The car industry needs to clean up and reinvent itself - with our support

Written by Elżbieta Bieńkowska on 7 April 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

The aftershocks of dieselgate are still being felt, but together the Commission and Parliament are moving forward on effective legislation, says Elżbieta Bieńkowska.

It's been almost a year and a half since the news of the Volkswagen emissions cheating broke, but the aftershocks still seem to reverberate across the car industry.

Almost every day, Europeans discover more car manufacturers have been involved in suspicious - if not illegal - activities and discover that their cars pollute more and consume more fuel than they were led to believe.
Consumers feel cheated, and rightly so. To restore trust in our automotive sector, member states must urgently establish the full extent of the wrongdoing.

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The Commission has acted with determination to ensure rules are properly policed and enforced, and we will not shy away from opening new cases where evidence shows rules have been broken.

Dieselgate is a wake-up call for car manufacturers to reconcile the interests of industry, consumers and the environment.

Well-run car manufacturers have sound internal controls, good risk management and respect both the letter and spirit of the law, treating their customers honestly and fairly. They compete by innovating in areas like automated driving and see zero emission cars as an opportunity, not a threat. They understand that their international competitiveness and export strength relies on their ability to change, renew and excel.

To date, industry and member states have not shown their full commitment to change and cooperate. That's why the Commission and European Parliament must present a united front.

The European Parliament is a strong ally and has complemented our work on many fronts. The EMIS committee in particular has done important work shedding light on what went wrong in the first place, work that we have fully supported from the start. We have taken on board their criticisms. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear many things could have been done differently.

I am glad that the EMIS committee report also expressed support for the Commission's work on improving the rules to measure car emissions. A new robust procedure to measure NOx emissions in real driving conditions will become obligatory from September this year. Europe is the first in the world to mandate such tests. We have also expanded the rules to particle emissions and further strengthened the tests to minimise opportunities to cheat.

The Parliament supports our work to improve the worldwide harmonised light vehicles test procedure (WLTP) for measuring CO2 emissions as well as our guidance to member states on how to enforce the ban on defeat devices.

But the real opportunity to show our common resolve is in swiftly adopting our proposal to overhaul the vehicle type-approval system and improve the market surveillance of vehicles in Europe.

Cases like Volkswagen have left no doubt that under the current system, member states have failed to police the car manufacturers on their territory.

As the recent mediation between Germany and Italy on Fiat has made clear, the Commission's power
to act has been limited to observing from the sidelines. With the aim of strengthening independent and uniform supervision across the EU, EMIS has also proposed the creation of a European vehicle surveillance agency. This option merits discussion as part of the debate on the future of Europe, as laid out in the recent White Paper.

In the meantime, the Commission proposal that has been on the table for over a year now allows for rapid and tangible progress in the interest of our citizens. We have no time to lose.

We're glad that the Parliament's internal market and consumer protection committee has accelerated work and its report goes in the right direction. We hope to see a constructive debate on our proposal in the Parliament's plenary so that negotiations with Council can begin soon, leading to speedy adoption with a high level of ambition.

Nonetheless, we cannot stop there. To guarantee that our car industries can continue to compete globally, it is not enough simply to improve the emissions profile of current combustion engines. The race now is to create a future of zero emission cars. Ultimately, this is what our citizens expect from us.

To keep pace with the world, we should act now. The Commission is already thinking in this direction - in particular how we can improve the life of batteries that power electric cars and the infrastructure that supports them. Right now, we're discussing these ideas with stakeholders at the first conference on connected and automated cars. We hope to develop more concrete proposals soon.

I am confident of a bright future for European carmakers. The Volkswagen and other emissions revelations have left visible scars on the industry but at the same time offered it the chance to reinvent itself, by modernising and embracing new technologies. As policymakers, we will support this transition with all means and policies available to us.

About the author

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