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AGE LIMITS ON TAXIS

Dear Editor

My personal view is that we should not be arguing about 10, 12 or 15 years age limit on cabs. That is just what TfL/PCO - Transport for London Board and the Mayors Office want us to do.

Once the trade start to debate the economics of the number of years they have already conceded the principal that a taxi is plated until it is no longer economically viable to carry on plating it. This time of course will vary immensely from vehicle to vehicle depending on many variables, i.e. from the amount of time the vehicle driven each day, the driving style, and whether driver/owner is diligent with regards to servicing and repairs. By trying to make a case for the maximum number of years, the trade will have given away their best card and received absolutely nothing in return.

Now I'm not saying we should do nothing, after all, like every driver out there I work in the worse place in London for traffic pollution, which is in the middle of the road about 4 ft off the road surface. I also accept that taxis do contribute to this pollution. Although I do have reservations about how much of the total pollution we are responsible for.

The fact that we do have vehicles that consume a great deal of diesel is not really down to us. We use what vehicles PCO/TfL licence as taxis. Now I'm not saying I'm against the purpose built taxi as I do feel it is a very strong image and marketing tool. Whatever else you say about them, they do the job. They are very safe, robust, and generally very reliable (apologies to TX11 owners) and they do the job day in day out.

Several years ago we had a botched attempt by Livingstone to clean up the trade, but a failure by those in power to understand the taxi trade, not helped by the appalling reputation of the TX11 and its many documented problems meant that rather than purchase new vehicles as was hoped by the 'administration' drivers wanted to stick with their trusted Nissan engines and fitted various Heath-Robinson contraptions to their cabs to keep them on the road. Musers purchased these devices in the thousands, which enabled the fleets to fit these contraptions to their fleets at virtually no cost to themselves thereby keeping even much older vehicles on the fleet. I believe Livingstone and his advisers thought that owners would see the cost of the retro fitting as an inducement to purchase new cabs, but as mentioned earlier the reliability problems with what was available caused many drivers/owners to hold back on purchasing new and once they had paid for conversions they wanted their monies worth. If the Mayor really wants to help and encourage the trade, then he is going to have to start using the carrot instead of the stick. If the powers that be really do want to remove old cabs then the way to encourage drivers to change to a new vehicle is to offer them a deal similar to the recent scrappage deal that the car buying public were encouraged to participate in, but it would have to be a significant amount of money to attract drivers to change their cabs.

TfL need to offer the owner something like a £5,000 subsidy against a 10 year-old cab towards a new vehicle. Owners might not wish to change cabs for a variety of reasons. Getting near or perhaps past the retirement age these drivers tend to do very few hours and would not want to take on the large repayments of a new cab, but with £5,000 scrappage it might be a different proposition. This scrappage amount could be reduced to £4,000 at 11 years and again by £1,000 pa until after 15 years there is nothing left for them in the scrappage pot. Now I have no doubt they (TfL and the Mayor) will claim they cannot afford the money, but they always seem to find plenty to pay for other schemes like cycle routes, which often cause problems to traffic flow and increase pollution (which of course they then blame on us).

Of course they can try to bring in legislation but that has been tried before and found to be illegal as it was imposing retrospective standards on vehicles. I'm sure they will try to find a way around this but if I was them I would not put any trust in our parliamentary brains to do this. After all only last month we all saw the disgraceful pictures of four policemen carrying Brian Haws the peace protester away from his tent in Parliament Square where he has resided since 2001. The sight of his protest so angered 'President Blair' that he got Parliament to form and pass a Bill to remove Mr Haws. Now I don't know what percentage of the House have legal qualifications, but I'm sure it's quite high and I'm equally sure that most of them would have been describe in sycophantic press circles as the finest minds in the profession before they took to "serving the country", but this collection of finest legal minds were beaten by Mr Haws and the simple fact that it is extremely hard to make laws retrospective.

By trying to force the trade into a compulsory age limit all that will be achieved is a strengthening of the trade's resistance to this. There is a way it could be achieved over a period of time and that is to limit the life of the vehicle from new when granting its very first plate but this would take ten years to start working and there would be a big downside to this. Going on the knowledge of the failed Livingstone, Heath Robinson, experience to do this would actually prolong the life of the taxis that were first registered before the 10 year life was brought in, as drivers kept them on the road long passed their best. I know it would go against the grain to provide subsidies to the taxi trade as after all we have always paid the price ourselves in the past for so called vehicle enhancements such as wheel chair accessible cabs, etc, but if by giving us the above £5,000 sliding down subsidy the Mayor can then meet the European Clean Air Directives he might actually find himself in a positive financial position. He might also find the trade a bit more cooperative on other matters. Whatever the Mayor decides the one thing the taxi trade cannot afford to do is concede life terms for cabs without getting some major concessions.

Eddie Lambert

