

Getting Our Wires Straightened Out

THE DOWNING STREET PETITION

A few weeks back I got a call from Steve Wright. 'Guess what?' says Steve, sounding a little more excited than his usual matter-of-fact professional approach. 'An operator called Les Shaw from Alpha Cars in Ashted has managed to raise an email petition on the Prime Minister's Downing Street website calling for private hire access to bus lanes!'

Despite the thousands of petitions on there, it's not easy to get an application approved, and the fact that a small operator got through on bus lanes was music to our ears. We agreed to encourage everyone we knew, and their friends and families - even their customers, who would benefit most of all - to get online and register their support.

I was equally thrilled. Les Shaw's action represents a golden opportunity to put the lid on everything we've been working towards for so long. It's free of charge and goes straight to the seat of power in this country.

The recent petition against the Government's road charging plans had attracted over 2 million responses. Surely, with 2300 private hire companies (plus staff) and 40,000 drivers, in London alone we could expect a good follow through on this one?

Unfortunately, to date, the uptake has been poor to say the least - with just a few hundred at the time of writing. It's quite clear that everyone in and around this industry are desperate to get PHV's into bus lanes; and with the internet being the most public of domains, we are now in serious danger of being seen as all talk and no action. Apathy can be extremely costly.

I know the LPHCA will be heading the call to get as many names online as possible. For my part, I beg you, all of you, please get everyone you know onto the Downing Street website (link below) as soon as possible and register your support for bus lane access. It's the one thing neither Steve, I, nor anyone else can do for you.

Downing Street Petition link:
<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/pchbuslanes/>

Without the selfless diligence of the trade reps and people like yourselves willing to pay their dues and pursue our common interests, where would we be?

No licensing and therefore no congestion charge exemptions - and certainly no chance of relief on red routes and local controlled parking zones (CPZs), not to mention access into bus lanes.

It doesn't end there. Even amongst those of us who are willing to get involved there is a tendency, at times, to shoot ourselves in the foot. It seems we in this industry are blighted with suspicious minds when it comes to motivation.

For years now, as often as not, whenever we approach people about getting together to support one thing or another, the first thing that registers in their eyes is, ...so *what's in it for you?!* It doesn't help, how could it? It just ends up stifling efforts made by others on our behalf.

David Beck,
Campaign Co-ordinator



Here's a for instance. During the run up to last November's Rally at Red Lion Square, the DOOR-to-DOOR Campaign team made a whistle stop tour of London boroughs in an attempt to recruit local operator support for the cause. Whilst largely successful, it would be true to say we met a significant amount of resistance from people who were convinced D2D was in conflict with the LPHCA.

Despite Steve Wright's subsequent backing for the Campaign, and the rousing speech he delivered at the November Rally itself, it would be equally true to say relations between Campaign and some LPHCA supporters have been frosty to say the least.

Without going into too much unnecessary detail, Campaigners believe the LPHCA could have been quicker off the mark on an issue that affected the incomes and faith in the industry of so many drivers, particularly in inner-London districts.

Clearly some regarded D2D as a militant faction, hell bent on dividing the industry. Worse still, there are some who saw D2D as some sort of David Beck versus Steve Wright private hire political leadership contest. The notion is preposterous; for those who missed it all, I'll tell you why.

Steve and I have worked together on the Private Hire Board and various committees of the PCO and TfL for some years now, representing what we and our colleagues on the Board jointly considered being in the best interests of all in the private hire industry in London.

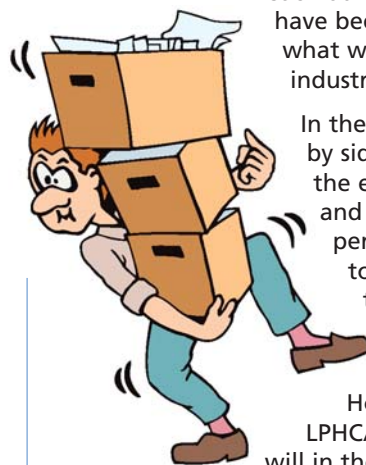
PCO negotiators will tell you that the private hire representatives on the PHB have always been a much tighter unit than those on the taxi side. We might not always agree with each other privately, but nor do we squabble amongst

each other publicly. Consequently we have been that much more effective in what we seek to achieve for this industry.

In the time we have been working side by side, I have witnessed at first hand the enormity of Steve Wright's ability and commitment, both publicly and personally. I think it is pretty clear to everyone that Steve is a one-off talent; an irreplaceable asset to our trade, and one who must be valued and retained at all costs.

However, Steve is one man and the LPHCA one entity, and with the best will in the world he can't be expected to attend and resolve every issue that rises up before us.

The LPHCA's priority is to represent its members, both collectively and individually, and certain issues occasionally emerge through other channels.



The Need to Protect our Drivers

It's a well known fact that the LPHCA was involved on other fronts at the time, and Steve himself had been caught up in other matters when, back in March 2006, a group of drivers stood up at a Lambeth Minicab Forum meeting and vociferously demanded action against the sharp increase in the numbers of tickets they were getting.

Others had realised the threat this posed to driver and client interest and got stuck in. The DOOR-to-DOOR Campaign was set up for the sole purpose of protecting licensed private hire drivers.

It raised the ante against the injustices involved and called for exemptions on red routes and in CPZs; *and it will continue to do so until we have full clearance to provide the dedicated door-to-door services that are our stock in trade.*

Whilst all this was going on the LPHCA focused on submitting vital, and very much related, responses to both the DfT and ALC public consultations on parking.

In so doing, they highlighted the authorities' failure to include private hire in local Unitary Development Plans which largely exposes the neglect for PHV services in CPZs.

Others should have done likewise to add weight. I'm afraid I failed miserably on this one: co-ordinating D2D activities left me without a moments' time to even study the documents and that's my point.

There's so much going that poses a threat to us of one kind or another at any one time, you'd need a school of educated octopuses to get a hand on each potential issue.

It wouldn't be so bad if missing something one year could be caught up with in the next - but as often as not, a hidden implication for private hire in an otherwise unrelated parliamentary bill or local regulation and that's our lot.

Without essential intervention, drivers and/or operators would end up having to put up with often unnecessary and/or expensive nonsense year in year out. We cannot afford to miss a trick.

In my view, regardless of which trade association or action group we belong to, this industry deserves a fuller, better co-ordinated overall effort to effectively meet all the challenges we are confronted with - and without getting in each other's way, or missing something that ultimately affects us all.

The Private Hire Board

A re-structured Private Hire Board, which already accommodates all organisations as an umbrella body and is government recognised, has been put forward by many as the obvious solution.

There is a window of opportunity between now and the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in which we can cover a great deal of ground towards meeting our potential as an efficient public transport service provider.

To meet our needs entirely, and have the instant respect of, and due consideration from, all levels of government (including European) and the media, the PHB needs to have a national platform.

We also need sufficient knowledgeable, willing and able workers, preferably both voluntary and paid, to support the Board and the associations and get things moving behind the scenes at every turn.

Private Hire Ball at Café Royal

It would need to amass funding from a variety of sources: membership, sponsors, products and various initiatives such as George Walker's forthcoming Private Hire Ball at Café Royal on Saturday 2nd June. I understand that there are also funding possibilities via company tax concessions.

If the PHB solution turns out to satisfy the needs of the disaffected and non-aligned, as well as the associations and the unions, I can only give it my full support. I know Steve Wright feels the same way, and I hope you do to.

Steve has to be part of this effort; as must current Private Hire Board members including Eddie Townson, John Griffin, Bill Edwards, George Walker, Diana Kendall and Terry Flanagan.

Beyond the usual suspects, the PHB must also engage the enthusiasm of some of the more active components behind DOOR-to-DOOR, people like Ian Ferguson, Fred Keen, Peter Waterhouse, Joe Polley, Mabsy Latiff, Luci Browne, Patrick Raeburn, Steve Hackworth, Richard Fellini, Victor Hume, Tony Marcantuono, Don Glave and Deon Beck and so on.

Our service suppliers such as the dedicated software, replacement vehicle, insurance and other companies must also have greater involvement beyond simply forking out *ad nauseam*.

Along with current issues such as the case for further signage on vehicles, SGS efficiency and consistency, PCO enforcement practises, bus lane access and Olympics and Paralympic games considerations, we have much to do and little time to do it in - and we all, including most of our drivers have businesses to run. It's a big ask - with huge benefits for all if we get it right.

The National Picture

Pat Murtagh an Operator from Birmingham believes the needs of the private hire trade won't be taken into account until our drivers are formally trained. As things stand that can be nothing more than a pipedream.

Pat knows all about pipedreams, she's been an operator since licensing was introduced back in 1976 and is still waiting for the day private hire is automatically included in any new initiative without the need for another battle to promote commonsense.

As I understand it there are moves afoot to bring about a more co-ordinated, national effort. Both the Private Hire Board and the LPHCA appear to be reviewing the situation and setting their stalls out accordingly.

I confess I am still unsure quite how things will pan out but I'm increasingly confident that whatever the outcome it will be of huge benefit to the needs of this industry going forward.

If that is the case then my agenda and that of a number of my colleagues will have been satisfactorily addressed. The people who have put their weight behind the DOOR-to-DOOR Justice Campaign have been thanked for their contributions to date.

A much bigger thank you to us, and to the Private Hire Board for tying up the loose ends, will be more fully expressed sometime this summer when our drivers will finally be freed from penalty for picking-up and setting-down our legitimate passengers on red routes.

David Beck, Door to Door, Campaign Co-ordinator