

Media craze over Dutch road pricing

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For a long time, the always upbeat Dutch Transport Minister was his own best advertisement for the announced road pricing scheme. But the national press smelled a possibility to make things a bit harder for him and seized it. What exactly is the role of the automobile association and what does that mean for the scheme?

[F092 Image 1](#)

Until recently, Dutch Transport Minister Camiel Eurlings was confident that he would see the current road pricing plans through, key reason being the 'broad support in society'. That support is essential seen as in the past 22 years five previous ministers were unsuccessful in their efforts to introduce a similar scheme.

But suddenly, early this month, the press reported that automobile association ANWB's support was wavering. A stream of articles and of reactions from the Minister and the ANWB followed, climaxing in the announcement that if the ANWB doesn't support the plans, the Minister will not press on.

An ANWB spokesperson told us what really happened. Time for a reconstruction.

In favour

The (conditional) support Mr Eurlings considers paramount to his plans comes mainly from the Dutch car lobby, primarily ANWB, and from environmental organisations like the Netherlands Society for Nature and Environment (SNM).

Reasons for ANWB to be positive about the plans are (apart from the fact that their own former director headed the advisory platform and the current one is part of a 'soundboard'):

- equal treatment of all road users (not just charging those using urban ring roads during peak hours);
- equal government revenues (in previous plans revenues rose);
- and the promise that all revenues will be used for road infrastructure, public transport etc.

SNM welcomes the fact that "driving clean [their word] and fuel-efficient cars is cheaper than driving polluting and uneconomical cars". They are confident the scheme will diminish car use and increase public transport use.

Accusations

The first criticism consisted mainly of accusations that certain costs, for example those to install the registration units, were not included in the presentation of the plans. Also, the Minister held certain optimistic *presumptions* about effects on congestion to be *facts* and used them to substantiate his plans.

More importantly, in the eyes of ANWB: the rush hour surcharges on certain (also undisclosed) roads remained – and still remain – undisclosed. These additional fees threaten the 'equal treatment of all road users' as ANWB sees it. But first and foremost, ANWB objects to the compensation for abolished vehicle purchase tax through a temporarily raised motor vehicle tax.

[F092 Image 2](#)

Feeding frenzy

Early January, Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* wrote that ANWB “threatened” to retract support because “[\[c\]ar drivers complain\[ed\] about higher costs.](#)” The media erupted in a feeding frenzy.

The next steps: ANWB announced their plans to hold an online survey amongst their members (non-members can fill it out as well, but their opinion weighs less) and Mr Eurlings expressed his intention to base his decision on the outcome: he would not implement kilometre pricing without the support of the four million ANWB members, because “they form a larger part of the population than a majority in the House of Commons. If the average car driver is opposed to the plans, there will be no levy.”

But the smallest christian government party reprimanded the Minister, pointing out that it is Government rather than ANWB members who decide how we will be paying for mobility. The green party said the Minister should organise a referendum if he wants to consult the people. Minister Eurlings declared to be “rather surprised” by the commotion, but last Tuesday he confirmed the CU's view.

Survey experts commented on the questionnaire, stating that it is biased (“Trains are overcrowded”), that the survey can easily be filled out multiple times by the same person, and that it will attract mostly opponents.

Pull out

Spokesman Ad Vonk of ANWB reacted shortly after the first stories on the subject appeared in the news papers. The association cleverly play down their part, while they have only increased their influence.

“First of all, we never threatened to withdraw our support,” he says, “for, as opposed to what the media claim and what the Minister suggests, we never expressed our support in the first place.” It is crucial to ANWB to take part in the negotiations, so they do not intend to take a stand until the very last moment. “We urged the reporter who wrote the first article to rectify, which he did,” Vonk says.

But the article set in motion some favourable developments for ANWB. Vonk: “In reaction to the article, the Minister has promised that a dedicated task force, which had already been promised, will be assembled to come up with a solution to the problem of the transition period.

“We don't have a solution either, but the one proposed now, in which some car drivers (who bought cars with a high purchase tax) pay double through raised vehicle taxation only to balance the Treasury, is unacceptable to the ANWB. Maybe Government ought to advance the money, like they could to save the banks,” Vonk suggests, “but maybe that's not an option either.

“Anyway, as long as the principles decided upon by the advisory platform remain in place, for instance the principle of a rush hour surcharge to deminish congestion and thus improve the environment, we can stand behind the plans,” Vonk states. But he also says: “You can want something, but if it is not possible, you must pull out.”

Sources

- [Nieuwsthema kilometerheffing](#) [in Dutch] - *NRC Handelsblad* [Kamer](#) [beslist](#) [over kilometerheffing](#) [in Dutch] - *Nu.nl*

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