



# THERE IS MORE TO LIFE THAN INCREASING ITS SPEED<sup>1</sup>

*Roger Bray*

Here's a thought to wake Nigel Farage in a cold sweat: how about harmonising Europe's motor-ing laws? Huge swathes of rain forest have been sacrificed in pursuit of a single European sky, yet the EU's road regulations remain a mess of inconsistencies.

The thought occurred during a recent trip by car through five EU countries. Why, for example, should 'hogging the middle lane' be looked upon as a sin in the UK when it doesn't seem to raise an eyebrow across the Channel? Why does Germany impose no permanent speed limits on some two thirds of its total Autobahn length while the French impose an autoroute maximum of 130 kilometres per hour, which is roughly 11mph higher than Britain's top legal speed of 70mph, reducing it to 110kph in bad weather, or about 68mph?

There's nothing quite like motoring to bring out the worst daftnesses and xenophobia in otherwise reasonable people. The UK's new lane discipline rule is a classic symptom. If you drive in the middle lane at the relevant speed limit you harm nobody save those who want to speed illegally. Anyway, isn't it safer to stick to one lane rather than continually pulling in and out? As for 70mph limit on British motorways, I have heard it argued, quite seriously, that you might as well up it to 80mph because everyone treats that as the

maximum already. What if it were increased? Would 90mph become the norm?

Perhaps I should no longer be surprised, after the excesses of personal greed which have characterised the past few decades, that petrolheads should still demand the right to pilot a lethal weapon without restrictions. A foreign based, British hotelier once grumbled to me, in genuine outrage, that he had been caught speeding by a camera *after* he had passed it. So in his book dicing with the law was no different from winning a penalty by diving, provided the referee was fooled, or failing to walk after nicking a ball to a catcher in slips, so long as the umpire didn't raise a finger.

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As for xenophobia, the British, on the whole, believe they're better at driving than Johnny foreigner, which is highly debatable, and that standards elsewhere tend to be worst in France and the Mediterranean countries, which is also questionable. In fact statistics suggest that motorway deaths in the UK, France and Italy are now broadly similar but that those in Spain - and Germany - are much higher (it should be noted that across Europe there are many more deaths on rural roads than on motorways).

But accident statistics take no account of the quality of roads or weight of traffic. The German Autobahn network for example, which once

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi

attracted international envy in measure equal to the revulsion felt for the Nazi regime which hastened their introduction, is now bedevilled by dual carriageway bottlenecks. Because of Germany's central position in Europe the proportion of foreign vehicles using them is higher than that on similar roads in other European states. My recent trip took me from Weimar (it was during the ill starred Weimar Republic that the Autobahns were conceived) to the Tirol. It was a Saturday in the peak July holiday period. The journey was a nightmare of roadwork jams to rival the worst of those experienced during the great French summer escape to the countryside and coasts.

So, in the absence of reliable figures, one falls back on anecdotal evidence and the temptation to generalise about national traits is hard to resist. The Belgians I surmised flippantly on my travels, must be required to demonstrate an ability to tailgate at high speed in order to pass their driving tests. The Germans have a similarly nasty habit of zooming up to within inches of your back bumper in the outside lane when it's obvious you are overtaking a slow lorry and will pull over as soon as you can. In Greece a driver once overtook me on the left while I was signalling to turn off left in that direction and in Palermo I witnessed a Sicilian

driver overtake another in the same lane. In mountainous countries such as Austria drivers display a disturbing tendency to cross the centre line while negotiating tight bends.

Just as Britain's motorway speed limit continues to prompt demands for a review, so Germany's comes up, from time to time, for debate. During a conversation last year with representatives of the German tourist industry I suggested that visitors might be deterred from repeat trips by the white knuckle experience of Autobahn driving. On the

contrary, one replied, the lack of constraints might actually attract them. Besides, in the land of "das Auto", slowing drivers down would cost too many votes. When one German politician suggested it a

commentator retorted that he might have well have proposed a ban on sausages.

I suspect that, not very deep down, most petrol-heads across the EU know very well that the measures which provoke their ire, from speed cameras to speed limits, save lives. So despite the self serving sophistry which would be levelled against it, the difficulties of introducing consistent, Europe wide regulations might not prove insurmountable. But there's no need for UKIP's leader to stock up with sleeping tablets just yet.

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