

Private Submission to the Vulnerable Road Users Enquiry

By Ron Brent

Background

I have been a licensed driver for over 40 years, a cyclist road user for over 50 years and a citizen of Canberra for over 50 years. In that time have driven my car, ridden a motorbike and ridden my bicycle on Canberra's roads, roads around Australia and roads in Europe, North America and Asia.

The following comments and views draw on that experience.

Key Issues

I believe that cyclists are Canberra's most vulnerable road users. While some of that vulnerability is inevitable given the inherent features of cycling (lack of physical protection around the vehicle, difference in speed between cyclists and faster traffic, and the difference in damage to a cyclist and a motorised vehicle when the two collide), there are factors that can be changed to improve the safety of cyclists.

Given the social merit of cycling it deserves strong and active support. As a form of commuting and transport cycling is environmentally sound, accessible to most of the community, and cost efficient for both cyclists and for society (in that it can save substantial amounts in reduced demand for roads, traffic management, parking and public transport infrastructure). As a recreation it is also, accessible, cost effective and environmentally sound.

The key issue for cyclists as road users is: given the high rates of injury and even death of cyclists on the road, what can be done to improve safety for this particularly vulnerable group of road users. Given that the ACT already sets a high standard in both on and off road cycle paths and signage I believe the key issue is the attitude of motorists to cyclists. This is a matter that can and must be addressed by government through a mix of public education, clear leadership from public figures and particularly leaders in government, active responses from government to inappropriate comments by journalists and commentators (some of which border on incitement to disregard the rights and safety of cyclists), and rigorous law enforcement where motorists disregard the safety of cyclists, especially where actions deliberately seek to intimidate or harm cyclists.

The Problem

The problem seems to stem from a series of deeply flawed notions held by some members of the public and the media, and freely propagated. These include:

- "*Cyclists break road rules and therefore don't deserve respect on the road*": this is flawed at two levels. While some cyclists break the rules (as do some motorists) a few easily noticed, recalcitrant cyclists is no basis for blaming all cyclists. More importantly, it is highly inappropriate and illegal for motorists to target other motorists who break road rules (that being a matter for the police). It is equally inappropriate for motorists to target cyclists who break road rules (and much more dangerous), but it is absurd, unjustified, outrageous and illegal for motorists to disregard the rights and safety of all cyclists because some cyclists behave irresponsibly!
- "*Cyclists don't pay for the roads and shouldn't be allowed to use them*": this is simply wrong. Road users are subsidised by rate payers and tax payers because fuel and registration taxes do not cover anything like the cost of roads. Thus cyclists subsidise motorists by virtue of making much less use of roads than cars and trucks do. Further, most cyclists also own cars and therefore pay registration charges but use roads less.

- "*Cyclists slow and interfere with traffic*": while an interaction with cyclists can interfere with or slow traffic it is critical to understand that if those cyclists were driving vehicles to commute or to attend forms of recreation other than cycling, the disruption to, and slowing of traffic would be greater. The disruption from cyclists that does occur is usually dramatically less costly in time and inconvenience than it is perceived to be.

The Solution

Until government is active in correcting the misconceptions above, and is active in educating drivers and the community at large that cyclists are entitled to be road users and must be respected, cyclists will be at much greater risk than they need to be. Given the social and economic benefits of cycling to the community it would be a cost effective measure for government to invest significant funds in changing attitudes to cycling, thus making cycling safer. The pay-off will occur in both reduced costs for dealing with the consequences of motorists causing unnecessary risk and injury to cyclists, as well as through the gains from seeing an increased take-up of cycling leading to social and economic gains for the community as well as the individuals themselves.

I believe the biggest single issue is policing. Currently police would seem to give a very low priority to following up on complaints from cyclists about motorists who have endangered them or indeed even where motorists have caused an accident and injury. All the cycling bodies around Canberra, and most of the regular cyclists can point to occasions where an incident that was actually or potentially very serious has not been properly followed up.

The second priority is to ensure that journalists and commentators across all media are educated not to propagate attitudes and myths that reinforce and even legitimise aggression by motorists to cyclists.

The third priority is to take direct action to educate drivers about the obligation to respect the rights of cyclists and to ensure that they understand that there will be consequences if cyclists are endangered or disregarded as road users.

In making the above points I do not want to overlook the importance of educating cyclists on the need to respect road rules and indeed to go further and ride defensively and courteously. This is an important part of the mix both in directly improving cyclists' safety and in changing attitudes to cyclists.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. Should you wish to clarify any aspect of it I am happy to be contacted as per the details in the covering email.

Ron Brent
Cyclist, motorists, road user.

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