

BUS LANES THE NEXT ASSAULT... by John Kennedy

It didn't take long for the private hire trade to hoodwink many in authority into thinking they are the solution to the capital's transport needs. I'm also saddened to say that some within the taxi trade have taken it upon themselves to partner or even set up mini-cab businesses in direct competition with you and me. But now the spectre of crowded bus lanes looms and we within the taxi trade must ensure that our way of working is not impeded nor damaged further by a private hire trade that seeks to one day replace the world's finest taxi trade with an overworked underpaid second class service that the taxi user neither seeks nor desires.

Now the question of access to road space needs to be answered and many within the private hire trade (mini-cabs) seek access to the bus lane network within the capital. This may on the face of it seem a reasonable request until you examine the number of mini-cabs involved (over 55,000 mini-cabs licensed in London). There are now too many mini-cabs operating within the capital and access to the bus lane network would increase costs

of taxi-cab journeys and delay London bus/taxi-cab movement. You should note even in a global recession the owners of many of the capitals mini-cab companies still recruit new drivers even though they do not have the work available for the existing driver base. The mini-cab trade was granted legitimacy by way of an Act of Parliament; we should always remember what they were licensed to do and that was pre-booked work only. This element of pre-booking allows the driver to plan his/her journey and take into account the restrictions that are placed on all road users depending on the time of day/night one is travelling. Mini-cabs do not need nor require access to bus lanes.

Due to the lack of oversight from many within the licensing authority it is possible for a member of the public to licence his/her motor vehicle as a mini-cab and display the front and rear discs and then become exempt from payment of the congestion charge. If access was granted to mini-cabs to travel along bus lanes we would see further abuse of an already lax licensing regime by many road

users. We must also remember private hire is just that a private hiring, it is not too dissimilar to hiring a car yourself except it comes with a driver and is for a much shorter period. Now I haven't heard of the car rental firms seeking access to bus lanes for customers who rent cars from them.

But why are taxi-cabs allowed in bus lanes I hear the anti taxi lobby cry, well taxi-cabs pick up & set down the vast majority of their work from the kerbside/carriageway, the journey is metered and this would be adversely affected by allowing such a large group of cars access to bus lanes, we are wheelchair accessible and a legitimate part of the public transport network who were here long before the bus or any other mode of transport & finally we must always remember that a taxi-cab "ply's for hire" a mini-cab does not. It really is time for those in Government to send the mini-cab trade a timely reminder of the role they play within the transport network which is a pre booked and therefore pre planned, mini-cabs do not and should not ply for hire and this factor alone should ensure they are not given



access to a lane that would grind to halt due to the uncontrolled growth in their numbers.

John Kennedy is the founder of Ltcrp and a member of the RMT London taxi branch.

BAD PRESS... BY THOMAS THE TAXI

Every time someone asks me "Have you seen the article in the..." I wince. We have come in for some bad press of late and its not going to get any easier in the near future. Drivers who have given many years of service to help make this "The best taxi service in the world" are saddened and it seems there is no place left for us to fall, the trade is at an unprecedented, all time low.

We have to realise that we have NO friends in high places, no one is stepping up to the plate to defend us and we are being constantly bombarded with lies myths and rumours, in the press and on the radio. Our trade doesn't have the press officers and PR Companies that are being employed by the opposition to spread these false rumours, phone up radio stations with malicious vindictive comments and spread lies about using comment boxes in on-line press articles.

MYTHS AND RUMOURS

In the press and on the radio chat shows, we come up against our biggest problem. It doesn't matter what is true, it is what people believe to be true that is important. In the same way that the passenger is always right, the shortest way is his/her shortest way and not the driver's route. We have to start informing the public that the lies they hear and read on a daily basis are just that, lies.

Personally, I have had to stop listening to radio presenters who constantly make references to our trade being too expensive, failing to go south, looking like tramps and driving "dustbins on wheels". The presenters are highly skilled in the art of making people look small and demeaning. Almost every time a driver phones in, they are treated a way that makes them look quite stupid and it damages the trade. We need a team of drivers that speak well and are intelligent enough to take these people on. A team that has the knowledge to combat this type of media assault.

We have to get across to the media certain points about the trade.

ARE OUR VEHICLES ARE DIRTY AND POLLUTING?

We have little or no control over what vehicle we drive, a choice of just two very expensive brand names. Most of the "dustbins" out there are rentals from greedy proprietors trying to squeeze every last penny out of a dying FX4. It is up to the drivers to refuse to drive these vehicles, pay a bit more and get a comfortable ride. Considering the hours we spend in a vehicle, you know it makes perfect sense.

ARE WE ARE TOO EXPENSIVE?

We have no control over the meter which is set by TfL. We

are not expensive when our capacity for passengers is taking into account and our fare compared with public transport. Five passengers travelling from Selfridges to Harrods is far cheaper in a cab than on the tube. Five passengers from Paddington to Heathrow, cheaper by cab than the Heathrow Express. We are constantly told in the press and on the radio we are expensive from the Airport, but this is not the case. Just look at Addison Lee's website. They charge a fixed booking price of £87.50 to Mayfair, our price on the meter, under £70. One of our biggest enemies is the London Chamber of Commerce, who are always banging on about the price of a cab ride, they just haven't got a clue, their figures are based on myths and rumours with no actual research. These are the very people who couldn't see the credit crunch coming.

DO WE REALLY NOT GO SOUTH OF THE RIVER?

30-40% of our work goes south. If we turned it down we just wouldn't survive financially. Our meter now makes these journeys profitable and has completely turned around the official complaints that used to haunt this trade.

ARE OUR DRIVERS SCRUFFY, ARROGANT AND BELLIGERENT?

Our image has however been damaged by drivers who insist on wearing shorts, vests and flip flop type sandals, it's not a pretty sight. But then again, the media must not be allowed to put us all in the same basket. There are some very smart taxi drivers out there. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of Addison Lee's book, Primark suits £20, shirts £3, and plastic shoes £5. In fact we could all look like minicab drivers for a grand total of the price of a pair of M&S shorts. Our driver base consists of people from a complete cross section of society, ranging from ex-dustmen to solicitors, policemen and in one case a magistrate. Our trade made up by many different individuals and should not be stereotyped by the media.

They used to describe minicab drivers as rapists and robbers, now they're doing this, (Extract from the Independent). This is a blow beneath the belt, as the recent case of John Warboys was a one off. We expected this case would be used against us are in some way we have got off quite lightly. The Private Hire fraternity however (given the figures issued by TfL themselves), manage to suppress the fact that the rate of serious sexual assaults and rapes carried out by licensed private hire drivers is still running at approximately 6-8 every month, a figure that has not gone down with the implementation of the satellite office and the Safer Travel at Night scheme.

Post taken from a trade forum

Last Friday night a girl was rescued from a tout after the

terrified female passenger phoned the police. He had driven her to a place, just off York Way near the quarry. She had the presence of mind to dial 999, when she knew something was amiss. Turned out he was wanted on warrant for sex offences and will probably be deported when this has been dealt with! Articles like this pop up all over the forums and trade press but are rarely published by the national press. This actual posting came from a serving police officer who also drives a London taxi part time.

UNITY, WILL IT EVER HAPPEN?

To make matters worse, we now have in-fighting amongst ourselves, to a point where I dread logging on to the cab trade forums. Worried Associations and Unions, whose leaders have for so long led us very badly, are now panicking because they are haemorrhaging members in a way never seen before. With the latest goings on at Heathrow, we now see the infighting starting to escalate. Victories are being claimed that have not materialised and there is bad feelings between trade reps that have been close friends for years. Why can't these people work together when it comes to trade issues?

When on the terminal dealing with difficult passengers, they stand solidly back to back. But when it comes to their associations or union, civil war breaks out. They act like football supporters, disregarding any view that conflicts with theirs.

While this trade remains so disjointed the competition will walk all over us. If the combined allied armies of 1945 were in the same state as the licensed taxi trade, D-day would never have happened. We have only just seen the start of Addison Lees campaign, according to my source in the private hire industry, there's more to come. With massive investment coming from America, they now have an eye on all the major rail termini, plus City Airport. The really bad news is TfL want to give them these ranks and we have to face facts, we have no friends in that department.

We have had our Dunkirk.

The time has come, for our once great trade to join together in a united front, for an almighty assault on our enemies. There are people in high places, left over parasites from a previous administration that are hell bent on the complete and utter destruction of our trade. There is only two ways left for this trade, "The Best Taxi Service in the World". Either we go forward as a united force together, or we go down the toilet with Addis on Loo pulling the chain.

If we stand United, we will never, never, never be defeated...