

The Research Director
Transport, Housing and Local Government Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane QLD 4000

RE: Inquiry into Cycling Issues

Background

I am a 35 year old father of 3 with very little background in cycling. I rode a bicycle during my teens to Kenmore High, using the same stretch of road that claimed the life of Richard Pollett in 2011. That particular incident hit home for a number of reasons. One because as a teenager I had terrifying moments being passed by large vehicles, usually buses, along that stretch of road, but secondly because my wife unfortunately drove past with our then-2 children in the car and saw Mr Pollett unconscious on the road.

Two weeks before that incident, I had taken up riding the 15km from my home in Jindalee to my place of work in Spring Hill. My wife witnessing that incident raised considerable questions in her mind about my safety on my commute to and from work.

The recent acquittal of the driver who was involved in the death of Mr Pollett reopened wounds and had my family asking a simple question: how can a truck kill a cyclist and there be absolutely no punishment under the law? Quite clearly, the law is inadequate and I applaud this inquiry for trying to get it right in the interests of safety for vulnerable road users.

Summary of Submission

With 2 years of cycle commuting, my points relate around “utility” cycling. I am not a sports cyclist, nor intend ever to be one, and I feel cycling is too often marginalised as a leisure activity or extreme sport. And too often the assumption is that cyclists are either fit, confident, sporting cyclists who accept and understand the risks of riding on the road, or parents with children who are happy to plod along on the foot path to the local park. There’s a whole range of people in between who do and would use bicycles but for some fundamental inadequacies, which I will outline.

In my 2 years commuting I have not suffered an injury from a collision. But sometimes that’s been good luck and in spite of the cycling infrastructure, rather than good management and safe infrastructure...

Bad Infrastructure is worse than No Infrastructure

Brisbane does have some very good cycling infrastructure. My own commute utilises the Centenary, Western Freeway and Bicentennial Bikeways. These are superb separated infrastructure meaning about 75% of my daily commute is completely separated from motor traffic. What’s in between ranges from adequate to abysmal. Unless infrastructure is such that you would feel comfortable letting an 8 year old ride their bike on it, it is not adequate!

Sylvan Road On Road Bike Lane: This infrastructure is newly “upgraded” by BCC. To say it’s substandard is kind. Essentially all that was done was to resurface the road and repaint the bike lane

and on road car parks. The bane of a cyclist's existence is when a bicycle lane is supplied, but blocked with parked motor vehicles.



What should be a comfortable 2.5m wide bicycle lane gets compressed to provide barely 50cm of clearance past the truck door/mirror on a corner. This is simply unacceptable. You will note the position I took here was on the traffic lane to discourage drivers behind from attempting to pass me on this corner, as that would leave me potentially in danger if there's any obstacle hidden from view by the truck. *This fails the 8 year old safety test!*

Sylvan Road was an ideal opportunity to make the linkage between the Western Freeway and Bicentennial Bikeway to match the quality of those paths by making a separated, 2 way bike path along that road. That was initially the plan, but it was sacrificed at the complaints of locals to retain on street parking. This is typical of the decision making regarding infrastructure – who cares if it's safer for cyclists – vulnerable road users – if it inconveniences drivers then it's unacceptable!

Vanishing Bike Lanes: One of the most bizarre things we see throughout Brisbane is bike lanes that suddenly disappear where they are needed most – intersections, roundabouts, where lanes split or merge. A great example is on Roma Street, just past Parklands Drive.



As a confident rider, I know the best practice here is to check behind, signal right and move out at least 1m from the kerb and take a strong position. For new commuters, you see them move as close to the gutter as possible, which, given the left lane splits into two just ahead, is a terribly dangerous position. The only alternative is the footpath which, at peak times, is rightly populated with many pedestrians who do not expect a cyclist to come up behind them. This is simply poor road design. The bike lane should have continued to the intersection with Turbot Street.

This fails the 8 year old safety test!

Another example is on Edward St approaching Wickham Street:



This road is appalling. On my commute I need to go straight ahead across Wickham down to Astor Terrace. I need to move right into the only through lane, up a hill, and rely on the patience of drivers. Most times, with a good strong signal, they are fine. Sometimes not so much – I have been wedged by a driver trying to go straight through the left turn only lane in the past. The bike lane should continue up and beyond, through the intersection, with the green paint/dotted line enabling cars to cross through to the left while giving way to cyclists.

This fails the 8 year old safety test!

These are examples of infrastructure that might as well not be there. It shepherds cyclists into a position that is actually dangerous with poor options once you reach it and boxed in by motor traffic!

Bicycle Awareness Zones: The biggest flaw with these is people are unaware what they are. If you surveyed most road users they would tell you it's a bike lane. They then assume cyclists should be in the shoulder – often where there is little or no shoulder – and this leads to frustration and conflict. Again, either have a properly designed bike lane separated from both moving and stationary vehicles, or have nothing at all.

These fail the 8 year old safety test!

Road Laws and Speed Limits

The biggest risk where there is no specific bicycle infrastructure – which is most residential streets – is speed. On most suburban streets, 50kph is far too fast to provide a driver enough time to avoid a collision with a pedestrian or cyclist, particularly with children around. Roads are often littered with refuge islands, which create pinch points (narrowing of lanes) and despite the best efforts of the BCC, potholes, cracks, debris and drain grates. On most streets, the safest place for a cyclist to ride is what drivers complain about as “the middle of the road”. Drivers complain that they can’t “get past”, but more often than not a cyclist is riding in that position because they don’t feel it’s safe to be passed in that location. Drivers generally have a mindset that if the speed limit is 40, 50, 60, then they will do, 40 or 50 or 60.

Speed limits in residential streets should be no more than 40kph, and really, 30kph would be better still. Residential streets are for residents. Not for rat running or commuting. Larger residential streets should be no more than 50kph, while major suburban roads like Moggill Road, Dandenong Road, Horizon Drive should be the only candidates where sections should be 60kph or more. Importantly, wherever a road has a speed limit of 60kph or more AND is a known cycling route it should be legislated to have a separated bike lane or path.

Crossings: It seems a bizarre law that cyclists should dismount to cross a road except where there’s a cycling light. Nowhere is this better exemplified than the crossing of Moggill Road where the Western Freeway bikeway crosses. At either side is a zebra crossing, and the main crossing is a cycle crossing. To the letter of the law, cyclists must dismount, walk across the zebra, then they can ride across the main crossing on the light, and then dismount again and walk across the zebra before mounting and riding off again. Beyond stupid, and not one cyclist would do so. There is no reason why cyclists should be legislated to dismount. Just as a pedestrian needs to stop, look, listen and cross briskly when safe, cyclists can do exactly the same without getting off their bike. This is one law that provides no benefit for safety, and defies any logic.

Safe Passing Distance: There is much debate about whether the legislated safe passing distance should be 1m, 1.5m or a varying distance depending on the posted speed limit. What isn’t debateable is the absolute necessity of a quantified law regarding overtaking cyclists. While this isn’t likely to be enforced day to day, it provides a forensic line when investigating tragic cases where cyclists are hit by vehicles. It takes away the defence, as was used in the Richard Pollett judgment, that the driver “believed they had left a safe distance”. You either left the safe distance, or you didn’t. Had Mr Stevens had in his mind that he had to give 1.5m distance to Mr Pollett, there is a real likelihood Richard would still be alive today. The counter arguments against the passing distance are nonsensical. This is one law that is so easily implemented that WILL save lives.

Giving Way to Cyclists: Bicycles are without the safety and signalling devices motor vehicles are blessed with. I have a mirror so I can see behind me, and of course the mandatory lights front and back. My only other form of self protection is predictability – signalling, maintaining a consistent position and pace. If a cyclist is signalling right, either indicating that they need to move out into the lane or make a right turn, then it should be a requirement for drivers behind to slow down and allow them to move. The “must get in front” attitude of some drivers in that situation can and does cause injury and death. It is mandated to give way to buses that are indicating. It should be the same for cyclists.

Discourage laws that disadvantage the vulnerable: When an issue such as cycle safety comes up, often the solutions amount to little more than “Blame the victim”. A classic example is mandatory helmet laws. The answer to a perceived increase in the number of cycling crashes was to force cyclists to wear a helmet, instead of looking at why crashes were increasing and how to reduce them happening. The unintended consequence of that was to reduce cycling rates.

Similar ideas are being raised now – force cyclists to ride single file, force cyclists to wear hi-vis vests and clothing, ban cyclists from roads of a certain speed limit, force cyclists to pay registration so we can identify the bodies... There never seems to be any analysis or discussion of why cycling accidents and deaths occur or how they might be prevented. It is my hope that this inquiry is focussing on the why and the how, and not lump the responsibility on the vulnerable road users’ heads...again.

Education

While the focus should be on developing separated infrastructure to ensure a separated bike path runs parallel to every major transport route, there will always be a need to “Share the road” in some circumstances.

When I began commuting, one of the best things I did was join the Brisbane Cyclist internet forum. I was able to share my experiences, seek advice on safer routes to avoid areas I felt uncomfortable, and most of all, discuss techniques to improve my safety and comfort. I learned about concepts like “taking primary” or “taking the lane” to discourage unsafe passing by motorists, proper techniques for starting and stopping, how to perform basic maintenance on my bike, and most of all a sounding board to discuss particular incidents and what I could have done to avoid it.

As a driver my attitude has completely changed. Where I used to drive at the speed limit wherever possible, and be frustrated by slow cyclists, I now tend to drive a bit slower and where I see a cyclist drive cautiously and patiently to ensure their safety.

You are never going to get everybody onto a bicycle, but education for drivers about driving around cyclists is essential. This needs to be multi-pronged:

1. Advertising. The success of road safety campaigns, including how to drive around motorcycles, proves that it works. Having one about driving around cyclists would start creating better awareness – and leave the lycra out of it. While there’s nothing wrong with technical cycle clothing, there’s no doubt in the general population there is a negative association with cyclists in lycra. Children or an adult in “normal” clothes on a “normal” bicycle would help break the stereotype.

At the moment the only time cycling appears in the media is discussing the Tour de France, a road fatality, or a story on A Current Affair or Today Tonight attacking “dangerous MAMILS (middle aged men in lycra)”.

2. Driving test requirements. Driving around cyclists should be a more focussed area of the driving test for new drivers.

3. Cycle schools. Currently there's very limited opportunities for people to learn skills for cycling safely. More should be encouraged. Indeed a list of cycling best practice should be published on the TMR web site, discussing things like road positioning, the laws, being predictable, signalling.

Conclusion

I believe cycling safety can be greatly improved with some government cooperation at all levels to focus on:

1. Improving infrastructure: focus on separated infrastructure, and where bike lanes are provided forbid onstreet parking. Ensure bicycle infrastructure is safe for people from 8 to 80 years old;
2. Improving road rules: reduce residential speed limits, mandate a safe passing distance, mandate the requirement to give way to a signalling cyclist;
3. Education of all road users – drivers, cyclists and pedestrians.