

A fine mess: how diplomats get away without paying parking tickets

In New York, UN officials have racked up \$16m in unpaid parking tickets, while London is owed £100m in congestion charge fees. Is this a small price to pay so bigger issues get addressed - or shameless dishonesty from those with power?

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They are the scourge of the world's capitals. They flout the law and cost the authorities millions. Yet, like mice, noise and traffic jams, there seems to be little any city can do to protect itself from diplomats.

Immunity from prosecution under the Vienna Convention may be a vital part of international relations, but it does little good for the moral fibre of the individuals involved.

As of April in Canberra, Australia, diplomats representing various foreign powers owed the city more than A\$500,000 (£290,000) - mostly in unpaid parking fines. Tickets for running red lights and speeding were also common. Saudi Arabian diplomats alone owed nearly A\$140,000.

In New York, meanwhile, the total bill for parking tickets issued to UN diplomats was more than \$16m (£12.3m) as of March. Here Egypt was by far the worst offender, with a debt of nearly \$2m, although more than a third of that was the handiwork of just four cars. One of them - registration 001 THD - accrued \$109,165 in fines from 1,985 offences, many of which date back to the last century. Since then, with added penalties, the total has more than doubled. Who knows whether the malefactor is still in New York, or even still alive?

In London, diplomats failed to pay 4,858 parking fines in last year alone, creating £477,499 of debt (£161,328 of which was later waived or paid). The real story here, however, is the congestion charge. Nearly £100m of congestion charges fees remain unpaid since it was introduced in 2003 - more than 10% of it from the US embassy.

In part, things have reached this stage because of an argument over whether the charge is the price of a service or merely a tax for going in and out of London. Diplomats tend to argue the second, because it just so happens that they are also immune from tax as well as from prosecution. The US reached this view in 2005.

“They can’t be forced in court to pay a fine,” says a former British diplomat, who asked not to be named, “so there’s no legal redress against them. All that the government or the local authority

can do is to try to use persuasion, which, as we all know, doesn't work."

No, it doesn't. But there have been encouraging moments in cities around the world. In 2002, New York achieved a drastic reduction in unpaid fines by refusing to re-register any car with a large outstanding debt. (Since then, though, the fines have gradually crept back up.) The UK introduced a stricter policy in 1985 and in one year reduced the number of annual parking fines not paid by diplomats from 92,285 to 33,904.

Even so, such signs of improvement help to simply hide how normal the practice has become. "I suspect that in some cases the parking wardens don't bother," says the former diplomat. "In the past, wardens used to regularly put tickets on diplomatic vehicles, but there was never any belief they'd be paid."

If a diplomatic car is causing an obstruction it can at least be towed away, but drunk or dangerous drivers have to be freed once their credentials have been established. Sometimes this has terrible results. In Ottawa, Canada, in January 2001, a senior Russian diplomat, Andrei Knyazev, lost control of his car on the way back from an ice-fishing party and mounted the pavement, killing one person and seriously injuring another. Knyazev insisted he had not been drinking but would not allow himself to be breathalysed, and the Russian authorities refused to waive his immunity. It subsequently emerged that Knyazev had been stopped for driving drunk twice before, but released. In the end he was prosecuted in Russia and sentenced to four years in prison.

This is not an isolated example. A Georgian diplomat, Gueorgui Makharadze, killed a 16-year-old girl while driving drunk in Washington DC in 1997, and was later prosecuted after his government waived his immunity. In 2009, Silviu Ionescu, a Romanian chargé d'affaires, drove into three pedestrians in Singapore, killing one. He returned to Romania, where he was convicted of manslaughter, and subsequently died in prison. Officials from the US alone have been involved in driving incidents that killed or seriously injured people in foreign cities in 1998 (Vladivostok, Russia), 2004 (Bucharest, Romania), 2011 (Lahore, Pakistan), 2013 (Islamabad, Pakistan) and again in 2013 (Nairobi, Kenya).

To some extent, the lack of action over parking may be because host nations are playing realpolitik, saving real fury for these serious crimes. After all, a few hundred thousand dollars in lost fines is easy enough for any good-sized city to overlook. Even a few million is probably worth it to New York, when set against the wider social and economic benefits of hosting the UN. No doubt London would like to claim its £96m in lost congestion charges, but diplomats who refuse to pay are hardly putting the city through any meaningful danger or inconvenience.

One way or another, the international community seems resigned to do no more than grumble. And there is no shortage of diplomats, from countries of all levels of wealth, willing to take advantage. "It's quite simple," the diplomat says. "They know that they are in effect immune. It's convenient for them to park in these places. So they do it."

One study has suggested - rather bluntly - that the rate at which countries accrue unpaid parking fines in New York correlates well with that country's own rate of corruption. The study, conducted by the economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel in 2006, found no non-payments from officials in Japan, Canada, Turkey, Sweden or the UK, while the worst offenders were Kuwait, Egypt and Chad. (Kuwaiti diplomats managed a heroic average of 246 parking violations each over a five-year period.)

Interestingly, considering their high corruption scores with Transparency International, both Russia and China had peculiarly honest diplomats. Equally interestingly, the study found better behaviour among diplomats from countries considered friendly with the US; and diplomats in general became more honest, briefly, after the 9/11 attacks.

It's almost as if people behave better when, you know, they try.

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