

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark suit and a striped tie, stands with his arms crossed. He is positioned next to a traffic light where the green light is illuminated. The background shows a clear blue sky and some green foliage.

The haul guy

Former Ford dealer and FTA man Geoff Dunning, now chief executive of the RHA, tells John Challen about his hopes and predictions for the UK haulage industry

Trawl through the press releases published by the Road Haulage Association (RHA) in 2010 and you will find that few weeks have passed by without the association commenting on the issues that affect vehicle operators and haulage companies. Fuel prices, foreign lorries on UK roads and VOSA test stations are just three of those tackled in recent months, but there is good reason for that, according to chief executive Geoff Dunning.

He describes the RHA as three main activities under one roof: a conventional trade association, where you pay a subscription and get advice and guidance; a commercial arm, which includes training services and the RHA shop; and its representational work. "We'll talk to anyone with an interest in, or influence on, the transport industry," says Dunning.

He dismisses any claim that the RHA is anti-government, but admits there are frustrations. "When it comes to consultation and lobbying, people will have different views, and it is government's job to find the balance between the views and take things forward," asserts the chief executive. "But sometimes they fail to respond to new problems or don't take actions on recognised problems."

One recent example concerns longer, heavier vehicles. "We have a problem within RHA, because a lot of our members aren't very enthusiastic [about LHV], while others are very supportive," admits Dunning. "But then, when the government starts talking about these vehicles, they get messages from

the environmental lobby opposed to our opinions. Clearly, we want the balance to fall in our favour, but it isn't always going to do that, [so] we get frustrated."

Another of Dunning's gripes is the lack of action against some foreign drivers, who are, he claims, trying to "fiddle tachograph records" by using magnet systems on the vehicle. "Reliable figures are difficult to find, but we're getting information from VOSA that a large proportion of, particularly, foreign drivers are using these systems," he claims.

Unfair competition

That matters, not least because this situation leads to unfair competition on a large scale, with penalties currently set at as little as £200. Dunning suggests a complete overhaul: "I'd like to see the Traffic Commissioners fine them, convict them and get them thrown out – and the sooner, the better," he states. "We'd also like to see a revocation of their licence. These people shouldn't be in transport."

His approach could be a subject for discussion with Philip Hammond, Secretary of State for Transport in the UK's coalition government. Another item on the agenda might be the recently proposed fuel price stabiliser, aimed at ensuring that duty increases and decreases in line with the price of fuel.

"We are getting mixed messages already [about the stabiliser]; that it might not be as high a priority as was first suggested. This is an important issue for us, because the problems our members get with fuel costs are as much to do with prices [at the pump],

Guiding light within the RHA

Brought into the position of head of technical services at the RHA soon after Dunning's appointment as chief executive, Ray Engley is another busy man. Tasked with advising and listening to the association's members and their engineering concerns, he says he would like the technical committee to work closer with members. "I'm very conscious our members need supporting. At the end of the day, they will do what they want, but we should be able to at least guide them," he comments.

Engley says members bring him a number of issues, the most important concerning carbon emissions. "We need to look at how the profession can reduce its carbon footprint, which is difficult, considering our lifeblood is fuel," he observes. "We are hoping to get some of our members involved with fuel trials, so they can try technologies, such as low rolling resistance tyres, aerodynamics and automated manual gearboxes, which are all quick wins that will give them a reduction in fuel consumption and carbon."

The need to comply with new side guard regulations from the EU, as of 1 May, has also caused "a bit of a ripple", says Engley, with many unaware or confused by the changes. As reported in the FTA's legal column (Transport Engineer, April, page 7), vehicles that didn't comply before that date would not be failed. However, Engley's experience is different, and he says that many members have contacted him in the past couple of months.

"Some operators have got older vehicles that would cost a fortune to convert [to match compliance requirements]. These vehicles may not meet the directive, but they are still compliant," he stresses. "If there is no obvious reason for failure, you should appeal there and then," he advises.

Engley also claims that, while VOSA had promised to give notice to operators whose side guards were probably not going to be compliant after their next MOT, that communication seems to have been patchy at best.

That said, other issues are also troublesome – one being Euro 6. "It's a whole new can of worms," he groans. And then there are the new testing standards set to be introduced: "We know changes are coming and accept that we are going to have to be compliant with European directives on vehicle testing," acknowledges Engley. "The question is: what's going to be in there and what impact it will have on the industry?"

But Engley's final point relates to vehicle choice: "Specification of vehicles and trailers is something we see as a major area for us," he advises. "We want to make sure people are specifying the right vehicle for the right task. The days of people wanting the truck with the most horsepower are gone, and we are asking transport managers to think about what they want and spec it correctly, so they get the right tools for the job."

as the inconsistency in the per barrel price of oil.”

Dunning is the first to concede he had to make sweeping changes to the RHA when he became chief executive in May last year, in order to make it “leaner and meaner” and prepare it for recovery from recession. Part of the association’s subsequent success – member numbers are now up to 8,000 – could be down to Dunning’s philosophy that harks back to his car trading days of “selling ideas, not a Ford Escort”.

Sweeping changes

Among key changes were the appointment of Ray Engley as head of technical services (see panel, page 15), as well as a revamp of available training. “We wanted to broaden our range of services to help people in all areas of the industry, so we have re-branded some of the training and revised the pricing structure of the driver CPC course,” says Dunning.

He also insists that the RHA is open to ideas from non-members. “There are still a lot of people who are not members, especially a lot of smaller firms, and we’re looking at the concept of a one-stop shop approach – so independent hauliers can get a set of working practices, for example, that are effective in running a business,” he explains.

But there are yet further big changes afoot, according to the chief exec, designed to benefit the business environment for member operators. “We want to develop by helping hauliers to be good hauliers,” suggests Dunning. “Most of the work we do at the moment is designed to help people run trucks. What we’re looking at now is what more we can do to help them run their businesses.”

Clearly, whereas the image might have been of an RHA catering primarily for truck drivers, the association is now poised for change, recognising that most operators run a variety of vehicles. “The operational requirements [of vans and HGVs] are very different. With vans, for example, there are no drivers’ hours, no additional testing, no tachographs, no ‘O’ licence,” he points out. But there absolutely is employment law, health and safety, and the rest. “In the future, I think that people who run vans, but not trucks, will look for support from the RHA for a variety of reasons, and that support will be there,” he promises. Watch this space. **TE**



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