

Taxi drivers' slam plans for new metre changes

CORK taxi drivers have denied that they are charging customers at Cork Airport excessive fares.

The claim came from the country's taxi regulator, Ger Deering, who criticised today's 24-hour stoppage by drivers, 800 of them in Cork, against new regulations he is to introduce shortly.

The new taxi regulations — which include a nationwide standardised method of charging taxi customers — were announced by Mr Deering last March.

The new regulations have been met with anger by members of the Irish Taxi Drivers' Federation and escalated into the union calling for its members to withdraw their services for seven hours in Cork city last month on the June Bank Holiday weekend.

Today however, Derry Coughlan, from the Cork branch of the ITDF, said these strikes will continue until Mr Deering adopted a more reasonable attitude to the matter.

But Mr Deering isn't convinced that the majority of taxi drivers in Cork have a problem with the new regulations.

"First of all, I don't think this action is in the interest of the customer or the industry.

"I would also ask them to be respectful of those who don't wish to take part in the strike.

"The last strike had absolutely no effect in Cork or around the country because a bulk of the drivers don't support this action," he claimed.

"This is a very small number of people who will be putting forward this action and those that are do not have full support from all drivers."



The scene in Patrick Street during a previous stoppage last month. Picture: Cillian Kelly



OLGA CRONIN

Mr Deering said he believed the taxi drivers who are upset in Cork are the small number of drivers who work out of Cork Airport.

Cork Airport lies outside the Cork city taxi meter area.

Because of this, there are no laws governing how much a taxi driver can charge customers who are leaving the airport, therefore giving taxi drivers carte blanche on deciding what to charge passengers leaving Cork Airport.

"The nub of this debate is that, at Cork Airport, taxi drivers can charge what they like.

"In our consultations we found that people are being charged an awful lot when they take a taxi from Cork Airport to a place outside the taxi meter area, into the county.

"We have identified this as a huge issue for

people. In fact, it is one of the single biggest issues.

"This is something that doesn't happen so much in Dublin because most people who leave the airport are going back into the city and so they are not going out of the taxi meter area.

"Basically, when driving out of Cork Airport, the taxi drivers can charge what they like, there is no control.

"That's why some of these taxi drivers are unhappy in Cork but it's only a small number," he said.

Mr Deering said the new regulations will fix this problem because instead of having 30 different taxi meter areas across the country, Ireland will become one taxi meter area with one standard method of charging customers, leaving no room for overcharging no matter where anyone is in the country.

Mr Deering also criticised the claim that Cork taxi drivers will be put out of pocket by the regulations and even said that they are in line for a rise.

"Overall, there is a moderate increase for taxi drivers in Cork. What will be happening here is that there will be a balancing out of fares," he said.

Mr Deering also refuted the claim by Mr Coughlan that he has based his new regulations on the taxi system in Dublin, not taking into account the rest of the country.

"I have had consultations and meetings across the country — from Letterkenny, to Cork, to Kilkenny — and I am extremely conscious of my remit to accommodate for drivers and provincial towns and issues."

Another gripe made by Mr Coughlan is the rule that taxi drivers found not to be compliant could face a €250 on-the-spot fine.

However, Mr Deering said there is no reason to be afraid about the rule.

"Any driver who provides a quality ser-

vice has nothing to worry about."

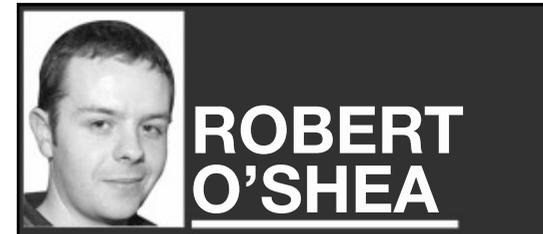
"Nine enforcement officers will be blitzing areas across the country to carry out high-profile and covert enforcement operations. This will be a new era for enforcement."

He also said the cost of the new skills development course — being touted as €500 and making the drivers take five days off the road — is nonsense.

"I have no idea how much they are going to cost and we are only going out to tender for the development of it now so I don't know how anyone could know how much it costs," he said.

He envisages taxi drivers being able to do the course one night a week over a course of a couple of weeks; completing it via a DVD before taking an exam and, for those who need it more urgently, taking a high-intensive course over a number of days.

"People are always nervous about change but unfortunately this shows a lack of understanding. These regulations have been carefully created," he said.



ROBERT O'SHEA

WHILE I was perusing a newsagent's stand one day last week, and attempting to wrestle one wandering eye away from the top-shelf section, the other eye's gaze alighted on a headline from an English newspaper.

"Israel: We will attack until Hizbullah is destroyed," it read.

I shook my head. Perhaps you think this shake meant, "Ah, the Middle East. They have been fighting over this land for 4,000 years and they will probably be fighting for 4,000 more. There is no solution to this problem."

This is not what my head-shake intended to convey and I do have a solution to the Middle East crisis, which I will reveal if you are patient enough.

No, my involuntary head movement was a disapproving gesture, one that disagreed with the spelling of Hizbullah.

This is just a personal preference, but I prefer Hezbollah.

I also favour Taliban over Taleban, Al Qaeda over Al-Q'aida and Hot Babes over Hot Babez.

When it comes to Islamic militant organisations, certain media outlets tend to diverge on the issue of spelling. Why this is, I do not know. These titles are all taken from languages with different alphabets, so I guess once they are phonetically correct there is little point in getting too heated up over it.

But wouldn't it be a mite misleading if a newspaper in Beirut referred to our former terrorist freedom fighters as the 'NRA' and unintentionally suggested that the National Roads Authority was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent people? Perhaps.

Names, as we can see, are tricky things and even when the spelling is undisputed, there can be trouble waiting ahead.

For example: "In Penny Lane there is a slave trader selling Africans..."

Yes, the street made famous by Ringo Starr was named after a merchant of slavery. Liverpool Town Council has decided, in an attempt to rid any association with these historically inconvenient fellows — (slave traders, not the Beatles) — to rename all seven of the city's streets that are connected with the people trade of the 18th Century. So, from now on, one of the most significant tourist sites in Liverpool, in-

stead of being called after Mr James Penny Esq., will be known as An Daingean.

Or not, as the case may be, because there's been quite a furore developing over the issue on Merseyside, with Liverpoolians, Evertonians and Tranmere Roverians agreeing that this is a step of political correctness too far.

A renaming that will go ahead is that of the characters who make up the Famous Five. Julian, Dick, Anne, George, Timmy and Aunt Fanny are out and names like Josh, Todd, Emma, Rachel, Heathrow and Aunt Jacqui are in.

Will this set a precedent? Could we soon be following Jason Bloom, as he meanders across Dublin on June 16? Will the great men who tread the boards soon be forced to utter: "Alas poor Derek, I knew him well?" And is there a better ring to Jack Christ?

It is the militant organisations who would probably benefit the most from modern, edgy names.

Think IRA and what do you see: Balaclavas, AK-47s, Shergar, silhouettes with actors' voices; kneecaps. But this is the 21st Century. Let this band of men from here on in be known as the iRA, and who knows what sort of funky direction they will take.

OK, as promised, my solution to the Middle East troubles. And yes, it involves names.

I suggest a complete renaming of everywhere in the Middle East. Beginning with Middle East, it would become instead The Surly Coast. Maybe if they knew everybody else in the world thought they were irritable, they might try to improve their behaviour a little.

Next, all the violent hot-spots would be given cute names. Tel Aviv would become Fluffibummville, while Haifa would be known as Toytown. When can you imagine someone on the news saying:

"There's been an escalation of hostilities in Fluffibummville..." or "A tragedy hit Toytown today..."

And I would love to hear Jerusalem become something amusing like Blunderscreek.

If all the names were changed, the historical ties would be loosened and in a generation or two no one would know where they were originally supposed to come from and all would live peacefully together.

If these changes are made, it will happen. Or my name isn't Robart O'Shay.