

Road charges take their toll on French drivers

Attention, Mr Cameron. Privatisation has forced drivers here back on to the slow road

Charles Bremner

Road companies have run rings round efforts to limit price rises

If you have driven on France's splendid motorways lately, you might have noticed that some seem eerily empty. For example, when you leave Paris's packed périphérique motorway for the posh commuter town of Saint Germain-en-Laye you could almost be on a country road. You find out why when you reach the toll gate: nearly £7 for nine miles. Cars and lorries often prefer the old, slow route.

The same applies on the new A65, France's second most expensive motorway. Drive the 115 miles from Saint-Selve, south of Bordeaux, to Lescar, near Pau, and you'll cough up more than £18. Many drivers still opt to clog up the parallel route nationale.

While David Cameron considers introducing private toll motorways to Britain, he would be advised to look across the Channel. France, with its 7,500 miles of autoroutes — second only to Germany's in length but far superior — offers a model in how these things should and should not be done.

The French are only just getting around to handing non-motorway roads to private management, but the autoroutes were built and run by separate state-controlled corporations, albeit until lately. They raised the finance and recouped the costs through tolls. Italy, which invented the motorway in the 1920s, was the original model and Spain followed suit while Germany and the Low Countries kept their motorways toll-free and financed centrally, like Britain. Switzerland, Austria and some other states raise funds by requiring drivers

to buy annual motorway "vignettes".

The system worked well, bringing in a healthy tax flow to the French treasury. Thanks to France's centralised State and elite corps of engineer civil servants, the highway network was woven intelligently into the landscape with sweeping curves. In 1970, when the car-loving President Pompidou opened the north-south Lille-Paris-Marseilles axis, he waxed lyrical. "The autoroute must be continuous, like the blood supply," he said. "The autoroute is a tool of work and also a tool for liberation. . . It has enabled man to rediscover the geography and history of his land."

The state-run motorways in and close to cities are as scruffy as those in many other nations, but once you are on the toll stretches, they put Britain's to shame. Service areas sell local produce, don't smell of chips and the bathrooms are clean. They even offer massage and gym classes in holiday periods. People were willing to pay the moderate fees, which did not seem high, especially after national road tax was abolished for private cars more than a decade ago.

The change came in between 2002 and 2005 when the autoroute companies were privatised by socialist and then Gaullist governments. This is now seen in many quarters as a squandering of the national heritage. François Bayrou, the centrist former Cabinet minister who is running in fourth place in the presidential campaign, called the sell-off "a typical case of plundering of public wealth followed by profits without cause".

The long-term concessions, which earned the state a relatively meagre €14 billion, handed the new owners a jackpot. They have kept the motorways in excellent shape and built new ones,

but they have made mouthwatering profits by running rings round the State's attempts to stem the surge in toll charges. The average toll per mile for cars jumped by more than 16 per cent, twice the rise in inflation, in the first five years of privatisation. For lorries it was 38 per cent. This was achieved thanks to a wheeze that the companies called *le foisonnement*, or abundance. This consists of jacking up the prices on the busiest stretches and keeping rises to a minimum on less travelled routes. Averaged out, the overall rise complies with the level set by the regulator. The Court of Accounts, the state auditor, has issued vitriolic reports on toll price gouging but the tolls keep rising and companies keep on raking in the "grey gold", as the motorway concessions are nicknamed.

As a result, motorists and haulage companies are staying on the low road and the highways are beginning to fail in their mission of lightening traffic on the nationales and départementales, while offering faster, safer travel.

In some cases, the cost is prompting potentially lethal manoeuvres. Motorists coming in from Normandy on the free part of the A13 jam on the brakes and try to head for an exit when they realise they have reached the notoriously expensive A14 stretch into Paris. One recently turned round and drove six miles back along the hard shoulder into mid morning rush-hour traffic. Police reported that the 40-year-old man was sober and in full possession of his wits. He just did not want to fork out his £7.

