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## Economic folly or commercial reality?

With the unsurprising news that the chancellor yet again failed to cut fuel duty last month, operators must now content themselves with two thoughts. Fuel is still cheap, currently nudging pre-2009 prices. And, well, the fuel tax freeze continues.

Those will doubtless come as cold comfort to many – particularly to the FTA and RHA. Ahead of the Autumn Statement, both were parading a report by the Centre for Economic and Business Research that attributes £11.6 billion of UK activity to this year's low fuel prices. It also estimates that ending the fuel duty escalator increased UK tax takings by £1.3 billion – in line with HM Treasury's own modelling.

Ergo, if the goal is stimulating recovery, it is "economic folly", as the FTA put it, to sustain fuel duty at the current level. Clearly, however, George Osborne was unmoved. Or maybe too intimidated by the growing anti-diesel lobby. Either way, with fuel tax still 57.95p per litre (23p in Luxembourg), UK hauliers must continue to pay by far the most in the EU for what is invariably one of their greatest cost lines.

Hardly a level playing field across borderless Europe. And hardly a tribute to a government's supposed commitment to transport.

That said, if the Greater London Assembly's call to ban HGVs in peak periods gains traction, operators may soon have other worries. Signing up to truck safety – through CLOCS, FORS and the Safer Lorry Scheme – is one thing. Restricting movements across the capital is quite another. Costs would clearly rise. But, given the driver shortage, the move might well stretch capacity way beyond breaking point.

Against this background, the promotion of Ian Chisholm to managing director of SOE (Society of Operations Engineers – the home of IRTE) is a welcome development. Now, more than ever, IRTE needs a steady hand capable of conveying the commercial, as well as the engineering, realities of transport to the powers that be.

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