could potentially boost the traffic capacity of their roads by establishing premium “AC Only” lanes without adding any physical lanes. This would be similar to the current US “HOV Only” lanes. Some studies suggest that ACs have the capacity to double traffic throughput. Of course, one needs to balance out this traffic bonanza with the investment needed to equip these “AC Only” lanes. Motorists would benefit too, as they would travel faster and more safely.

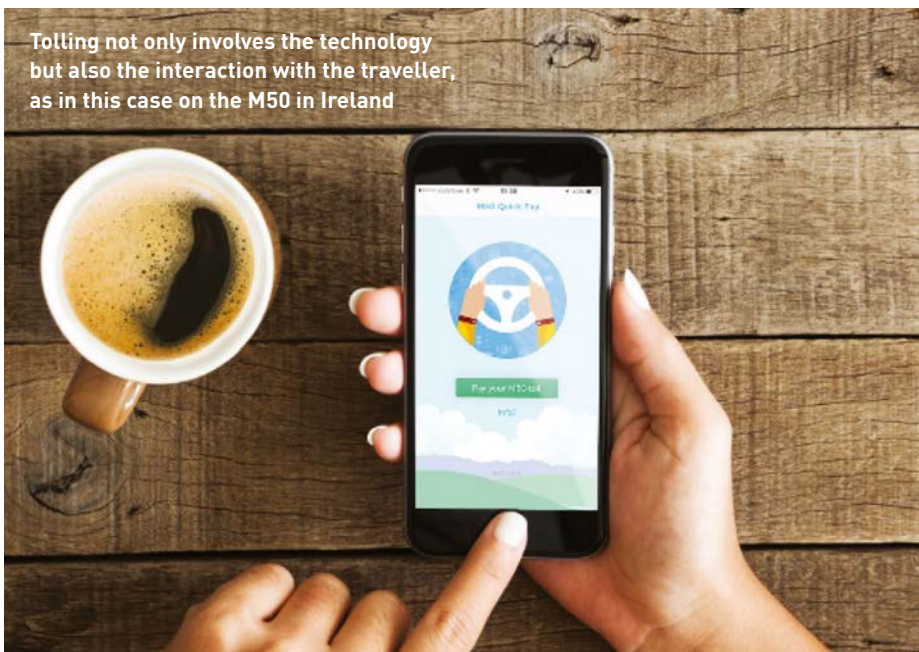
On the other hand, car manufacturers may face a bleaker prospect as the demand for cars could sharply decline. According to a recent study by KPMG, sedan sales will fall by 50 per cent from 5.4 million currently to 2.1 million by 2030 in the US as families will prefer hailing self-driving cars instead of owning a car.

Although ACs may sharply lower road fatalities, the society may not be better off as a whole as ACs may unleash new travel demands which could, in turn, create more congestion on the roads.

This may lead to new mobility pricing models such as the Pay-Per-Mile that we are currently trialing in the US with the Oregon’s Department of Transport. As we can see, there is no magical “tolling wand” - we always need smart public policies to keep the roads from flowing.

Q Finally, despite working in both Sydney and London, I’m still not able to convince you that cricket is the best sport in the world?

Well as Lord Mancroft once said: cricket is “a game which the English ... have invented in order to give themselves some conception of eternity” and I am afraid I don’t have the required patience to fully enjoy a cricket match! ■



Tolling not only involves the technology but also the interaction with the traveller, as in this case on the M50 in Ireland

