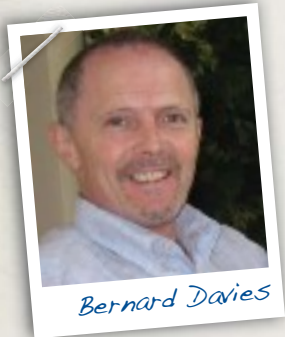


Follow the leader



Bernard Davies

In his latest column, **Bernard Davies**, Director at Fleet Force Ltd, ponders on the development of the SARTRE road train system and the issues that still need to be addressed.

I'VE BEEN thinking about SARTRE. Not the French existentialist philosopher, but the Safe Road Trains for the Environment study funded by the European Commission.

When this research is completed we may well have a new way of travelling down the autobahns, motorways, autoroutes, autostradas and autovias of Europe. The broad outline of the project is the development of a so-called "vehicle platooning" system, whereby cars travel down these roads in convoy.

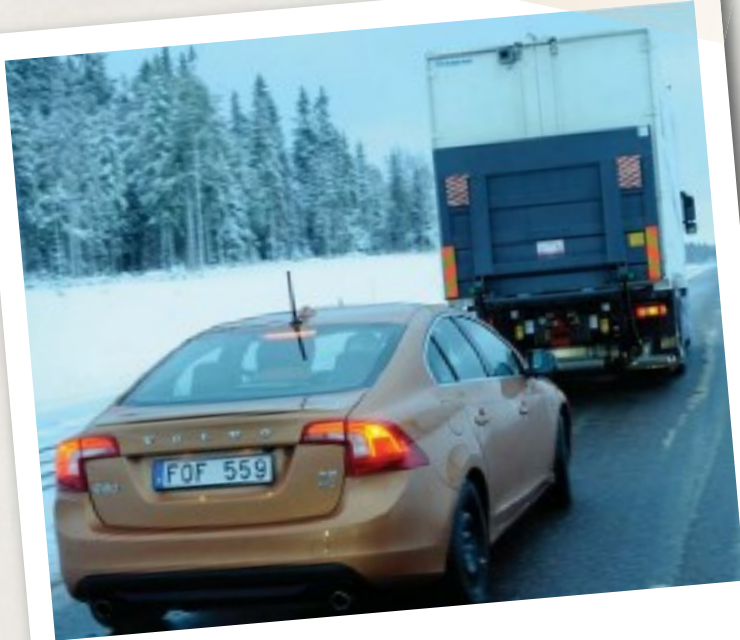
By removing the human factor a number of benefits accrue. Firstly, there's the obvious improved fuel economy (and, de facto, reduced emissions) brought about by convoys travelling at the optimum speed.

Then it is to be hoped there will be fewer accidents – the rear-end shunts caused by momentary distraction that we have all witnessed on these roads. It should be easier to travel in bad weather – a professional driver will guide you

through the worst. It will certainly deliver a better use of road space – not everyone will be in the middle lane of three-lane roads. You will be able to catch-up on your emails, finish the presentation for your next meeting, drink



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a coffee or even apply make-up without suffering the dreaded sight of blue lights flashing in your rear view mirror. And these are just a few – no doubt you can think of your own advantages...

While mentioning advantages, I suppose I ought to offer a few thoughts about the disadvantages. I can only think of a couple – this system, combined with the latest electronic safety systems available to drivers today, may encourage complacency behind the steering wheel and I suppose you might fall asleep and miss your junction entirely...

Then there's the speed at which you'll travel – 90kph is the quoted rate of travel and there'll be plenty of people who will

want to go faster. But, due to the events in many North African counties, it seems that already some countries are considering a reduction in speed limits to conserve fuel – suddenly 90kph sounds OK...

Now I don't know about you, but if my journey time could be reliably predicted and I didn't have to allow extra time for traffic hold-ups, enabling me to guarantee my arrival at an airport, meeting, lunch appointment or whatever at precisely the intended time, I'd be delighted!

The technology for this appears to be just about in place but there will still be a number of issues that will require some attention, not

least those of a legal nature, and I'm not sure who pays – or how...

I also rather suspect that the human mindset will need some work (maybe Monsieur Sartre can help here?) to overcome the feeling of loss of control.

This system looks as though it could be available to us within the next ten years and I'm looking forward to trying it. How long, I wonder, before someone has the bright idea of putting power lines in the road surface for electric cars to draw a current? Then our roads would become one large slot-racing circuit – Scalextric, anyone?

And if that did happen then it would be great – as long as the lead driver has not been spending too much time with his games console...