

Speech to 7th EPF annual conference on what passengers want from the new Parliament

The European Passengers' Federation was established seven years ago. We set it up to provide passengers with an effective voice at the European level. We had good encouragement from the European Commission – in particular, the enthusiasm of Jean-Arnold Vinois of DG TREN. Wise advice but, unfortunately, no money.

The 2001 Transport White Paper, *European Transport Policy for 2010: time to decide*, had introduced a welcome new theme – “placing users at the heart of transport policy”. The Commission recognised that the removal of borders and the growth of travel meant that measures were needed to ensure that passengers' rights were protected effectively. It acknowledged an enduring truth: passengers are the weaker party in the transport contract with the transport undertakings. These companies have access to effective and well resourced lobbyists, both nationally and at the European level. Passengers needed an effective voice if the Union's Lisbon Agenda for the realisation of a more dynamic and competitive European economy is to be realised. Europe needed an organisation that was capable of defending passengers' rights at the European level, giving effective voice to passengers' expectations.

The European Passengers' Federation was born. We now have members in sixteen European states which, between them, cover more than three quarters of the EU's population.

Our early work actively supported the Commission's plans to extend passenger protection measures from air to all modes of collective transport - rail, bus and coach and maritime. Rail was the starting point. Despite well-funded opposition from CER and much of the rail industry, we campaigned successfully for a system of enforceable rights, applicable to domestic travel within member states as well as to international journeys. We were pleased when the Council, Parliament and Commission agreed Regulation 1371/2007 – the part of the Third Railway Package that safeguards rail passengers.

National administrations and railway undertakings must implement that Regulation by December this year. Member associations have sought to influence that process, struggling to make sure that the principles of consumer empowerment are observed and that the provisions are applied to domestic as well as to international services at the earliest date. We want all passengers to benefit from the protection of the Third Railway Package.

For this reason, we continue to work for the extension of these rights to bus and coach and to maritime passengers. A consistent set of passenger rights – rights that applied irrespective of mode or territory – would provide better consumer protection. They would be better understood by passengers and therefore more easily enforced. We have welcomed the Commission's proposals to extend protection to bus and coach and to maritime passengers and we have actively lobbied the European Parliament to this end.

An effective system of passengers' rights' will both empower consumers and encourage operators to provide a better service. This is particularly important for bus and coach passengers. Many are the more vulnerable members of society, the elderly and the young, the less affluent and those persons of reduced mobility who frequently have few alternatives, if any, to public transport. By extending passengers' rights' protection the

institutions of the Union are reflecting their duty under the Treaty to strengthen economic and social cohesion.

We welcome the Commission's proposal that these rights should apply to all types of service, irrespective of mode or geography. There is elegance to the Commission's proposals in this respect: the Commission has acknowledged the principle of subsidiarity. It is proposing that European protection should apply to the users of all services, except those services which are covered by public service contracts and where an adequate level of consumer protection is already assured.

The argument hasn't yet been won. Bus and coach and maritime companies are resisting the march of consumer protection. The restaurateurs of Brussels, Luxembourg and the major European capitals must be smiling as the industry's lobbyists dine their way through politicians and senior decision-makers in a last ditch bid to deny vulnerable public transport users their rights.

The struggle for consumer protection and the empowerment of passengers has other fields of struggle. The European Commission wisely saw to it that the passengers' sector is represented on the board of the European Railway Agency – the body that is responsible for creating the standards that underpin the development of a safe and integrated European railway network. We have used that position to ensure that the passengers' voice is heard in key decisions. One of the current tasks of the Agency is to produce a Technical Standard for Interoperability on Passenger Applications' Telematics – the standards for information provision and displays, ticketing, reservation systems and those other things that are key to keeping a passenger informed about their journey.

EPF has been fighting hard to make sure that this new TSI, known as the TAP-TSI, ensures that potential rail users have access to timetable and fares' information throughout Europe. This goes to the heart of what the Commission describes as putting citizens in the driving seat and thereby boosting competition. Access to information about what is on offer is key to enabling consumers to exercise their power in driving a more competitive economy. The industry has resisted this transparency, preferring to hide behind spurious claims of commercial confidentiality. The Commission must ensure that it does not miss the opportunity to deliver this basic consumer protection.

Public transport users travelling between different parts of Europe are already handicapped by the lack of a public transport users' smart card. This is another area in which EPF is seeking to influence European policy. A car driver can drive by motorway from Uppsala to Reggio di Calabria, armed with just a credit or charge card from one of the big American-owned financial organisations like Visa or MasterCard. A European public transport user does not have the same freedom. There is no card that will work throughout Europe's public transport network. Yet what an opportunity this would be for the European knowledge-based industry: the specification of a universal interface for a smart card that could be adapted to work throughout the EU – or perhaps, in time, in towns and cities throughout the world.

A European smart card would make an important contribution to sustainable urban mobility. The same is true of the potential of a Europe-wide database of timetables and fares' information, building on the work of TAP-TSI but developed across all public transport modes. Google Earth and Tom-Tom have revolutionised car travel. We need the equivalent for sustainable transport if we are to accelerate modal shift.

EPF consulted widely amongst its members and submitted a thorough response to the Commission's consultation on sustainable urban mobility. We are therefore disappointed and concerned that the promised Action Plan has not yet appeared.

Our confidence in the Commission's ability to deliver forward-looking, but essential, policy initiatives has already been shaken by its failure last summer to pursue with adequate vigour its strategy for *Greening Transport*. We actively contributed to the workshops and consultations on the internalisation of external costs in the transport sector. This was intended to ensure that the price of transport better reflects its true cost to society, thereby reducing congestion and environmental damage and helping to make the European economy more competitive.

Together with others across Europe, we saw the planned revision of the *Eurovignette* directive as a key step in delivering this. But Europe's leaders fudged the issue. They backed down in the face of pressure from the road hauliers, the airline industry and the automotive sector. Public transport users lost out. More important, our children and our children's children lost out. Short-term expediency displaced long term strategy.

We have a similar concern about the Commission's current proposals for a rail network that gives priority to freight. While we welcome the Commission's determination to make the rail freight network more competitive and to ensure that rail bears a greater proportion of cargo traffic, this must not be done at the expense of an ever more attractive passenger network.

All who are familiar with Europe's rail network are aware that it suffers from congestion on key routes and at key nodes. Freight traffic competes for access with freight and passenger traffic, passenger traffic with passenger and freight traffic. That problem can only be resolved with investment: investment that delivers new capacity, whether by new infrastructure, longer and faster trains or more efficient traffic management systems.

At the moment, EPF is seriously concerned that passengers will be seriously disadvantaged if the Commission's draft Regulation to create a more freight oriented rail network is progressed in its present form. We say "Yes" to freight, but "No" if it means that the performance and potential of Europe's passenger services are threatened. Progress depends on investment. Investment must precede a change in the rules governing the prioritisation of traffic.

One of the oddities of the Commission's proposals is that they have come forward now. The transport sector needs significant investment. Its delivery requires long time scales: major projects cannot be delivered overnight.

EPF therefore welcomes the Commission's work plan and Commissioner Tajani's intention to develop a Communication on the Future of Transport, starting with the development of scenarios with 20-40 year horizons. EPF intends to contribute fully to this important work. We hope that it will result in a new Action Programme, following on from the ten-year programme published in 2001 that sought to put users at the heart of the Commission's transport policy.

For us – and we believe for every European citizen – the test must be: how does each Commission intervention bring greater benefit to the user? It is a question that every European leader should keep upper-most in their mind in this election year.

March 14th 2009
Christopher Irwin, vice-chairman of EPF