

**STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION
19 November 2009**

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**STATEMENT BY OPPOSITION SPOKESMAN
FOR TRAFFIC GILBERT LICUDI IN RESPONSE
TO THE GOVERNMENT'S INTEGRATED TRAFFIC,
PARKING AND TRANSPORT PLAN**

Gibraltar's traffic and parking problem has become more acute in recent years to the point where circulation is often difficult with traffic coming to a standstill in certain areas of Gibraltar on a regular basis. Gibraltar's roads are often found to be gridlocked.

The Opposition therefore is in favour of any proposals which are aimed at resolving these problems.

It is not enough, however, for the Government to make statements in a traffic plan or in a glossy manifesto. The traffic and parking problem is a very visible one which affects motorists on a daily basis. It is practical results, not just in building new facilities but on the effect of these facilities in easing congestion and allowing traffic to circulate with ease, which will determine whether Government can claim any success in its traffic and parking strategy.

The Government's track record in terms of the priority given to the problem is not a good one. Government has allowed the problem to escalate to almost crisis levels before deciding that it was time that real and effective measures were required.

What is needed, above all, is a change in attitude by the Government with a level of commitment and political will which has not been evident so far in the thirteen years this Government has been in office.

In his New Year message of 2008, the Chief Minister referred to what he called "Gibraltar's perennial parking and traffic issues". He announced that "we will build new roads and parking facilities on a massive and unprecedented scale".

The Chief Minister recognised the seriousness of the problem in January 2008 yet despite his announcement virtually nothing was done to tackle the problem during that year. Indeed, the problem became noticeably worse.

It was therefore not unexpected for the Chief Minister to have to address this again in his New Year message of this year. The Chief Minister stated:

“During **the next few weeks** the Government will be publishing its detailed comprehensive and integrated parking and traffic improvement plan.”

That was in January 2009. The traffic plan was not published until 28 October 2009. A “few weeks”, to quote the Chief Minister’s own words, turned into almost ten months without any explanation given for this delay.

That is why we say that it is not on statements of intention that this Government will be held to account. All too often, those statements of intention have not been translated into practice. Procrastination and delay are very evident in almost all aspects of the Government’s traffic and parking strategy.

Dudley Ward Tunnel

Nowhere is that more evident than on the Government’s handling of the saga of the Dudley Ward Tunnel. As everyone is aware, the tunnel was closed as a result of a fatal accident in February 2002. Since 2003, the Government has been telling us that they had received a consultant’s report with various recommendations and that they had identified a preferred solution. That continued to be the position for five years with no progress made at all. A tender process was then started but the Government changed its mind as to the works which needed to be carried out. Recently, we have been told that works will be carried out in three phases with the tunnel opening in July 2010, more than eight years after it closed.

In the meantime, and whilst the Government was giving the impression that progress was being made towards reopening the tunnel, the area of the approach road was being used as a dumping ground for rubble. The Government have now told us that they had nowhere else to dump this rubble. It is clear, therefore, despite their public pronouncements to the contrary, that the Government had no intention whatsoever of carrying out the necessary works to reopen the tunnel until they found an alternative site for the rubble. At no stage did they tell the public that this was the problem even though they were being constantly pressed by the Opposition both in press releases and in Parliament.

It has now cost the taxpayer over £1 million for the rubble to be collected from the area of Dudley Ward Tunnel and dumped at the eastside reclamation.

Proper planning and transparency have been visibly lacking in relation to this project.

We now find that works are being carried out to Devil’s Tower Road with the disruption that this entails at a time when Dudley Ward Tunnel is still closed. Again, this is evidence of lack of proper planning on the Government’s part. Had the tunnel been open much earlier as it could and should have been, the disruption which now faces motorists could have been eased.

The Government's Plan

In announcing its traffic plan, the Government have done what the Opposition committed itself to doing at the time of the last elections. This is what we said in our election manifesto:

“As a matter of priority your new Government will draw up a comprehensive traffic plan encompassing the whole of Gibraltar which will be the result of a major review of existing traffic arrangements in which all interested parties will be consulted. The plan will contain set targets and objectives in the building of new roads and a creation of more parking spaces for motor cars and motorcycles, especially for residents in the town area.”

The Government's plan is disappointing. It amounts, in many respects, to a repetition of works which have been previously announced or which are already under way or have been completed. In other respects, it is a mere statement of the obvious such as the need to remove derelict vehicles or the replacement of bus shelters.

We sincerely hope that the measures which the Government have announced will have a real and significant impact in improving Gibraltar's traffic and parking problem. We are, however, sceptical.

Undoubtedly the greatest impact on traffic circulation is the state of the roads and measures to ease congestion. A “plan” requires new ideas and innovative solutions and has to be prospective in nature. In other words, it has to look to the future. The idea of building of new roads “on a massive and unprecedented scale” which is what the Chief Minister announced is evidently lacking in the Government's plan. There isn't a commitment to a single new road scheme announced in this plan.

Under the heading “New Roads” there are three distinct areas identified. Firstly, road schemes which have already been implemented. These include works to Winston Churchill Avenue and Sir Herbert Miles Road which were completed years ago. This is hardly what one expects from a plan for the future.

Secondly, there are road projects which are already under way. These include the Trafalgar Interchange, Devil's Tower Road and Dudley Ward Tunnel.

And thirdly, there are other schemes on which the Government is said to be working on design and viability. The only scheme under this heading which could potentially have a significant impact on circulation is a road linking the Rosia area with Queensway via the Dockyard.

This is not, however, an announcement of a new road. It is a statement of an intention to consider viability. No commitment is given by the Government as to how long it will take in its consideration or when the new road will be ready if and when a decision to proceed is taken. After all the hype and expectation created by the Chief Minister's announcements, this is, frankly, not good enough.

The south district continues to suffer from acute traffic problems particularly at peak times. In the not too distant future, when the Anchorage is fully occupied and Nelson's View, Cumberland Terraces and Bay Views are completed, there will inevitably be an influx of residents and, consequently, road users in this area. The only road scheme to which the Government is committed and which targets south district traffic is the Trafalgar Interchange. It is simply wishful thinking by Government to believe that this on its own will redress the problem in a significant way.

Parking

The Government's plan sets out the Government's intention to build a number of multi storey car parks primarily in residential areas. No indication is given as to whether these facilities will be free or will have to be paid for by the public.

Statements of intention have been a feature of this Government for many years with projects either not proceeding or being subjected to substantial delay. For example, the Government have been stating their intention to reopen Dudley Ward Tunnel since 2003. The Government also announced many years ago, when my colleague Juan Carlos Perez was in the House of Assembly, the building of the Europort link road but this was apparently subsequently abandoned. This road now features in the Government's plan as a project which is already underway.

The building of new car parks has also been subject to substantial delays. The car parks at Willis' Road, Sandpits and New Harbours were virtually complete at the time of the elections in 2007 yet it took many months before these parking spaces were allocated.

The parking facilities at Euro Plaza, for hospital visitors by day and nearby residents by night, have been ready for over two years. These facilities are still closed to the public.

The plan envisages the creation of 100 parking spaces at the Mid Town development. This represents a reduction of 300 spaces from what the Government had previously announced. In the GSD's manifesto for the 2007 elections under "Our Commitments" the GSD stated: "City Centre, public, underground parking for around 400 cars at the Mid Town development".

An electoral commitment of 400 spaces has become an intention to create 100 spaces. What has happened to the other 300 spaces? They seem to have vanished into thin air.

In any event, there are currently parking spaces at the old Naval Ground where the Mid Town development will be built. All these will be lost. And what about the parking spaces at the Queensway car park? These will also be lost. Yet the Government announces the 100 parking spaces as “new, additional parking spaces in Gibraltar”. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only have the Government made a U-turn on an electoral commitment, it is now evident that the net result of the Mid Town development is a loss of parking spaces and not the creation of “new, additional parking spaces” as the Government would have us believe.

The Government’s plan also suggests that enhanced parking facilities will be created by the management of derelict vehicles. We do not need an Integrated Traffic, Parking and Transport Plan to deal with the problem of derelict vehicles. This is a matter we have been pressing the Government on for many months. It has also featured in the media with numerous photos of derelict vehicles appearing. During all this time, the Government have not taken the problem seriously. No particular effort is necessary to redress this yet it has not been done.

Public Transport

On Public Transport, the Government’s plan announces new buses for the upper town route and the replacement of all bus shelters.

These are matters which have been on the Government’s agenda for many months but have not materialised. They are further examples of statements of intention made by Government which are repeated several times before any action is taken.

The Opposition have been pressing continuously for the Government to resolve the problem of the buses to the upper town route. Extensive delays have occurred as a result of tests carried out with inadequate vehicles and a tender process which has not resulted in the purchase by the Government of appropriate buses.

As for the bus shelters, I have reminded the Government in Parliament on numerous occasions of the appalling state of the bus shelters. Despite the poor state of the shelters, no maintenance at all has been carried out this year. It is not acceptable for bus shelters not to be maintained whilst no steps are taken to replace them.

Again, there is no need for the announcement of a Plan in order to tackle these matters.

Conclusion

The Government envisages that much of its plan will be completed within two years. It is no coincidence that this takes us close to the date of the next elections.

There are a number of projects which are included in the plan which have started this year, for example, the Trafalgar Interchange, Devil's Tower Road Dual Carriageway, Eastern Beach Dual Carriageway, Tunnel under runway and Dudley Ward Tunnel approach road.

All of these projects are scheduled to be completed in 2010 or 2011.

Having neglected the traffic and parking problem for twelve years, the Government has now embarked in a mad rush to complete all these projects in the last two years of its term. This suggests that Government is motivated more by electoral considerations rather than a real desire to address an acute problem at an early stage.

The issue which this raises is not just related to the Government's motivation. The disruption created by all these projects taking place at the same time will be enormous. With proper planning and the necessary political commitment, much of this disruption could have been avoided.

Government will be judged by the effect of these measures in practice. It is, however, a matter of regret that the long-suffering motorist can expect at least two more years of chaos and disruption as a result of Government's lack of planning.

We will continue to monitor progress on the implementation of the plan over the next two years. It is our sincere wish and desire that our scepticism and disappointment with which we have received the Government's plan is proved to have been misplaced and that Gibraltar achieves the traffic and transport system which it so desperately needs and deserves.

Gilbert Licudi

19 November 2009