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Highway tolls could relieve traffic jams

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Suppose you place a half dozen scorpions in a bottle, and shake vigorously. What would be the result? One need not be a sophisticated biologist to know that each of the creatures, feeling crowded, frightened and put upon, would lash out at all the others. Something of this sort seems to have occurred in California, where motorists have taken pistol shots at one another along the freeways. Although these are people, not scorpions, and they are on a **highway** not in a bottle, the parallels in the two situations are ominous.

Heightening the distress is the summer heat in southern California, with its fraying of tempers and resultant **highway** breakdowns. Because of the pressure of people and cars on limited road capacity, the rush hour has been extended until it includes almost every hour from 7 a.m. until long past midnight. What solutions are in the offing? Unfortunately, it would appear, only more of the same is in store. According to the California Department of Transportation, an additional 90-100 miles of new **highways** will come on stream each year from now through 1992. As well, bids will soon be taken for double-decking five miles of the Harbor Freeway in the downtown core, which are particularly congested, even by L.A. standards. There is also some talk of setting up a mass transit system, but if that ever occurs, it won't be for decades. Los Angeles serves notice as to what is likely to happen to the rest of us in areas where **traffic jams** are a feature of city life. EXCESS DEMAND Fortunately, the L.A. approach is not the only solution. There is another option called peak-load pricing, predicated on the idea that **traffic** congestion is merely an instance of excess demand. As all economics students well know, there is only one way for the market to resolve a situation where the amount demanded

exceeds the amount supplied: the price of the good or service in question must rise. How would this work in the present instance? First of all, the citizenry would have to get used to the idea of paying an explicit price for road usage. It might be thought, initially, that this would be difficult; after all, people look upon their freeways almost as a natural or God-given right. But **highways** are not free, even now. Their initial construction is paid for through taxes, and so they could be more accurately called "taxways" than "freeways." Furthermore, all who use them must pay in terms of time, while sitting in bumper to bumper **traffic**. The choice, thus, is not between paying and not paying; it is between paying in terms of money, or, as at present, in terms of time wasted, nerves and tempers frayed, and, in the extreme, bullets exchanged. Secondly, a system of pricing would have to be set up which would take account of the fact that the demands for taxway usage are not uniform throughout the day or week. Thus, at certain times on weekdays, say between the hours of 7 a.m.-9 a.m., or 4 p.m.-6p.m., and at certain places, a premium charge would have to be exacted. The fee would best be determined through experimentation; it would be continued to be elevated until **traffic** could move relatively smoothly. This solution to congestion has been tried with great success in Singapore, where people buy different colored monthly tickets for display on their windshields, which allow them access to different parts of the city, at different times of day. (Severe fines are imposed on motorists who defy the rules.) If **traffic jams** in large Canadian cities are to be avoided in future, we shall have to take a hard look at peak-loading pricing policies.

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