

Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 312

On Tuesday April 09, 2013, the Senate passed a Bill to amend the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chapter 48:50 to provide for the issuance of special identification marks to be carried on the registration plates of motor vehicles owned by diplomats and diplomatic organizations. The Unofficial Hansard Record states that “...we provide for the provision of the identification plates so those who enjoy those immunities and privileges under the local legislation are identified, and it also provides for cancellation if there is any sale, the entitlement comes to an end. The proposed amendment, although 48 years late, will only serve as a medium of identification of particular individuals as having certain immunities and privileges which are already granted to them under the Privileges and Immunities (Diplomatic, Consular and International Organisations) Act. It will also serve to assist the relevant authorities in identifying the vehicles used by members of the diplomatic corps, as well as assist in the functioning of these diplomatic organizations.”

Where will this new legislation fit in with current motor vehicle and traffic control and enforcement operations in this country? My concerns include the following, in no order of priority:

1. The newspapers have recently reported incidents of same number plates on different vehicles. Is there a well-organised register of motor vehicles that track the details of new, transferred, imported-used, modified, or adjusted vehicles, etc.? When a vehicle has been written-off by crash or scrapping, is its de-registration monitored? Is the data preparation and update easily done, and readily accessible?

In 1996, a useful method that the Transport Division (commonly called the Licensing Office) had in assisting to ensure that vehicles

were registered annually was removed. Up until that time, vehicles had to be registered annually, and in order to do so, up-to-date vehicle insurance had to be shown. Today, only trucks, taxis and maxis have to be registered annually, while new private cars do not register until 5 years, and then every 3 years thereafter. But because of extremely poor field enforcement, I suspect that there are not only many unregistered vehicles on the road, but many un-insured ones as well!

So we have difficulty in monitoring the existing vehicle categories, how will the authorities manage more?

2. Number plates can be manufactured anywhere. What will prevent fraudulent production of diplomatic number plates by criminals? I reviewed the Privileges and Immunities Act and noted that it would entitle you to immunity from search. Could that not be an advantage to the criminal over the undiscerning field enforcement officer? In addition, how does a field enforcement officer determine the authenticity of a driver's permit or vehicle insurance permit?

I have some other issues more related to the priority of the legislative agenda with respect to traffic safety and control. These include the following:

3. How can the authorities try to convince us of the need for traffic safety when nobody can currently be charged for speed violations? Speed detection and enforcement are primarily to: (a) reduce the traffic crashes; (b) encourage compliance with speed limits; (c) achieve safe and effective control of traffic; and (d) reduce the number of road users exceeding speed limits.

The Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50, gives lots of regulations on speeds, such as (a) for exceeding the specified speed limit, the fixed penalty is \$2,000;

(b) for motor racing and speed trials between motor vehicles without permission, the fixed penalty is \$2,000; and (c) for Dangerous driving, fixed penalty is \$3,000; and failing to keep people to the left of the road [except when overtaking, such as on one-way carriageways with two or more lanes], there is also a penalty. But I have not seen anything on how to measure and enforce speeds.

Every driver knows that nobody enforces speeds in this country, so travel speed is almost exclusively related to (a) traffic density, or the numbers of vehicles occupying a specific segment of roadway, (b) ability of the vehicle, (c) risk-taking desire of the driver, and (d) influence of the other occupants. In fact, it is common for motorists to overtake Police vehicles who are travelling at the speed limit on highways.

The presence of a Police officer or a parked Police vehicle traditionally has the effect of causing the driver to depress the brakes. Not now! Because we all know that Police no longer do the primitive method of two officers hiding in the bush to conduct a speed trap. This is the stopwatch system and is cheap, but is more manpower-intensive.

Modern methods include the following: (a) Video systems will automatically send out notifications to all speeding cars, or can be used to target specific vehicles. These can be permanently set up at key intersections and along highways; and, (b) Laser systems and Radar systems, which can be handheld and easily used by a Police Officer sitting in his vehicle.

So why not give legislative priority to speed detection and enforcement, as a start. Next week: a case for removal of traffic enforcement from the Police.

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