

David Mckirdy

Christine Loh
Legislative Councillor
Rm 429 Central Government Offices,
West Wing, 11 Ice House St.
Central.

13 Dec 1999

Dear Ms Loh,

Subsequent to our brief chat this morning, here are a few facts and observations which I hope may help you in your upcoming panel discussions.

My own background is that I was brought up and educated in Hong Kong and have lived here for 39 years. I am a car mechanic of over 20 years experience and I have run vehicle repair facilities both for myself and for other people. I have been a formula one mechanic and currently repair classic and sports cars for a select group of clients. I can swear fluently in Cantonese!

Overview:

A diesel engine is an inherently good and efficient design, it gives superior consumption figures to the equivalent sized petrol engine and the fuel itself requires less refining thus making it easier and cheaper to produce. A diesel engine generally requires less in the way of complex servicing than a petrol vehicle.

A badly adjusted or worn-out diesel will however produce pollution on a larger scale than a petrol engine in a similar state. Diesel engines tend to produce a larger particle which is more visible.

Reasons for unwanted emissions include the following:

1. Service interval too long, resulting in dirty lubricating oil, dirty air, oil and fuel filters. These factors cause more rapid engine wear, the wrong fuel-air mixture and de-synchronization of engine controls through lack of adjustment.
2. The use of sub-standard lubricating oil (cheaper), sub-standard filters and sub-standard

fuel oil (illegal) leading to the same conditions as in point 1. with the added consideration that illegal fuel oil is dirtier and clogs up many of the components internally.

3. Incompetent repair facilities lacking either the knowledge or the equipment to do an efficient job.

All of the above points can be seen to be directly related to financial considerations. The independent commercial diesel vehicle operators (taxies, minibuses, commercial vans and trucks) demand a professional and efficient service but seem unwilling to pay a professional fee, or the going rate for parts, fuel and service. It seems extraordinary to me that somebody would invest the large capital amount required for many of these vehicles and then fail to secure that investment by prudent care and maintenance.

The commercial operator must be the worst customer for a garage to have. The vehicles operate under arduous conditions with different drivers (sometimes 24 hours a day) a high mileage and limited service. The vehicle generally arrives broken, sometimes on the back of a tow truck and the operator wants it back on the road immediately and doesn't want to pay the going rate.

As a consequence of this within the hierarchy of car repair, fixing these vehicles is the equivalent of the French foreign legion or the Siberian salt mines.

Government or other training schemes will in my view not alleviate this problem as the trained technicians would much prefer to repair private cars (cost \$ 1,000 per hour for some luxury models) or work for responsible fleet operators with good conditions etc.

Solutions:

1. Commercial diesel operators need to be encouraged to spend their repair budgets on pro-active servicing rather than reactive repairs. Frequent oil changes are much cheaper than engine rebuilds.
2. Find out how much the main agents charge for regular servicing and what the recommended service interval is. If they charge \$20,000 every 10,000 kilometers service, then it's clearly too much but if it's \$3,000 every 20,000 kilometers, it's probably not. I am also sure that the main agents can provide an affordable service package that includes an element of major repair insurance. (This is available for private cars.)
3. Encourage compliance of the law by punitive fines. The fines are not in place to make it more expensive to run a commercial vehicle but to dissuade all road users from breaking a law that affects all of society. Most other traffic violators

“home trading” on other proposed traffic reforms could encourage a grudging acceptance of this particular and most important amendment!

4. An increase in the level of fines will have no effect whatsoever if the law is not enforced. A fine of \$10,000 is affordable if you only have to pay it once in a blue moon I drive at least 100 km per day and while I regularly encounter speed traps. I cannot remember having seen a single road side emission/fuel check station within the last 5 years. In these austere times of budget constraints surely the revenue raised from more assiduous policing would adequately cover the cost of the additional resources needed, plus in true Hong Kong style generate a healthy profit. Additionally, since it seems that a popular dally newspaper can rind illegal diesel for sale on a daily basis in Causeway Bay why can't the police catch the perpetrators of this crime on a daily basis?

I hope these writings are of some use to you. Please call if I can be of further use.

Best regards,

David Mckirdy