

Wayne Duvenage - From CEO to civil activist

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Chairperson of civil action group Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance (OUTA), Wayne Duvenage, told a recent Forum at GIBS: "Something very interesting is happening in our democracy."

"The public wants to fight and wants to support credible organisations," said Duvenage, who went from head of the largest private-owned fleet in SA as CEO of Avis to civil society activist. "The energy is there. We have to become the public's protector."

• Opposition to e-tolls

Before their launch in Gauteng by the South African National Roads Agency (SANRAL), e-tolls seemed a foregone conclusion. Instead, the public's hostility towards the system "became the first multi-class opposition against the ANC-led government through civil disobedience," Duvenage said.

OUTA, formed in March 2012 as a coalition of industry bodies opposing e-tolls, took issue with the tolling proposal because no public consultations had been held and there had been no meaningful consultation as per Constitution.

The threat of collusion in fee collection, the unsolicited bid process, the lack of an oversight committee of SANRAL, the existing fuel levy, as well as criminality and the threat of cloning license plates, all led OUTA to the conclusion that e-tolls were "irrational".

"Government was not interested in our rationale or arguments for opposing the system," Duvenage said. "SANRAL's attitude was 'It's our way or no highway for you.'"

• Non-compliance as civil disobedience

Duvenage explained that OUTA knows tolling has worked in other cities, but is opposed to the circumstances and manner in which the Gauteng e-tolls were implemented.

"The system requires the willing compliance of the public. If the money from tolling were used to improve integrated public transport, then people would have no issue with compliance," he said.

After OUTA filed papers in the North Gauteng High Court in March 2012 to halt tolling, international interest in the issue grew. "People were astonished that an African democracy could have groups opposing government policy. We couldn't have done it without social media and a free press," Duvenage explained.

The latest threat that motorists with unpaid e-toll accounts won't be able to renew their car licences will have unintended consequences, Duvenage said. "We plan to defend society in court as we believe it is unconstitutional."

• Big business involvement

Duvenage said he has been disappointed by the lack of support his organisation has received from big business, which has a fear of discussing controversial issues and potentially losing government contracts. "Business has a short-term view and no appetite to challenge the extractive taxes that have been put in place by government and the maladministration of funds. I'm surprised business is not standing up more."

- **OUTA's future role**

While the roll-out of e-tolls did take place, the non-payment and social opposition to the system has shown it is possible to capitulate an irrational policy with civil disobedience.

"We want to empower society with knowledge. We have the expertise, the passion and the people. There is a lot of good that we can do," Duvenage said.

- **Holding government to account**

Duvenage said his organisation would continue to "challenge the rationality of government decisions".

OUTA has been asked to assist in the larger civil activism space and use their influence to address other issues, such as the proposed nuclear power station deal. "We have to ask if the nuclear deal is in the best interest of South Africa, and whether all the alternatives have been considered," he said.

"We are at a turning point in South Africa. People are saying they are fed up. This fight is an economic imperative and we are holding politicians to account. We can't let it slide and we won't wait five years between elections."

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