



Ken Newton,
CEO. VASA

Under the Southern Cross

Slinging a stone at flammables

Many is the time that I've sat in a high-backed cane chair sipping that wondrous elixir the Singapore Sling in the gardens of Raffles Hotel in that bold little no-nonsense economic hub of South-East Asia, Singapore.

I say 'bold' and 'no-nonsense' for a reason. You've got to admire a country which has the intestinal fortitude to enact laws with corporal punishment – a good whack with the rattan cane, or a good hanging if you've really been naughty, for a range of misdemeanors such as vandalism, air rage and outrage of modesty. And there are on-the-spot fines for jaywalking, chewing gum and smoking in public places. In fact, you risk a hiding with the rattan if you attempt to import chewing gum into Singapore. As for drugs, forget it. The word DEATH is in red capital letters on every entry document.

What I like about Singapore, apart from the great food and the Singapore Sling, is its common sense approach to law and order and business. It is in the top four of the world's leading financial centers, it has one of the busiest ports in the world, there are more millionaires per capita than any other country, and the World Bank reckons Singapore is the easiest place in the world to do business.

Of course it helps to have what really amounts to a benevolent dictator government. The People's Action Party has won every

election since the Brits granted self-government in 1959. Over the many years I spent on documentary projects in Asia, I looked forward to the regular television broadcasts by the country's founding father Lee Juan Yew who holds the world title as the longest serving prime minister (three decades). His broadcasts made so much sense. No spin, no politics, just good solid fatherly advice and inspirational leadership without any of the doublespeak we have come to expect from our western politicians.

You need to have this background (wait till I finish before you Google the Singapore Sling recipe) to appreciate the recent announcement by the Singapore authorities effectively banning the use of hydrocarbon refrigerants in all vehicles.

And before the HC lobby reads this and sticks pins in their Ken Newton/VASA dolls I hasten to add that there's nothing wrong with natural gas as a refrigerant, but it has a problem. It explodes readily, and no vehicle has yet been invented that was designed to use hydrocarbons as a refrigerant in the A/C system.

VASA, having fought battles for many years to keep HC out of vehicles, could never quite understand that if hydrocarbon refrigerant is so good, why hasn't someone designed a safe system for it? The car makers quite obviously don't want to take the risk. Imagine the impact on your brand if yours was the first car in the

world to explode and kill its occupants because of the combination of a leakage of refrigerant into the cabin and a spark from a door switch?

So when the Singapore Civil Defence Force issued an international directive banning the use of flammable refrigerants in motor vehicles from April 1st of this year, the e-mail containing the announcement travelled around this part of the world faster than an offer of a fortune from a long forgotten Nigerian family member.

And like all Singaporean edicts, there is a finality in this announcement which seems to imply that any dancing up and down by the natural refrigerant lobby will be a waste of effort. Besides that, it would be a brave lobby group to take on the Singapore Government which is generally regarded as experienced and highly qualified, backed by a highly skilled public service and an education system which recognizes meritocracy.

The Singaporeans, it seems, have been investigating refrigerants since 2009. "While we recognize that HC refrigerants have an edge over many refrigerants in terms of their environment impact, the main consideration is that HC refrigerant is extremely flammable and would pose a potential safety hazard to users and occupants. These are additional risks which can be avoided if safer alternative refrigerants or other refrigerant blends are used," said the official announcement. Sounds pretty logical, but so many governments, including our own, seem unable to articulate such a simple notion.

In Australia, one state virtually bans the use of HC in vehicle air conditioning systems, while most of the others have vague and untested precautionary clauses hidden in unreadable workplace health and safety regulations.

And as any of you who have ever met an Australian should realize, nobody reads regulations or 'how to' manuals, so flammable refrigerants continue to be used in vehicles by those backyarders who follow the rule, 'better to seek forgiveness than permission.'

Oh for a celebratory Singapore Sling right now. ✿

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