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President: Gerry Fleming IEng CEnv
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Executive Director: Ian Chisholm BA
IEng FSOE FIRTE FCILT MCMi MIMi

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Registered Office: 22 Greencoat
Place, London SW1P 1PR
Tel: 020 7630 1111
Fax: 020 7630 6677
Email: soe@soe.org.uk
www.soe.org.uk

Editor: Brian Tingham BSc CEng
MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE
Email: btingham@findlay.co.uk

Contributing Editors: Brian
Weatherley, John Challen, John
Kendall, Ian Norwell, Laura Cork, Steve
Banner, Toby Clark

Art Editors: Martin Cherry, Neil Young
Illustrations: Phil Holmes
Production Manager: Nicki McKenna
Email: nmckenna@findlay.co.uk

Advertisement Manager: Craig Molloy
Email: cmolloy@findlay.co.uk
Tel: 01322 221144

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Time to incentivise NOx reduction technologies

With the RHA (Road Haulage Association) calling for government to fund vocational drivers' licences or face a massive shortfall, while campaign group FairFuel UK again presses for a 3p per litre fuel duty reduction, the chancellor is caught between a rock and a hard place. With his Autumn Statement imminent (as we go to press), there will be countless comparable demands from across the length and breadth of industry, commerce and the public sector.

Nevertheless, failure to do something about the former would self-evidently damage the UK's burgeoning, but yet fragile, recovery. And, with the RHA claiming 45,000 vacancies right now, plus 35,000 drivers due to retire in the next year and only 17,000 joining up, this is one situation that clearly needs urgent attention. Meanwhile, on fuel duty, back in June the Treasury finally conceded that a reduction would indeed stimulate the economy. So, given the ongoing austerity pressures, on both the public purse and the electorate at large, it's hard to conceive that George Osborne might pass up such an easy opportunity – unless, of course, he feels moved to bow to the green lobby.

Talking of which, here's another conundrum. In a twist to the European Commission's demand, earlier this year, that the UK respond to its way-past deadline to reduce NOx in towns and cities, the European Court of Justice last month ruled that judges must now force ministers' hands. Commentators are agreed that, short of implementing a country-wide programme of low and ultra-low emission zones (LEZ/ULEZ), whichever government comes to power next May will have to order a major retrofit of emissions-busting technology for older truck and bus engines.

Why? Because, quite simply, in the freight sector, the take-up of low-NOx Euro 6 engined trucks and dual-fuel (methane and diesel) conversions on existing Euro 5 and/or new Euro 6 trucks just isn't going to make a big enough difference within the timeframe. Similarly, despite the mass movement to diesel-electric hybrid (and latterly some electric and gas) buses making a huge contribution to improving air quality in our major towns and cities, retiring the rump of older PSVs (public service vehicles) just doesn't make economic sense.

Certainly, installing NOx removal equipment, such as Eminox's SCRT (combining its continuously regenerating trap and selective catalytic reduction technologies), is not without encouraging precedent. This summer, TfL (Transport for London) completed its high-profile £10 million retrofit project, bringing more than 1,000 older buses up to at least Euro 4 on NOx and particulates. At the time, TfL director of buses Mike Weston confirmed it had proved to be by far the quickest and most cost-effective way to significantly reduce NOx emissions.

All well and good, but how many operators, large or small, freight or PSV, have the necessary spare cash floating around? Yes, that project and others like it have proved effective and far cheaper than buying new vehicles, but mandating retrofits through whatever measure – including LEZs – just isn't realistic. So, Mr Osborne, we say you need to propose yet another deal in your Autumn Statement: financial support and incentives to clean up transport's and this country's act.

Season's greetings to you all, and a happy and prosperous New Year.



Brian Tingham BSc CEng MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE