

CAN'T PAY, MUST PAY

The British have an expression for it, borne out of literally hundreds of years of continuous social evolution and cohabitation; it has that genteel familiarity that has usually succeeded in rendering the worst excesses of one of the most imperialist nations on earth acceptable: 'you can't have your cake and eat it'. Doubtless the Dutch, who probably hold the world record for apposite sayings, also have a similar expression and for broadly similar reasons.

The Americans, pioneers of 15 minutes of fame, fast-food, and conversational brevity to the point of violence, take a rather different stance with an almost pathological adherence to the 'win, win' philosophy. Along with Friends, jeans and a relentless tendency to obesity, it is something we appear to have adopted from the Americans. According to them we can have our cake, dutifully constructed to the precise instructions of the Joy of Cooking, and still eat it. Henry Ford was tragically wrong when he opined and sought to express a fundamental view that for Americans history was 'bunk'. Quite the opposite in fact, because for them, the future is bunk.

Strangely, both sides of the Atlantic have been united by a common cause, railing against the recent rises in the price of petrol. Quietly ignoring the fact that actually over 50% of new car sales in Europe are now for those with diesel engines, the principle is the same, we can't pay to fuel our cars at these prices and neither should we.

We are indeed suddenly discovering that we cannot continue to pump out petroleum to be burnt in our internal combustion engines, and continue to keep it in the ground as a limitless reserve. We are discovering that actually, collective madness which describes the boom in the purchase and use of the massively over-specified, over-weight and frankly baroque four-wheel architecture that we call 'passenger cars' (for quaintly historical reasons, cars used to have more than the contemporary average of 1.2 people in them while in use) does indeed come at a price, both economic and environmental.

Neither is this actually an issue of personal mobility, despite appearances to the contrary. Think about it for more than a minute, and the grotesque inefficiency of it all becomes clear. First, most of the energy content of the fuel we burn in our cars is lost through thermal inefficiency, if we are really, really lucky the engine might just extract 35% of the energy to send to the wheels. Most of the rest is lost through turning the various components of the drive train, overcoming rolling resistance in the tyres, running the air conditioning that is a primary requisite when the radio that you are also running keeps telling you that the traffic jam you are stuck in will remain for the next two hours, or pushing the air out of the way when anything approaching actual driving speed is attained. Any energy that does, by some minor miracle, succeed in contributing towards forward motion then actually moves the car, not the person. Average car weight, say 1,500kg. Average person weight, say 75kg. So the person inside accounts for about 5% of the total mass moved. In other words, less than 1% of the energy content of the petrol that you pour into your car actually contributes to moving you...always assuming that you are not on the M25 and are therefore actually moving, at least occasionally. Put it another way, for the economically minded. If you paid for the petrol that actually moved you, it would only be 1 penny per litre.

Of course we should pay more for our petrol. There is no win, win. We are appallingly profligate, so busily eating our cake that soon we will no longer have it at all. There is no inalienable right to cheap, motorised, personal mobility. We might actually have to change our lifestyles, we might actually have to do without.

Of course, the usual argument proffered at this point, as it was by the myopically self-interested lobby against the fuel price escalator policy adopted with uncharacteristic clarity by the early Blair government, is that high prices are socially unfair. The poor will suffer. There are two answers to that. First, actually the poor often do not have cars (yes, even in this day and age a surprisingly high proportion of households do not have access to a car). Second, we'll take the money from the rich and give it to the poor. It is of course the rich (countries or people) who are the least sustainable, and who have the most conspicuously consuming habits.

We have somehow managed to build a society where it has become acceptable for the average journey to consist of a two-mile trip to buy a loaf of bread. The marginal improvement in the

average fuel economy of new cars sold has been swamped by an unthinking delight in driving further.

The answer to higher petrol prices is simple. Don't blame the government or rapacious oil companies. Don't blame the Saudis for hoarding it all, or the Chinese for taking 'our' share. Don't blame the vehicle manufacturers for the cars you are offered. Don't blame the vagaries of the weather. Drive less.