

## Open letter: Off-Road Vehicle (Registration) Bill.



Graham Stringer M.P.

I read with interest the thread on the British Speedway Fans Forum: "Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill."

This is indeed an issue that could have repercussions for speedway racing in this country and one that all involved in the sport ought to be at least a little concerned. There appears to be no distinction between *any* off-road motorcycle written into the proposed legislation, yet, surely, speedway bikes represent a special case. Might I suggest that a proactive response to the threat posed by Graham Stringer's Private Members Bill may determine that any of our fears are unfounded.

First, in any campaign to safeguard against Mr. Stringer's proposals it should be stressed that speedway bikes cannot possibly be used for anti-social purposes on the highway.

The first obstacle to using speedway bikes for nefarious purposes in built-up urban areas is that they do not, as yet, run on easily sourced fuel and oil. Methanol and castor oil cannot be purchased from regular garages, only from specialist suppliers who tend to know their clients personally. This makes it highly unlikely that irresponsible people would ever get the chance to upset, annoy or terrorise local populations in the manner in which Mr. Stringer is so concerned.

Furthermore, it is not just unlikely, but impossible for speedway bikes to be used for such anti-social purposes. The fact that they do not have brakes, no tick-over, nor are designed to take right hand turns means that any disturbance caused by any inappropriate use on the highway, unlikely though that is, would last for a very short period of time indeed. For example, it is common for stolen speedway bikes to be quickly recovered, either abandoned or offered back to their owners for ransom for this very reason. The case of James Grieves' equipment, stolen in the 1990s, is a classic one of which I am familiar.

And to further illustrate this point, once, while working on my own bike outside my home in the 1980s, the most notorious gang of thugs in my hometown appeared and demanded a go on my rather 'cool looking' machine. I can attest to their well-founded reputations for the grossest anti-social behaviour, having once myself been the victim of an unprovoked attack by this band of merry-men. Consequently, on the occasion in question I felt I had no choice but to allow them a 'joy-ride' down the street. However, when I pointed out that they could only turn left and were certain to fail to stop before hitting the wall at the end of the road, their collective bluff and bluster visibly withered before me. hilariously, after being spared a kick in the teeth, when I told them I actually earned my living riding this thing with no brakes, I was branded 'crazy;' the irony of their words completely lost on the morons, though probably would not have been lost on the unfortunate youth worker who had been scarred for life a few years earlier by the certifiably 'crazy' leader of the gang! Needless to say, they declined the offer of a go on my cherished Godden 500. Yes, even the most irrational, anti-social brutes I've ever met in my life couldn't see the point of riding a speedway bike on the road.

The whole incident seemed to me a perfect illustration that courage and self-discipline lay not in the power to intimidate but, in this context, in the ability to harness the power of a potentially lethal motorcycle under controlled conditions – on a fully licensed speedway track. So, far from introducing laws that could be used to undermine it, as a sport that could potentially instill in those he wishes to reform some qualities I feel sure he would admire, Graham Stringer ought to be promoting speedway!

Another reason why Mr. Stringer ought to think through this proposal more particularly, is a matter that cuts to the heart of a much broader political debate; that concerning environmental degradation.

It stands to reason that as the need to address environmental concerns grows more acute, motor sport in general may be seen increasingly as something politically unsustainable. Perhaps this is an undeclared ulterior motive behind Mr. Stringer's position? Or maybe his main concern is the tax-raising possibilities? Nevertheless, either way, it should be reiterated that speedway is unique in the world of motor-sport in that the fuel and oil used in the engines are wholly renewable and far less polluting than fossil-based fuel and oil. Of course, all internal combustion engines produce greenhouse gases, which has become a serious global problem, but is it not the case that the idea of converting *all* motor vehicles to ethanol type fuel constitutes an important element to the current environmental debate? And those of us who are familiar with the sport of speedway know well that methanol, as a fuel conducive to creating more powerful engines, is potentially a more efficient propellant than petroleum. In different applications lower emissions could be achieved because of this.

It must be acknowledged that speedway bikes themselves are not designed for fuel efficiency, rather for sheer power, naturally, and the debate over the practicalities of bio-fuels is an open one. Yet the principle stands: methanol/ethanol fuelled engines,

lubricated with vegetable oil, ought to be considered a step in the right direction amid the gamut of concerns surrounding the environment. The precise technical/scientific merits of methanol over petrol is something I do not feel qualified to comment on, there are many others within speedway who would be more familiar with the range of potentialities of alcohol based fuels. However, if the government is taking the ethanol issue seriously (?), then on some level speedway ought to be regarded as a special case and it's viability not threatened by a policy initiative that seems typical of current government thinking in Whitehall: i.e., legislate against the many to deal with an unruly few. Indeed, such behaviour by our elected politicians may be deemed itself to be anti-social by many law abiding voters.

Indeed, any debate concerning the proposed legislation should also include the role speedway actually plays within local communities. The various community projects featured in *Speedway Star*, May 12, 2007, are testament to that other unique feature of speedway that must not be overlooked. That is, unlike any other motor sport in the world, speedway teams represent civic entities rather than corporate ones, team sponsorship accepted. The affinity that people feel for their respective teams reflects an important sense of identity that is central to all our individual and collective needs. This is something I rarely hear expressed in broader debates but is something I know is felt deeply by fans. Just think of those old body jackets that displayed, for example: the Hammer and Chain (Cradley); the Indian Elephant (Halifax); the Gun (Ellesmere Port); the Chad (Liverpool), and many more besides to understand how speedway racing has for decades been embedded in the social history and psyche of civic communities in Britain. Add to that the traditional appeal that speedway holds for men, women and families alike from those same communities and I can't imagine Graham Stringer, or any other MP, would want to do anything that would have an adverse effect on this quite remarkable sport.

In order for the sport of speedway not to be adversely affected by this proposed legislation, it seems clear to me that a concerted campaign needs to be initiated as soon as possible. Some fans have already begun a letter campaign to their respective MPs, but to be successful a robust response on an official, institutional level would also seem necessary. The speedway authorities will be aware of the potential threat that MP Stringer's Private Members Bill represents, and I am confident they are taking the necessary steps to counter it. I wish them well.

However, I hope the views I have expressed here can also play a small part in any campaign to protect speedway against the Off-Road Vehicle (Registration) Bill. If those in a position of influence within speedway felt it helpful and appropriate, I would be happy to have this letter passed on to any relevant person in authority concerned with this issue, Graham Stringer included. For I am sure, with reference to the aforementioned anecdote, that even Mr. Stringer would have been impressed by the antidote to anti-social behaviour that the features of a speedway bike proved to be on that day in the 1980s. There can be little doubt, had it not been a speedway bike, I'm afraid my neighbours would have been menaced by four rough-riders of the most vicious variety. Sure, that would have certainly constituted a scenario that the Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill is *now* designed to prevent, but such a scenario was not then, and is still not possible using a speedway bike.

Finally, if the environmental and community arguments I touch upon here are valid, then for a member of parliament to extol the virtues of speedway racing could actually prove to be politically rewarding in the long run. Such considerations aside, however, for good reason Mr. Stringer should be urged to consider an explicit exemption to the Off-Road Vehicle (Registration) Bill in the case of speedway bikes. Were he to do that, who knows, perhaps at least to the speedway going public Graham Stringer will become something of a living legend, a Honourable Member of Parliament, no less.

**David Walsh**

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