

The Big Debate

I know that I'm going to regret this but hey, we'll have a letters page next issue and it's got to be less time consuming than a recent Facebook debate.

I'd best get something out of the way very quickly. I'm not political. I'm not, because I'm not well-informed enough about the political issues that are being bandied about by lobby groups.

Yes, I am aware that all I've got to do is to read the literature put out by any one of a number of riders' rights organisations but all I will then understand is the interpretation applied by someone with an agenda, and unless I know what their agenda is, I don't trust their interpretation.

And if I can't follow the logic, I trust it even less. And I don't think I'm unusual in that.

It doesn't mean that I don't have opinions or a position, but I don't feel the need to inflict it on others. Even this, which looks like it's going to burst into a rant, isn't.

A call to arms, maybe.

An invitation to look at the debate and take your own informed position, definitely, because this stuff needs to be debated by as many intelligent, rational people as possible.

Moreover, we need to make sure we know what the debates are about, because they can get lost once people start to get agitated.

The main reason for this is an e-petition on DirectGov to "*urge the British Government to put pressure on the European Commission to discipline any member state that imposes clothing standards on motorcycle riders*".

There was some heartfelt comments about mandatory clothing not being the solution to poor driving standard, which is hard to disagree with, but I didn't get that far at the first reading: I got stuck at the prospect of the European Commission being asked to intervene in the affairs of a sovereign nation and got no further.

The background to this is the French government passing into law a requirement for motorcyclists to wear dayglo jackets – or at least that is the perception – which formed part of a raft of proposals before the French parliament, which included a ban on motorcycles over seven years old from urban areas for environmental reasons, and – I discovered from an ex-pat rider on Facebook, to introduce a number plate that will be massive ... which turned out to still be smaller than the current UK requirement.

And the new legal requirement in France, to be law in January 2014? Basically, 150cm² of retro-reflective material – the stuff that reflects when you shine a torch on it. It sounds massive, but how much is that, actually? My smartphone is 64mmx122mm, which is 78.08cm², so two smartphone sized patches or an armband.

This is being cited as a barrier to the free movement of riders in Europe, but in reality it's no more inconvenient than riding on the wrong side of the road.

Inexplicably, it only affects riders of motorcycles larger than 125cc, which seems peculiar in a country where 14-year olds are allowed to ride mopeds, and must surely be a more vulnerable group: that was either not fought properly at a local level, or else was presented to a government who were determined to pass it into law: I don't know, but then I don't know the French system.

But I do know that if the entire UK population demonstrated against it, it would not have made one iota of difference to the French government.

And rightly so.

There is a second debate going on in Ireland for full-sleeve day-glo jackets for riders and pillioners, which we are frequently told has been passed. It hasn't: the Irish RSA (Road Safety Authority) has stated that they intend to consult before considering legislation.

The one thing that we do know is that the EU are not debating hi-viz – the French and the Irish governments wouldn't be wasting money even debating their own standards if it were being proposed centrally. And our own DfT is on record as saying "*The Government has no plans to make Hi Viz/Day Glo jackets/vests and protective clothing for motorcyclists compulsory*." and, "*there are no plans to change our laws simply because another member state chooses to do so*."

Don't get me wrong: I empathise with French riders, but this is a French national issue.

If we want to get all 'United Europe' about it, the trick is surely to freely share expertise and research, enabling national interest groups to fight national legislation, not make sure that all EU motorcyclists are treated equally, whether in Athens or Edinburgh.

Even the most staunch European will recognise that even if a centralised Federal Europe emerged from greater cooperation between member states, you've only got to look at America to see that it doesn't mean one law for all: and they've got a relatively young culture and a common language.

Where next?

Anti-Tamper.

Engines sealed from air-box to rear wheel.

Seriously? It would be terrifying if it were true – and it might well be on the table – but the way it's shaping up it will be limited to motorcycles that are already subject to restrictions, which have already been defined: learner-legal bikes for example, to prevent people like our younger selves from taking the restrictions out, or making it bigger.

There is a clear statement from Wim van der Camp, Dutch MEP and rider, who is overseeing the measures currently being debated, saying that "*The national inspection authorities will be in charge of controlling modifications*."

We are told that there are calls to resubmit a motorcycle if any "substantial" modifications are made to a "competent authority", but define substantial? Define competent authority?

We're told Stage One will be outlawed, but is that 'substantial'? What about a 103-inch big bore on a 96-inch bike or even a 1200 conversion to an 883 Sportster: the bigger bikes already exist so does that qualify as substantial?

That definition alone would tie them up for years, and could be argued infinitely.

They are referring to mods to make a bike go faster, but define faster? Is it top speed or acceleration? Surely mid-range improves safety?

And there's a new bogeyman in town: a test to put choppers through a slalom and a U-turn test, also referred to as anti-tamper for cycle parts.

Guess what? It has nothing whatsoever to do with one-off choppers, and it has very little to do with builders, unless they are building significant numbers of the same model of chopper.

There must surely be some foundation?

A concern was expressed that mass produced choppers (100+), available to an average rider, must be safe for them to ride.

If passed it would have been an addendum to existing EUWVTA tests because member states already have their own systems like MSVA to deal with one-off builds and small run production

bikes, and there is no intention of changing that.

It is true that the ABS case seems to have been lost, with only an addendum so that it is possible to switch it off if the manufacturer chooses, but something else comes out of that as you start to talk to people: all ABS wasn't created equal.

ABS is still evolving, with ever faster controllers and ever more sophisticated environmental measurements being accounted for – things like lean angle, pitch and yaw – but while it is possible to account for a bike leaning in a corner, and allow for that in the way the system responds, it will never offer the same benefits as in a car. It can't. Systems are being developed that will prevent rear wheel lift under heavy braking, and which can be set up for different environments, but as clever as they get, they are limited by the laws of physics.

Harley explain in the notes to read before riding your motorcycle: "*Harley-Davidson's Anti-Lock Brake System assists the rider in maintaining control when braking in a straight-line emergency situation. ABS operates independently on front and rear brakes to keep the wheels rolling and prevent uncontrolled wheel lock-ups either on dry pavement or on slick surfaces such as gravel, leaves or when riding in wet conditions*."

It goes on to say "*While an advantage in emergency braking, ABS is not a substitute for safe riding. The safest way to stop a motorcycle is upright with both wheels straight*."

You can perhaps understand how a car-driving committee member can think that ABS for motorcycles is a good idea – because they know that it is a useful safety feature in cars – but that it has passed through into law demonstrates a failure to explain the case with regard to bikes.

The stated goal for ABS is laudable: to reduce road deaths by 20% over ten years, but it will fail. It's as likely to have the opposite effect by raising the safety threshold, because some riders will use everything at their disposal to get that extra edge. Safety measure? Nah, performance enhancement!

Now, before you reaching for the pen loaded with green ink, or polonium, I'd advise you to ask, debate, challenge and, importantly, listen and think!

And please, whatever you do, don't start an e-petition on DirectGov – not even a perfectly phrased, concise, single point petition – because you'll show how few people actually care: if you can't guarantee 50,000 signatures, don't bother.

If you're angry enough, join a riders rights group and make your voice heard: within it and beyond:

You should find a natural home from this lot, crudely pigeonholed:

MAG: uncompromising idealists

BMF: pragmatic grown-ups

RightToRide: rational and informative

FEMA: European federation of national groups

Find out what they stand for by talking to someone at the top: the more radical the organisation, the wider the range of interpretations are applied to core principles, campaigns and press releases as you pass down the food chain, in a bizarre game of chinese whispers that can undermine the credibility of the whole lot, despite their best intentions.

And remember Hilaire Belloc's Cautionary Tale of Matilda: shouting 'Fire!' to grab attention when there isn't one, just means fewer will listen to you when the flames are licking round your ankles.

And don't trust anyone with an agenda: it saves time later.

/Andy