



Turquoise car: nervous



Ben Hedley, Lembit Opik, Wayne Mitchell, Lord Liverpool and Paul Rowen



Opik coaches PAN's Sam Macrory



Rowen admires Opik's Segway skills



Lord Elton with Lord Liverpool

Photos: Kaz Kapusniak

“If they arrest me, bring it on”

Lembit Opik MP

A public affairs firm campaigning to get Segways approved for use on Britain's public highways invited PAN's Sam Macrory to a demonstration of the device in Westminster

Launched in a blaze of global publicity nearly eight years ago, Segways – the controversial ‘two-wheeled self-balancing electric vehicles’ – continue to await a legislative green light for use on public highways in the UK.

Cavendish Communications, which is lobbying for their UK distributor, invited PAN to test the device in the House of Lords car park, alongside Segway-UK's Wayne Mitchell, Ben Hedley from ‘carbon offset’ company Clear, and parliamentarians including Lib Dem MP Lembit Opik.

Countdown to ‘S-Day’

Opik – whose distinctive features have become Segway's unofficial parliamentary face – led a “12-man convoy” in a protest drive last year from Parliament to the Department for Transport (DfT), where he delivered a note calling for their approval.

Now Opik plans to raise the PR stakes by taking the lead role in a planned ‘S-Day’ (Segway Day), scheduled for the next few weeks.

Declaring himself to be “absolutely pig-sick of the cowardice of the DfT when it comes to Segways – they always give us a vague and unspecified rejection of the technology without explaining why”, Opik is aiming to be photographed on S-Day riding a Segway around Parliament Square and Millbank, with the evidence to be handed in at Charing Cross police station along with a request for Opik's arrest. If, after half an hour, no arrest is forthcoming, Opik will “regard Segways as legal in this country – as I already do”.

But should the Met's finest arrive to take Opik to the cells, then he will go willingly. “If they arrest me, bring it on. I am very happy to be a Segway martyr in the interests of commuting, the ecology and common sense.”

Opik continues: “It has been approved by over 1,000 security forces across the world and hundreds of thousands of users, but the British government tell us they may not be legal. Unfortunately they're unable to point at a single piece of legislation that says they are illegal. We've had enough.”

Segway-UK is working with Cavendish to make the case to the Department for Transport (DfT) for Segways to finally be approved for use in Britain's public space.

Having lobbied for Segway since the Road Safety Bill arrived in Parliament at the end of 2005, Cavendish's Murray Stewart acknowledges the apparently “slow progress” on the issue but says he is encouraged by the “solid cross-party support” that has built up behind Segways.

Stewart is calling for the DfT to hold a trial to “see for itself just how safe a Segway is”. Lord Adonis, the transport secretary, is known to have sampled one – but Stewart wants an official test. “Most other countries have brought this forward, so it's about time that we hold a trial,” Stewart explains, pointing out that use of Segways is now permitted in Holland and Sweden.

He must also contend with the cycling lobby, who after a long campaign for their own cycle lanes are loathe to share their space, while the motor industry is yet to be convinced.

Stewart's current public affairs approach inevitably involves trying to align the campaign to the government's green goals. He sounds hopeful that a Conservative government may prove more amenable: “The shadow transport and Defra team have been enthused, but whether they will commit is another question. Our next task is to seriously talk to them; to try to get them to include it in that 2010 programme.”

Lord Elton joins in

As Lord Liverpool – a Segway enthusiast – motors around the car-park, an inquisitive passer-by, 79-year-old former Tory minister Lord Elton, asks to join in. Despite a bad back, he takes to the Segway with ease. A “proud owner” for three years since he saw a US policeman using one, Lord Liverpool says his Segway-supporting speeches in the Upper House see only the government argue against him.

Opik, back in command of the Segway, is explaining his S-Day plans to a passing policeman. “There isn't a word of legislation in the British statute that points to their illegality,” he concludes. “I'm confident enough to put my Segway where my mouth is and challenge them in a final stand-off.”

After returning to the office, PAN called the DfT, which responds that it has concerns about Segways' safety but that it has a “constructive relationship with Segway promoters and is considering what further evidence would be needed to inform decisions on any changes to current policies”.

The present, then, remains an uncertain place for the so-called vehicle of the future. Best make a date for Opik's great Segway showdown. PAN

Segways

FACTFILE

- A Segway's top speed is 12.5 miles per hour; it has a range of up to 24 miles; it takes up to eight hours to recharge once the batteries have run down
- The Segway i2 transporter costs £4,795; the Segway x2 transporter costs £4,895
- More than 1,000 police departments and security agencies use the Segway PT worldwide