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The Hype Around Vehicle Autonomy Slows as Reality Prevails

Over the past couple of years, it seems that hardly a week has gone by without an article somewhere in the media about the demise of the human driven car and truck, both in Australia and globally. During this period the Truck Industry Council (TIC) has maintained that autonomous technology has not developed to the degree portrayed by the general media and that in fact on-road fully autonomous vehicles are some years away yet. In recent times the hype around autonomous trucks has slowed, perhaps as those not so well informed persons beating the autonomy drum realise that the driverless trucks they predicted would be flooding our roads “by 2020”, are in fact much further away than their headline grabbing and sensationalised stories suggested. TIC has always cautioned that there was a considerable disconnect between the technology development that is required to deliver full vehicle autonomy, versus the somewhat outrageous claims that were being suggested by many in the main stream media.

While the hype surrounding autonomous vehicles wanes a little, those same media outlets are now predicting the imminent death of diesel engined trucks, to be replaced by electric powered freight movers. Again, the timelines some are predicting are simply not realistic given the current level of technology that exists for electric powered heavy vehicles and the infrastructure that would be needed to support the “mass take-up” of such trucks on our roads. Globally the sales of alternative powered trucks, electric, hybrid and various gas types, is approximately 2 percent, and not increasing significantly year-on-year. In Australia the take up rate is considerably less, in 2018 just 51 alternatively powered new trucks were sold out of 41,628 new trucks, that is just 0.12 percent, about one seventeenth of the global average. TIC is forecasting that the mass take up of alternative powered trucks is some way off in Australia.....

Taking a closer look at one particular autonomous vehicle technology that has received wide spread media attention, that of truck platooning. Many in the media have championed truck platooning as the holy grail for interstate trucking. Trucks using electronic autonomous and connected vehicle systems that enable the very close slipstreaming of two, or more trucks, safely, to produce significant gains in fuel economy. Of course Australian transport operators have long realised the economic benefits of running multiple trailers close together, but we have used a far simpler approach, just mechanically couple them up. We call them B-doubles, B-triples and 2, 3 and 4 trailer Road Trains! Now the world’s largest heavy vehicle manufacture, Daimler, has announced publicly that they will not pursue truck

platooning technology. The company has been developing and testing platooning in Europe and America for a number of years with the original belief, that particularly in the United States, there would be operator benefits. However, results show that fuel savings, “are less than expected” even in perfect platooning conditions “and that those savings are further diminished when the platoon gets disconnected and the trucks must accelerate to reconnect”, said Martin Daum, head of the Daimler’s Truck and Bus Divisions, recently. “At least for U.S. long-distance applications, analysis currently shows no business case for customers driving platoons with new, highly aerodynamic trucks”. Daum did confirm that “Daimler Trucks will, of course, remain committed to all partner projects that are still ongoing.” This outcome has not surprised TIC.

TIC members will continue to bring to market vehicles and technologies that will enhance road safety for heavy vehicle operators and all road users, with Electronic Stability Control (ESC), Autonomous Emergency Braking Systems (AEBS) and Lane Departure technologies being some recent examples. Truck manufacturers will continue to deliver the cleanest possible engine technologies to enhance environmental outcomes that will benefit all Australian’s, for example Euro VI and equivalents and of course trucks with systems and technologies that deliver bottom line enhancing outcomes for truck operators. A good example of this are the latest CO₂ reducing driveline systems that have been developed internationally with Euro VI and equivalent engines, delivering better fuel economy and the resultant fuel savings for their owners. However, these future technologies will only be brought to market after they have been thoroughly tested and proven for Australian operating conditions. Such timeframes may be notably longer than the unrealistic timings suggested by some, who are looking more for a sensationalised media headline, rather than reality.

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