

## HAVE CAR CLUBS HAD THEIR DAY?

In a conventional sense, I mean. I certainly hope not and while it does look as though some will probably not survive, others look set to be superseded by 21st century versions of themselves. I've been a member of various car clubs since the mid-1970s and have seen many different approaches to fulfilling their quite varied objectives. However, over the last ten years or so I have witnessed the phenomenon of well-established organisations becoming complacent and simply refusing to respond to the changing needs of their members and the changing world around them, often because the people in control have become so set in their ways that they are simply on auto-pilot.

A good example of this can be found in an Italian car club of which I was a member during the 1990s. At that time it was an umbrella organisation covering almost an entire range of models stretching back around 100 years, but those running it had become very inward-looking, literally so in that they could be seen at meetings sitting around a table facing each other! The organisation was obviously running out of steam and a particularly fraught EGM did nothing to stabilise things, so one by one separate one-model clubs began to be set up as the more enthusiastic types broke away.

Ultimately an internet-based club covering all models was also founded and this has successfully made the transition from people just talking about their interest to having a major representation at events while the original club –still with some of the same people present!- continues to chunter along, seemingly oblivious of all that has happened around it.

Later I found myself so concerned with the apparently rudderless drifting of another Italian car club that I had joined that I unwisely accepted an offer to become one of its committee. This quickly turned into something of a revelation as I found myself surrounded by a disparate group of people with little vision and lacking any cohesive approach to running and developing an organisation, each instead being either solely interested in promoting their own ideas or simply rubber-stamping anything

which the arch-manipulators among them chose to put before them.

None of them were interested in empowering the membership to realise their ideas and aspirations: Indeed, they were alarmed by anything which did not come down from the top of the organisation and during my tenure they successfully managed to alienate various productive and hard-working people who were putting much effort into attempting to take the organisation forward.

In a parallel with the club mentioned first, a rival internet-based organisation was also founded for this make and while it has yet to fully make the transition into also spanning the 'real' world it is very successful in what it does. In fact, the original club tried to copy its impressive internet presence, but its dead hand has systematically reduced this to being an almost useless tool for the wider membership, with heavy moderation stifling any meaningful debate. Indeed, its chairman has threatened to do away with this aspect just to make sure that it remains in its own Dark Age.

However, having recently joined yet another club, I was astounded to find that it possessed many identical managerial and operational flaws which permeated my former organisation. It may not be insignificant that it too is long-established and it seems to share exactly the same major defects, epitomised by its not being able to capitalise on over 40 years of experience due to having lost sight of what it was trying to achieve in the first place. While it flounders -with its excellent aspects in danger of being swamped by the bad- just as in the above cases a more vibrant organisation has been founded by those who felt that their needs were not being addressed.

So, is there an answer? I think that there is and feel that the secret of a future for car clubs lies in change, but as a process of evolution rather than revolution. Car clubs need to evolve like everything else in the world and those running them must understand that the regular reinvention of such bodies is the key to success. Encouraging fresh ideas and new blood is the only way that any business -for that is what they effectively are- can hope to survive and it is equally important that those running

these groups think from the bottom up rather than the top down, thereby keeping in touch with what their fee-payers want and making sure that they are best placed to be able to deliver it. While there are certain external pressures upon them, the future -or not- of car clubs is really in their own hands.

***MJB***