

## Awareness of Public Good Behind Objection to Toll-Free Expressways

By Isao ADACHI



*Totsuka toll gate on Yokohama Shindo bypass of Route 1*

The House of Representatives elections last summer resulted in the birth of the Hatoyama coalition government, with the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) at the helm, in the first full-fledged change of power since the formation of the Liberal Democratic Party back in 1955. As the new government began to implement policies advocated in its election manifesto all at once, however, a rather peculiar phenomenon has occurred. Many Japanese taxpayers have turned out to oppose one of the major policies of the new government – the lifting of expressway tolls. It is a mystery to me that a wide spectrum of the populace opposes the lifting of a public utility charge. Then again, it seems to have something to do with public consciousness peculiar to the Japanese people.

Japanese expressways are all toll roads, with over 10,000 yen chargeable for an approximately 500 km drive from Tokyo to Osaka. The DPJ manifesto promised to do away with expressway tolls. The policy aims at facilitating the flow of people and freight, giving a boost to flagging local economies. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism plans to implement the toll-free policy step by step, seeking to earmark about 600 billion yen (about \$6.7 billion) in its budget requests for fiscal 2010 to compensate for decreased toll revenue, among other things. The requested sum amounts to a third of the 1,800 billion yen (about \$20 billion) annual income from all expressways across the country except for the Metropolitan Expressway in Tokyo and the Hanshin Expressway in Osaka, both of which are excluded from the toll-free plan.

Despite all that, a public opinion poll conducted by Jiji Press in mid-October 2009 showed that 50.3% answered “no” to the toll-free offer. Operators of expressway buses, ferries and railways,

expecting to see decreases in users, had voiced their concern and opposition against the move, naturally enough. But the general public was never expected to oppose it by such a wide margin as shown in the poll. The poll did not ask the respondents about the reasons for their opposition. But putting together personal views posted on the Internet, it is noticeable that one of the major reasons mentioned there is that people are critical of possible injections of taxpayer money that will become eventually necessary to maintain and construct expressways. Another reason is concern about possible increases in greenhouse gas emissions, primarily CO<sub>2</sub>.

As a direct result of expressways made free, as estimated by the land ministry, there will be a major increase in the number of people turning to cars for long-distance travel. With car, railway and airplane travel combined, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will increase by 33% from the current level. The ministry estimate does not take into account CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions resulting from less congested traffic on open roads. All in all, however, the policy runs counter to another policy advocated by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% from their 1990 level by 2020. It seems to me that the Japanese people, growing acutely responsive to environmental problems, show their awareness to set the public good of environmental protection above personal interests associated with toll-free expressways.

Statistics show that the Japanese public did not turn ecologists overnight. Take a change in the amount of garbage in Tokyo, for example. Tokyo's garbage decreased 10% in 10 years from 1995 to 2005. Meanwhile, recycled waste natural resources increased 4.9-fold, amounting to 11.5% of the total garbage. Behind the change is progress in the segregation by Japanese households of reusable waste from garbage.

Japanese households used to separate garbage in only two categories – combustible and noncombustible refuse – but they now separate them in even smaller groups such as batteries, light bulbs, bottles, cans, plastic bottles, other plastics, and metals, leaving them at a collection spot designated for each group. Garbage separation has become *modus operandi* in Japan as early as the late 1990s. But in Paris, where I lived from 1995 to 1999, the practice of garbage segregation was almost nonexistent, to my surprise.

The Japanese public may not be aware of their advanced awareness of the environment. But the way the toll-free expressway and garbage separation issues have unfolded gives a glimpse of Japanese public awareness and ecological inclination nurtured down the ages. Coexistence with nature is almost a religious value held in the depth of our heart. In that sense, the Japanese may raise their self-evaluation to a somewhat higher plane. **JS**

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