

THE BIG DEBATE 2

Dear Ian and Paddy,

Thank you for taking the time to write and state your position, which I am delighted to reprint verbatim, as offered.

That is where the delight begins and ends though.

As lobbyists I would expect you to be able to read and understand plain English, and I am disappointed that you chose to mislead readers with the use of emotive language in an opening statement that misrepresents the editorial that you are responding to ... which I reprinted alongside.

According to the OED, to lambast is to 'criticize harshly'. I made one reference to MAG, and that was at the end of the editorial as a potential lobbying group to join, for those who wanted to become more politically involved. And as for 'scaremongering': where did you read that, or even infer it?

You want lambasting? You might want to get your helmet, but it's not compulsory.

I chose not to talk to you because I was not specifically referring to MAG, but for the record you will recall, Ian, that we had an exchange of correspondence on the 10th January, in response to a MAG press release of the same date promoting the e-petition 26931 that started all this. When I explained that I could not, in all conscience sign it, your exact words were "Blessedly others don't think like you, it's been up for about a day now go and see how many have signed it so far".

My reaction was to offer you, Ian, the chance to put MAG's case forward: I started at 200 words, you said you'd need 1000 words and I agreed.

I reminded you, Ian, on the 16th Jan in another exchange of emails, saying "BTW, have you got those 1000 words on MAG's position? Running a small piece on Harley factory engine mods and thought anti-tamper might sit well next to it, but I need it to be absolutely clear in terms of whether anti-tamper as it is being presented applies to all bikes or just those that are already restricted by law, which is my understanding of it. If I am wrong, let me know but give me chapter and verse: and I'm not talking about daft proposals that will get kicked into the long grass".

Your response was "I need to run this by Nich as the anti tamper thing is in flux I think".

I heard no more.

Back at the petition: who phrased it? From your response, not the person in whose name it was submitted, but why would any MAG officer sanction this petition if they had such reservations? Why would they pander to your "Particularly obsessive individual" if they had any reservations about its merit, value or validity? And if you can't convince one of your supporters of a sensible course of action, what chance have you got with professional advocates?

Do either of you genuinely believe that MAG has a right to demand that the British government applies pressure to the EU to apply sanctions to a second sovereign European government? Isn't that precisely what MAG is fighting against, in terms of the EU and other European governments having any influence on the situation in the UK?

And as for the assertion that the driving force behind the petition "refused to acknowledge that there was no immediate threat of compulsory dayglow in the UK and that it was an EU and other member state issue", your comment, Ian, on the 10th Jan was "Of all the people who might end up in charge of a magazine for the great freedom machine - why you? It's almost worth hoping we lose just so you'll have to wear this shite"

In this response, you acknowledge that Strasbourg is not debating hi-viz, but then use the submission of an unnamed report dated 17th July

2011 that "recommended the carrying of hi-viz for all vehicle occupants, and wearing by cyclists and pedestrians after dark and innumerable other initiatives". I assume there's no specific mention of motorcyclists or you would have mentioned it.

Of course there's a report – there will always be reports – but as I have repeatedly suggested in correspondence with Ian, MAG needs to be submitting its own reports, demonstrating why an increasing reliance on hi-viz is flawed, rather than responding to every submission, the overwhelming majority of which will never see the statute books.

Let's deal with out of date information next.

As of today – 28 July 2012 – the MAG-run site euhandsoffbiking.co.uk has a document posted called "The Latest News on Anti-Tampering". It is not dated. Not on the site and not within the document itself, either at the top or beneath your signature, Paddy, as its author.

When was this "Latest News" new?

When was the MEP meeting that is referenced in the second paragraph? It doesn't say.

Was it a meeting with an MEP or a group of MEPs, and who? It doesn't say.

What was discussed? Doesn't say.

Was that meeting minuted? If so, they haven't been published.

Without that, it is just unattributed waffle.

From dates referenced in the document, we can infer it was penned between 15th May and 6th June, and probably in 2012, but it needs a date!

That is the most up to date piece of news on that site, except the posters and meeting point info for the June Demo, which is still being referred to in the future tense on both euhandsoffbiking.co.uk and the main mag-uk.org. You are supposed to be a lobby group: your whole purpose is to inform and represent your members.

Yes, it is a very dynamic situation, which is why I choose to keep abreast of developments using sites that are updated frequently, by people who present the raw information with an executive summary, rather than interpreting it for me.

Based on this correspondence alone, I don't trust your ability to interpret plain English or follow a train of thought, and have very little faith in your ability to summarise European legalese.

I admit that I got ABS wrong: I'm delighted to say it isn't a done deal – Right to Ride spotted my error, hot off the press – and I've got everything crossed, hoping that someone can present a report at the right level explaining how ABS on bikes works very differently to the systems used in cars and consequently doesn't represent the same safety improvement; or else challenges the motives of a former nursery school teacher who as an MEP happens to represent the constituency where Bosch make ABS systems.

I'm not going to engage in debate about specific proposals that are being proffered and withdrawn because there are much bigger things to consider here, but I am fascinated by your A2 motorcycle concept, and especially the unattributed "some desire" to harmonise bike and license: is that lead by the industry or legislature?

You do realise that it would naturally happen without legislation, don't you? A massive single market – the EU – will demand a bike suitable for A2 license holders, and the only difference to current practice is that it won't be based on a bike that is otherwise available in an unrestricted form. Your "A2" bikes will replace things like the ER-5, CB500 and MZ Skorpion, and will be known to be sub-47hp, if that's what is finally ratified, so will be stopped and checked less often. What's the problem? Manufacturers will still make other bikes that aren't restricted, assuming a demand exists.

MAG would be better served by sorting out its communications, starting with a publicly stated policy on e-petitions: clever instruments of distraction, designed to allow people to vent their spleen, and having done so get on with their lives. Think back to what happened with the road pricing petition which sailed through the 50,000 figure with ease, only to be casually dismissed.

I challenge MAG to establish a real time comms strategy which can be controlled centrally, so that a qualified current position can be relayed to regional reps and beyond in its original phrasing, giving every on-line member – and potential member – the same information. Be transparent!

You rightly identify Facebook as a poor tool for that job – the core message can easily get lost in a lively discussion – so might I suggest a blog with clearly dated, attributable threads and only moderated comments, and a full audit trail.

You owe it to your membership to show them what you are doing for their money: be accountable. Transcribe minuted meetings and statements, and reprint written reports, which will build into a history of MAG's campaigning and successes that you can refer to, because it really isn't enough to say "we did that" without being able to show your workings.

That would help you to substantiate your claim that MAG was instrumental in preserving MSVA, which as far as I understood wasn't under threat.

Regarding Right to Ride, as a regular visitor to their site I have seen their press releases: not as attacks on MAG but as qualified statements, linked to the original documents, with an executive summary. And I haven't interpreted a lack of a response from MAG as your not retaliating: if you don't challenge it, the inference must be that it is correct, and that is how I have interpreted it.

I am concerned and confused in equal measure by your accusation regarding the "unfounded attack on an MP" by Right to Ride. I originally interpreted this as being a reference to MEP Bill Newton Dunn, who had been on the receiving end of an aggressive lobbying campaign, including some "threatening his life", but that was reported on the BMF site. So I ran it past Right to Ride who suggested it referred to their response to an article in the Washington Post, where MP Steve Baker references impending motorcycle legislation in a call for a referendum on EU membership.

I looked that up, and the original article plus their response and a qualified report were all clearly laid out, to help inform the debate.

The Right to Ride report mentions that MAG and Steve Baker have declared mutual support, and I wonder whether you consider this to be an attack?

And why the reluctance to mention Steve Baker by name? He's hardly Nick Griffin.

BTW, have you conducted an internal enquiry to see if MAG lobbying is implicated in Bill Newton Dunn's case, and taken the appropriate action?

And if not, why not? It is the right thing to do.

And while you're there, look into allegations that the email campaign is littered with false assumptions, misinterpretations and misleading statements, and see if MAG needs a new way to get a consistent and accurate message out.

I take no pleasure in any of this, and it may surprise you to learn that I am keen to see MAG survive, not least because a lot of good work is done at the grass roots level by unpaid volunteers who genuinely make a difference, but I have dwindling faith in the leadership.

I would be delighted to work with MAG in helping combat the threats that motorcycling faces, but right now there is a credibility gap that can only be resolved by a reformed executive.

Andy Hornsby