

Beware the return of anti-motorist mania

THE dreaded spectre of ERP (Electronic Road Pricing) was resurrected this week, causing predictable groans and cries of horror from those who remember the last time it stalked the streets of Hongkong. It caused such havoc in 1984 that the career of former Secretary of Transport, Mr Alan Scott, nearly came off the rails under a barrage of criticism because of his support for a scheme to charge motorists on certain stretches of road, as a means of cutting traffic congestion.

After that experience, it is either a brave or a rash Transport Secretary who so much as hints at another look at ERP. A mention of "unpalatable" options being examined to restrain road users at a meeting of the Legislative Council on Wednesday was enough to put Mr Michael Leung, the present incumbent, on the spot the following day. Yes, he admitted, road pricing was one of the many options being included in a Green Paper for public discussion by the end of the year, although he ruled out a repeat of the 1984 electronic experiment that prompted such fury.

That was enough for the hare to start running again, pursued by a vocal pack of hounds, headed by the chief executive of the Hongkong Automobile Association, Mr Phil Taylor. He quickly cast himself in the role of defender of the private motorist, beset by a Government apparently intent on introducing punitive measures to drive cars off the busiest roads. All Mr Leung's options, including

even more stringent parking restrictions and higher taxes, were dismissed by Mr Taylor as "negative".

What about the red tide of taxis, and the growing number of goods vehicles clogging the roads, asked Mr Taylor, pointing out that the number of private cars had dropped massively, from 190,000 in 1982 to 140,000 now. This statistic clearly reflects the success of Hongkong's public transport network, surely one of the best in the world, with its amazing array of railways, buses, ferries and trams.

Experience elsewhere shows that driving the private motorist out of city centres only creates other pressures which prove difficult to manage. Many traditional Western shopping centres have suffered badly from competition provided by out-of-town complexes offering the convenience of free parking. With space at such a premium in Hongkong, that is less of a risk, but it is a danger to consider if Central becomes a no-go area for ordinary drivers.

The private motorist already pays heavily for his privilege and his pleasure in Hongkong, and even bigger levies might start to look like a "soak the rich" policy more suited to socialist states rather than a bastion of freedom. It is to be hoped that among Mr Leung's more favoured options is a system of organising the ever-present roadworks in such a way as to avoid creating congestion in the worst places at the worst times.