

# PETER SAMUEL

Love him or hate him, this old-school news-hound has an eye for a story and does not pull any punches when dealing with the toll industry

➔ It would come as no surprise to Peter Samuel if he were to discover some readers were tearing out the page opposite to create a makeshift dartboard from his photo. It's fair to say he's no stranger to controversy. His website, *TOLLROADSnews*, is loved by many, loathed by a few, yet makes compelling reading for all those involved in the tolling industry. His 'take-no-prisoners' approach to journalism is refreshingly uncompromising – appeasing his online advertisers isn't particularly high on his agenda. "People know me well enough to realise that I won't let an advertisement get in the way of a good story," he laughs. "I make a point of giving people the opportunity to have their say and to respond to any negative stories. Most people appreciate this; they'll stay with you even if they'd rather the story wasn't written."

## THE MAN BEHIND THE URL

Having celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, Samuel's had plenty of time to develop the necessary thick skin his job requires. Born in England during the Second World War, his family emigrated to Australia in

1950 – he still speaks with an Aussie twang despite being based in the USA since 1980. He gained an economics degree Down Under and was tempted into academia for a while, becoming a junior lecturer at Monash University. But his real passion was writing and he found himself working for the *Canberra Times* and then for *The Bulletin*, a weekly news publication based in Sydney.

Never a stranger to drama, he was once blacklisted from the journalists' association for comments he made about the secretary of the local union, leaving his bosses with a dilemma – they didn't want to fire him but the repeated strikes caused by his continued presence were proving a little troublesome. Their solution was to ship him to New York to take over from the retiring manager of the Australian Consolidated Press.

"I'm an exile but I was lucky to be exiled to the greatest city in the world," he says of New York. "I was supposed to manage five smart, competitive female reporters, who didn't need to be managed. But my downfall as a manager came when I refused to toe the line with a top executive from Sydney who wanted to write off US\$10,000 of play

money as 'petty cash'. He enjoyed gambling and expensive women. I said I'd be happy to provide the money but said I'd need a signed receipt and that I'd write it into the next month's accounts as a 'cash advance'."

Samuel also got to know Rupert Murdoch, interviewing him in his *New York Post* office for a cover story of a Consolidated Press business magazine. When they fired him, Murdoch personally gave him a job in Washington as a correspondent for *The Australian*. Along the way, he gained an interest in toll roads when he started writing for a free market libertarian publication in California called *Reason*. He did all kinds of writing in those days and at one stage was even a defense reporter. "I was the *New York City Tribune's* national security correspondent," he recalls. "This meant I had White House passes, access to the Pentagon, the CIA, and so on. The irony was that all these high-level security checks overlooked the fact I had no valid visa to be in the USA. I was an illegal alien!"

It was a freelance assignment from *Forbes* magazine that really got Samuel into the toll industry. He describes three things

occurring in tolling in the mid- to late 1990s that nobody in the media really tied together: “The first was the introduction of electronic tolling. The second was this idea of toll lanes in the middle of a freeway and using dynamic pricing to maintain free-flow for people who were prepared to pay – that was happening in California on SR 91. The third thing was that particular example in California was a private enterprise initiative; up until then, most roads and highways had been the province of government, state authorities, DOTs or state turnpikes. When I wrote the *Forbes* article, it made a real splash. I was treated as some kind of an expert – which in a way I was because there was no other journalist in the country following toll roads at a national level.”

*Toll Roads Newsletter* was launched as a high-price, low-circulation black ink on grey publication in March 1996. Samuel laid it out himself in Pagemaker on an Apple desktop computer, printed it out on a large HP printer, got it folded, stapled and trimmed at a nearby commercial bindery, printed the address labels for envelopes, sorted by zipcodes, then took it in boxes to the local post office for distribution.

**TOLLING GOES VIRAL**

As much as he enjoyed the experience at first, he recounts frustration that the big stories would always break just as he was going to press. In early 2003, after 61 issues averaging 32 pages each, Samuel shifted the whole operation online. He says he loves the immediacy of the internet, the ability to post straight away, the ease of search, and how he can go in and fix mistakes. As a reader, he likes print but since adopting the *tollroadsnews.com* URL he now feels at home

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on the web. This is despite the fact it is not a big money-spinner. He estimates his earnings from the site to be about half the amount a toll collector would make.

So, given it is not going to make him rich, why does he continue to be so motivated about his work? “I think it’s important stuff,” he replies. “Good mobility is part of the fabric of modern life and of a productive economy. We’ve gotta keep those roads moving. We know how to do it: we’ve got the technology to manage them much better, and we can make much better use of the roads we have through variable pricing, through better traveler information, through using Expedia/Orbitz-type trip-booking, Google maps and GPS in vehicles. Automated drive is on its way. I’m dismayed by calls to get people out of their cars. That’s a nostalgic, reactionary idea. Sure, there’s a place for walking, for bicycles – and transit makes sense for a proportion of people and a proportion of trips, but small proportions.

“Rubber-tired, motorized vehicles on pavement are bound to remain the

dominant transport mode in advanced countries – if they are to stay advanced. It’s the most convenient, most adaptable, most efficient mode and contrary to what the ‘enviros’ say, it is usually best for the environment. Most importantly, it is fiscally sustainable. It will continue to provide 80-90% of the personal and goods movement.

“It’s exciting. There are huge opportunities for doing smarter roads, but we also need renewed and new roads. There are places where we need to widen or elevate roads, or bury them underground. It is a reactionary and negative notion that we can’t or don’t need new roads – of course there should be. But we also need to make sure they’re paid for by the users as they use them with road-use fees. That’s another, more fancy term for tolls. There’s no justification for using taxes. Given modern technology, the gas tax is a very inefficient and stupid way of charging for road use.”

**IF SAMUEL WERE IN CHARGE...**

He’s therefore in favor of getting rid of the gas tax all together, then? “I think in the USA we’re moving in the direction of most countries where the gas tax goes into the general revenue. We’ve got huge crises in the budgets of states and cities and the federal government, too, and I think the fuel taxes could probably be much higher to pay down government debt. But they shouldn’t be linked to road construction – that should be paid for by road use charges of some kind.

“The technology now allows us to rationally collect tolls or road-user charges – the terms are interchangeable and it’s a matter of PR what you call them. I’d personally prefer it to be decentralized. I’m not a fan of the federal government

**ENEMY OF THE STATES?**

Essential reading for many, a few people, though, can’t stand Samuel’s exposés, which in the past have covered everything from fraud to turnpike execs being busted for drunk-driving. As a result, he has experienced some nasty ‘feedback’ over the years. “One turnpike executive who I’d written negative stuff about turned around to me in front of several of his colleagues at a conference and said, ‘Look Samuel, it wouldn’t be wise to keep badmouthing us: we know you’ve got a pacemaker. Our techies reckon they can set something up to switch off that contraption in your chest when you

drive under one of our gantries!’ There were great guffaws of laughter from everyone present, including me, but I thought afterward it was said with a certain underlying intent to menace!”

Couple such anecdotes with windows at his home being smashed and phone calls along the lines of ‘I know where you live’ and you’d understand if Samuel decided to pull the plug on his venture. Instead, he dismisses such events as being “Not bad for 15 years!”

Perhaps even more telling is that he’s never even had the threat of a lawsuit. Love him or hate him, his stories stand up.

**THINKERS AND INNOVATORS**

When prompted for examples of organizations or individuals in the toll sector that are making a positive difference, Samuel lists several names that immediately spring to mind: “The Interagency Group for E-ZPass was very innovative in the beginning and did a great job of providing interoperability between toll authorities in the early years,” he says. “The North Texas Tollway has done a good job in moving to AET. Wilbur Smith Associates deserves a lot of credit for the work they’ve done with toll lanes and dynamic pricing and if it

hadn’t have been for them, many of the successful projects we see today would never have got off the ground. I think they’ve also done some very bad work in traffic revenue studies and have reported as such – they probably don’t like me very much!”

Suggesting that they may like him more than HNTB does right now provokes a typically honest response: “I’ve been a harsh critic of HNTB in Maine, but I’ve got a lot of time for HNTB and think they’ve got some excellent people. Unfortunately, robust

journalism is by its nature about the screw-ups and the conflicts. People like to read that. It doesn’t mean they don’t do good work, too.”

Samuel also cites companies such as ACS, Raytheon and ETC as being impressive on the toll operations side. He also admires the achievements of the IBTTA in bringing the industry together, and believes the Alliance For Toll Interoperability that Jim Eden has set up will prove a good practical tool for overcoming the difficulties in implementing all-electronic tolling.

collecting road-use charges and then dispensing them – I think it needs to be done by enterprises. Roads are a utility, a service similar to many others, and financially they should be self-supporting.”

Unlike others in this sector, Samuel is not clamoring for an instant revolution in the way Americans pay for their mobility. He knows the political side too well to hope for anything truly revolutionary in his lifetime. “A virtue of the USA is that it has substantial semi-sovereign states (Texas alone is about the size of Spain), allowing experimentation and learning from experience.”

He predicts a gradual move to more widespread tolling via maintenance and construction projects. “Most new roads will be toll roads and a lot of the widening and rebuild projects will have a mix of toll lanes and free lanes. The free lanes will be channeled through traffic lights and will be slow and congested, so people who want

a quick ride will use the toll lanes in the middle. I think that’s the model we’ll move toward and there’s an increasing number of metropolitan areas moving in this direction. To rebuild a road under traffic is more difficult and usually more costly than the original road, but it has to be done and I think tolls will usually come each time a major highway is rebuilt in an urban area.”

**FINGER ON THE PULSE**

Samuel is naturally keeping a keen eye on developments in the field of 5.9GHZ, although he doesn’t feel tolling alone will support its widescale deployment: “Tolling will pick up on 5.9 if others implement it and I think it has a lot of potential for improving safety and providing driver information and other services. Today’s

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Dynamic pricing is a useful tool for toll agencies



Samuel predicts that more toll lanes will appear as existing highways get re-built or widened

US\$2.00 sticker tags are sufficient for tolling: you can write back to them; they’ve got a memory in them; and they can be given away. How can 5.9 compete with that in tolling? It can’t. A lot of people would disagree with that – Kapsch primarily – but also good independent consultants. I just don’t see the value of 5.9 for tolling alone.”

Whatever happens with 5.9 and other toll technologies in the future, Samuel is keen to continue reporting as long as his health permits. “I’m wearing out,” he admits. “I love doing what I do, but the energy level and memory are fading away – so far slowly, I think. I’m working on a gradual phase-out and I have a promising person taking over the business side of TOLLROADSnews first. I hope to live another 10 or 15 years, but who knows?” That’s Peter Samuel for you – honest and realistic to the end. And *tolltrans* for one, salutes him for that. ❌