

All we want for Christmas is some common sense

As we go to press, with transport operators looking to the Chancellor for an early Christmas present – swift cancellation of the fuel duty increase planned for New Year's Day – our industry is hoping that 2013 will see the Coalition taking rather more notice of a sector recklessly being driven towards crisis point.

The issues are clear. Last month's Commercial Vehicle Forum, held at the IMechE in London, laid them bare, with speaker after speaker lamenting soaring costs, unsustainable margins, crushing congestion, inflexible regulation and inadequate financial support for anything like the forthcoming mandated moves to cleaner, more efficient and safer vehicles.

Addressing the conference, Rob Ffello MP, chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Freight Transport, urged the industry to make its voice heard, and force the Coalition to understand its scale and significance. The numbers, he reminded delegates, are impressive: a £24 billion sector employing two million people and moving £100 billion worth of goods, covering 140 billion tonne-miles annually, with some 400,000 trucks.

And yet to date – aside from late initiatives, such as the 10-year longer artics trial and initial support for low carbon vehicle R&D – there is little enough talk and even less action. And in these times of austerity, we probably can't expect a great deal more anytime soon.

So, as ever, it's down to us to look after ourselves. Speaking at the same conference, Des Evans, outspoken CEO of MAN Truck & Bus, drew attention to initiatives and technologies already proven to pay for themselves – such as driver training, supported by telematics. He also urged operators to ensure that vehicles are operating as efficiently as possible, not least by insisting that maintenance be carried out by irtec licensed technicians and that service centres meet the IRTE's new Workshop Accreditation standards.

In the end, it's all about bearing down on one of the few major costs we can influence: fuel usage. So we might add, for example: installing aerodynamic packages wherever possible; investigating opportunities to reduce vehicle weight; reviewing tyre specification and maintenance; and examining the potential for long-term savings from alternative and multi-fuel engined trucks.

But, to go further, our industry does need government intervention. Without that, yes, we can make progress, but, no, we can't realise the big ones, so eloquently outlined by Professor David Cebon, director of CVDC (the Cambridge Vehicle Dynamics Consortium), at the CV Forum. Paraphrasing: radical moves to slash congestion, such as traffic management and reconsidering night-time curfews (potential 50% fuel saving); cutting back on rigids for urban deliveries, in favour of efficient artics, by investing in manoeuvrability systems (40% savings); and embracing much longer vehicles, such as Dick Denby's 25.25m combination (another 20%). See page 5.

Ffello is urging us to make his all-party group aware of the wish list. So let him know what you want for Christmas and the New Year. Certainly the above. But what about a new scrappage scheme, paid for by the £7 billion raised from fuel duty? How about a Driver CPC qualification that makes some sense? Write to him in Stoke on Trent. Do it now. Season's greetings.



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