

Introductory address

by John Dickson-Simpson, editor "Transport Engineer"

### OPERATING ENGINEERS' INPUT ON LAW-FORMATION

Much of this conference will be devoted to views on legislation, particularly weights and dimensions. Comparing views has its value, but a more general purpose of legislation does, I think, have to be borne in mind. That is to protect the weak against the strong - no unreasonable nuisance to one's neighbour and no threatening of his safety. There is an inclination for legislators to lose sight of this broad objective in an anxiety to enshrine intricate detail in laws subsequently hard to amend.

Moreover, they are not always interpretations of practical requirements. They have been influenced by cultural backgrounds as well.

Europe believes in the sanctity of academics. The awe goes back a long way: to the Greeks. European government rides on that tradition. Consequently the fountains of knowledge, the institutions and the manufacturers, carry sway.

The younger countries do not have that reverence. Those who use the vehicles have more influence on their legislative framework and there is a healthier suspicion of vested interests. This seems evident in New Zealand, for example, where the operating engineers are acknowledged in legislative discussions. In Europe they are tolerated, rarely heard. They have no representation on technical committees preparing rules, and the subsequent observation of those rules is often privy to the authorities and to those having to abide by them. Perhaps it is not surprising, in view of British government's infamous love of secrecy. It does not, however, best assist the cause of public protection, which is the law's purpose.

In the U.K., trucks and buses have to pass a rigorous safety and environmental test every year. The manufacturers have to build to European standards of construction and performance stipulated in type approval directives. But documentary proof of meeting those standards is kept secret. So although the operators know what performance targets their vehicles have to meet, they do not know how close to the limits their vehicles were in the first place.

As it was manufacturers who dominated the committees forming the standards, the aims are not as ambitious as those of operating engineers would have been - or as practical. The manufacturers have managed to devise an international standard for measuring engine power. They have contrived to call it net power, but it is really gross. The

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real net power available to drive the vehicle can be kept secret.

A committee dominated by makers of spray-suppressant materials drew up a British standard for mudguarding incorporating those materials, without doing any on-vehicle performance tests. That did not stop the standard's becoming law, and the consequent suppression of spray is disappointing compared with what it could have been.

Automatic recording of driving time is done by tachographs with fifty-year old technology preserved in the aspic of European bureaucracy.

At the other extreme, the latest European directive being prepared under the guiding hand of manufacturers will force the fitment of the most complicated form of electronic prevention of braking-skids; it will double the costs for a small gain in effectiveness.

The Institute of Road Transport Engineers has, in preserving its Commonwealth roots, not been able to disturb this European secretive society for the protection of manufacturing business. It has, however, been able to take the initiative in matters closer to the operational scene. Fittingly, these initiatives reflect an international rather than a European context.

Co-operation with the Maintenance Council of the American Trucking Association has created a universal numerical coding of vehicle types, parts and repairs. That is the V.M.R.S. (vehicle maintenance reporting standards) system. It fits well with computer aided management. The I.R.T.E. has added buses, special vehicles and plant to the codes. The great ultimate facility of V.M.R.S. will be to enable transport engineers to compare experiences of reliability and costs either with each other or with data-bank averages - whatever the country and irrespective of language.

An international code of practice has been worked out for the safe coupling of tractors to semi-trailers. The situation it tackles is European rather than worldwide in its international sense, but the I.R.T.E.'s articulated coupling code is bound to have wider use as weights and dimensions become more closely aligned.

Concerned at an unacceptable incidence of unpredictable wheel-fixing failures, even where maintenance was exemplary, the I.R.T.E. launched a research programme to find the causes and the answers. The programme is not yet finished. It is entering the answers phase, though. Funding this research from voluntary contributions in Britain was a triumph in the teeth of diplomatic opposition from the

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manufacturers and the Government's Department of Transport. As problems with wheel fixings are international, the I.R.T.E. will hopefully be able to bring a sounder sense of security to an assembly somewhat fundamental to safety.

The Institute has also stirred the pot of discontent with diesel-fuel quality. This began as a campaign to get better cold-flow performance in Britain, but, pushed along by I.R.T.E. research the issue has lately broadened into ignition quality, low temperature vaporisation and seasonal variations. Again, as oil sourcing is becoming more cross-fertilised on a world scale, the work should be of international benefit. Maybe the I.R.T.E. and its multinational branches should transcend the bickering by publishing its own standards for fuel quality.

Countries have ever closer communication, so there is a trend to rationalisation of transport law. The I.R.T.E. has the elements of a cohesiveness that could shape legislation into practical sense, initiate more research and raise the standards of commercial-vehicle engineering - in which there remains much to do.