

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Shepparton—Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

John Mullahy

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Dylan Wight

Anthony Cianflone

Jess Wilson

Wayne Farnham

WITNESSES

Fiona Johnson, President, and

Catherine Meredith, Treasurer, Greater Shepparton Bicycle User Group; and

Rhianon Norton, Member and

Brett Lancaster, Member, Shepparton Cycling Club.

The CHAIR: Welcome to this forum for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. Your participation today will help this Committee make recommendations to make our roads safer for everyone. While we will make this session pretty informal, there are just some formalities that I will cover. Today's forum is being recorded by Hansard. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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I just ask people to make sure their phones are turned to silent.

What we might do is have a bit more of an informal chat rather than grilling you with questions. I might invite you in a moment to introduce yourselves, and maybe you would like to speak about your organisations, and then we will have a chat. I will introduce the Committee first. I am Alison, the Member for Bellarine.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I am Kim. I see some familiar faces here. Lovely to have you here. Thank you for coming.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might start with you, and we will work down the line. If you can just introduce yourselves, that will be great.

Rhianon NORTON: I am Rhianon Norton. I am a Shepparton Cycling Club member. I ride my bike for fun and I compete as well, and I am currently coaching younger juniors coming through the ranks as well. That is me.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Brett LANCASTER: Brett Lancaster. I am from Shepparton originally, and I have moved back—I lived abroad for 20 years. My last country of residence was Spain, for the last 12 years. I am a professional cyclist. I have ridden in every country around the world and competed, and for the last seven years I have driven a motor vehicle in pretty much every continent, so I am very aware of road rules and laws. I have had licences in other countries. You name it, I have probably done it in a car—high-performance driving courses in the UK, Switzerland and north of Belgium—so a heavy road user. I have been back here for seven months and have made some good observations.

The CHAIR: That is wonderful. Thank you.

Catherine MEREDITH: I am Catherine Meredith. I am the Treasurer of the Shepparton BUG—Bicycle User Group. I have been a member for a long time and have ridden most of my life. I was a Cycling Victoria Breeze coach for a while before they disbanded that. The Shepparton BUG group do social rides on the weekends—on Saturdays and Sundays. Our rides cater for the people that turn up on the day—varying lengths, varying speeds that we design to be social to support riding.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Fiona JOHNSON: Fiona Johnson. I am the President of the BUG group. As Catherine has explained, the group also have weekends away. We are lucky in the country that we get to do things like that—get out of town. I have cycled for a very long time, travelling to work, for recreation and a whole range of things.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I think we just might open it up to questions. Kim, I might start with you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. And thank you all for coming. You have all got really great experience, and that is exactly what we want to talk about today, particularly when it comes to cycling with this group that we have got in front of us now. Brett, you said you have lived away—and I know you have—and you have come back to regional Victoria. What have you seen that perhaps highly concerns you, and what is the change that needs to happen? Does that make sense?

Brett LANCASTER: I do not want to be here ranting and raving—

Kim O'KEEFFE: No, but it is good to hear from you. Obviously you have been living overseas, and you have come back.

Brett LANCASTER: I might start with the grassroots, the licencing system and what I know about other countries and what they are doing. It is difficult because, you know, my son is out there riding—Rhianon coaches my son—and he is out there every day. It was 2006 when Scott Peoples died. I carried his coffin, and I was meant to train with him. So it is pretty deep, this safety thing.

A general observation is that Australia lags behind especially European countries with driving experience, road knowledge and safety. I think the main thing is thinking about each other. I think when Australians get behind the wheel it is about them and about them getting to their destination, whereas if you go for a licence in another country or whatever—like in Spain, where I was resident—you think about the other person. You think about merging—people do not merge properly here, in my opinion. People tailgate. It is stressful. I find I do not like driving in this country. I think it is stressful. In Spain you can drive a lot above the speed limit, or at a higher speed, and feel a lot safer on the roads. I know I am not talking about cycling here, but this is just an open discussion. On the major highway from Sydney to Melbourne there are crossroads still—people can drive across. That does not exist in Europe. It is all on-ramp lanes, and you enter at a high speed. So there is a lot that Australia needs with infrastructure, and I know that. I know that we are a small country, and it is a budget thing as well. There is a lot of work to be done, like with the licensing system and how we go about that and how kids are getting the 120 hours up. There used to be a system in place. You had to do some lessons with a driving instructor, now I believe you do not have to—correct me if I am wrong.

Kim O'KEEFFE: It is just with anyone that can give you the hours, yes.

Brett LANCASTER: Yes, jump in. I say that because my daughter knows somebody, a friend, that did 4 hours driving and went and faked the rest and went to New South Wales as a 17-year-old and got her licence. There are loopholes. It is not acceptable, in my opinion. How you go about changing those things?

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. You have obviously all got experience with regard to riding over many, many years. I was just wondering, with regard to the pandemic, have you noticed any changes in driver behaviour since COVID-19? And have your members changed, as a result of that, how they use the roads?

Fiona JOHNSON: I will start, perhaps. I rode all through the pandemic and loved it. It was fantastic.

John MULLAHY: Get rid of cars!

Fiona JOHNSON: Those that were out were doing something specific, so their behaviour was really good. I rode around town and did all of my shopping—everything—on my bike. I put my car away and thought, 'I'll just ride.' I hesitate now. I was going to get a coffee this morning. It was interesting. I reflected because I was coming here today, and I was thinking, 'Actually, I'm really uncomfortable riding my bike,' because people drive right beside you and—I think Brett has got it—people do not think you are a person. The attitude to bike riders is as if it is the wrong thing to be doing. It is a really strange attitude in Australia, I would agree completely. Overseas it is quite different. It is as if it is not a legitimate way to get around. People do not think beyond the car, and the latest stuff with all the technology and stuff of course has made that worse. But it is as if you are not a real person, and if they knock you—you know. It is sort of strange. It is a real disappointment. Bring on the pandemic! It was fantastic.

The CHAIR: Does anyone else want to add to that about cycling in the pandemic?

Catherine MEREDITH: I know my sister drives in Melbourne, and they noticed down there that perhaps more the older community, because they did not drive for a great length of time, when they got back things were not quite as good as what they were before, because they were not used to it. I know she had some accidents at school because of older drivers just getting out of the habit of driving. Whether you apply that now, three years later—I do not know that you would really notice it now. The roads are busier. I suppose also what comes into it is we are getting older, and we are getting a bit wearier too. I have had two accidents—cars at fault. We are tending to ride on bike paths now rather than roads, whereas before the pandemic we were on the roads all the time. Is it our age coming into it, or is it that there are so many more cars and it just seems busier and everything out there?

Rhianon NORTON: I will probably just add onto that in relation to the COVID situation: I think that during the pandemic it created an ‘us versus them’ mentality with the vaccination situation, but then it has probably heightened the ‘us versus them’ for road users. Cyclists are seen as a pest by a majority of motorists, and it is, ‘You don’t have registration; you shouldn’t be on our roads. It’s ours. You’re in our way.’ The majority of cyclists will hold a licence and maybe have multiple vehicles. I, for example, have three registrations that I pay an exorbitant amount of money for, and I have the right to use the road, but there is the view that you should not be allowed on the road without a registration. Well, I already pay TAC fees—times three—and I am sure most other people would as well. Just adding on to that, she was saying we are not seen as people. It is like an object—you are an object—but the person behind the vehicle is driving a weapon that is capable of killing. It is no different to a gun being pointed at you when you have got someone passing you, like you could reach your hand out and you would be touched; or they pass you and turn directly in front of you, which I have had happen recently—you scream and slam the brakes on; or full bottles of water thrown out the window at your back; or people leaning out of the windows just two weekends ago, screaming at you because you are riding your bike; and the riders and the juniors that we coach, they are going to be the next Olympians in the future, but riders can get taken out and killed, like Brett said about Scott, in 2006. It is just not right.

Fiona JOHNSON: And you do not see police on the roads checking. In the pandemic they were checking we were not riding together, and we got caught, but anyway. That is just life. But you do not see cops out there checking, and people pass super close. There are lots of really good people. That is not the issue. The issue is if you are on a bike and there are enough people who pass super close or pull in front or jam their brakes on, you are in big trouble. It is those people that you really need to focus on, because there are lots of good people out there.

Rhianon NORTON: I tend to find that if one person passes me super close, the next few vehicles bear wide, because they have seen how close it actually has been. There is actually a viral video out there from another country, an Asian country, where there are bus drivers. They are sitting in a seat and they are on a stationary bike and they have the buses drive right close to them so the driver experiences how scary it is to have a multi-tonne vehicle go past you, because not only are they getting close, there is a wind suction that happens and it draws you toward the vehicle as they go past.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. From the evidence we are hearing—and I want to ask about minimum passing distance laws—it is clear that a large proportion of people are not adhering to those laws. In what way can they be better enforced to increase safety for cyclists on the road?

Catherine MEREDITH: My sister in Melbourne has not seen an ad on it. We have had ads up here, so I do not know whether the ads we got up here on 1.5 metres et cetera were televised in Melbourne, but you have city drivers coming to the country. If they do not know what is expected, your city drivers get to the country and they relax. They are used to seeing bikes around the town. They are not used to necessarily having bikes on the roads in the country and so they are not concentrating or not necessarily looking. Are they aware of what the distance is supposed to be?

Rhianon NORTON: And just further to that, there are no bike lanes, so you have roads that are most of the time the width of a vehicle each way. For example, I have taken photos—and there is one behind you right now—of the potholes and things that you will experience that are on the edges of the road. This one is 10 centimetres deep, so you are having to go around and change your line that you are riding and cars will

maybe, if they are not paying attention, look down at their phone again, anticipating you to stay in where that left wheel will be, but you have to move around it to be safe. These are just one road.

Fiona JOHNSON: And there is no edge, is there?

Rhianon NORTON: There is no edge. It just goes straight off from sealed road and it could drop down, or there is a massive build-up of bitumen there, just straight off, and most road bikes have very narrow tyres. You cannot go off road; you will end up on your head, so you have got the choice between just hoping that the person behind you respects your life enough, and breathing a sigh of relief when they go past. You risk your life every time you go out on the road.

The CHAIR: Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you all for appearing today; it is great to have another BUG. We have heard from many BUGS over the past few hearings. I think probably a good segue there would be looking at improving the infrastructure of our roads. Do you have any specific thoughts around how the Government could invest in improving cyclist infrastructure in particular? We hear a lot particularly in Melbourne around bike lanes. Obviously in inner Melbourne that is a huge focus, and in part of the areas that I know we represent, it is a big part of the road infrastructure. But it is a little bit different in regional Victoria. Obviously we have got city centres like Shepparton, and then we have spoken today about satellite towns, but then much wider, broader country roads, maybe not in the best state. But I am keen to get your thoughts on the infrastructure.

Rhianon NORTON: If you are going to seal this much road, why not add an extra 30 or 40 centimetres at least on the other side of the white line so that cyclists can ride on it and have a little bit more distance between that and the cars? Like, it is a little bit extra and, yes, it would cost more money, but at the same time lives get lost because we have got no choice but to be in the way of the vehicle. There are no bike paths. It is not like Europe, as you would know, where there are bike paths everywhere.

Brett LANCASTER: I am probably the wrong person to talk to, but I have just thrown my hands up—I do not ride on the road anymore unless I have to. I have got a gravel bike now which, essentially, if you know a bit about bikes, is a road bike with wider tyres. There are some great gravel roads around here. I have started a club, got the guys into that, and I took some guys out Sunday. You know, on these country roads you see a farmer and give them a little bit of a wave and you can have a chat and not have to worry about cars. I have risked my life a lot over the years in certain countries and had a lot of close calls. I have seen fatalities myself, and if I do not have to ride on the road—that is how much I feel. I rode my road bike probably about three times. I go to Strathbogie sometimes—it is okay over there, not much traffic. But I avoid riding on the road now. That is just me, and that is how I feel.

Take me back to Spain any time. There you will have a driver—it is just a society thing. It is the way people are geared here, a different—it is the 9-to-5, it is the grind. You know, people want to get somewhere, they want to go and see their kids. Spanish culture is a bit more—they will sit behind you and actually, ‘You can come past now’, and that is how it is. I do not have an answer for you guys around how we are going to change that mentality of Australians. I do not think you ever will. You are going to have that—I do not mean to stereotype people—football culture. You know, your beer and your pie and ‘effing cyclists’, or whatever have you. And that is Australia. Honestly, I do not know where to start with it. It is us versus them.

But at the same time there are cyclists out there that do not abide by the rules as well, and I personally get angry at them because it brings the right road users down. They think it is a race out there. They are all over the whole road. So it is not just drivers, it is educating bike riders to do the right thing, which brings us all down because then someone sees that and they think everyone is like that.

The CHAIR: Do other countries do better infrastructure, though, that you have seen?

Brett LANCASTER: Yes. I mean, if you go to a country like Denmark—I have been there three times in the last year—if anyone has been there, it is just amazing. You know, it is about the rider. If you go to Copenhagen, it is the rider first and then the cars second. It is geared around bikes. And with climate change and emissions and everything, I think Australia—we are trying to go that way, and we have to go that way and we should be encouraging bike riding a lot more. I know in Melbourne they are trialling—it is not bad riding on

some of the paths down there now. I ride the paths here on my gravel bike, and they are very good, actually. But for riders that need to go out on the roads, it is dangerous.

It is an education thing, and I know I am probably jumping topics here, but I do not think the laws are harsh enough around mobile phone users in the car. I think this country does a good job with drink driving, you know: booze buses, drug buses. I get a lot of people in the shop where I work come in and they have lost their licence. I personally honestly think: automatic loss of licence for using a mobile phone. That is when you would see action, real action—if you take it seriously, because in my opinion it is just as bad as drink driving.

Rhianon NORTON: Yes, there was a prominent cyclist in Bendigo who was run down by a girl who was using her phone a couple of years ago. The consequences are just—you have changed a family's life and a community's life because you needed to watch a video.

Fiona JOHNSON: I can imagine you get the stats on the number of deaths. It is also the injuries, and you would not even hear about those—someone has been run off the road and they broke their shoulder or something like that. The other thing is I think Australia just does not want people riding bikes, basically, because otherwise the roads would accommodate them and it would be a normal mode of transport. I would like to be able to not drive my car around Shepparton. It is flat as a pancake, for heaven's sake. Seriously, it is not that hard. And I am a keen cyclist, but I will not do it. You can have all these plans and blah, blah, but in reality, if we cannot do it in Shepparton, for heaven's sake, clearly the car gets priority. In your Committee, I think you need to admit that and just go, 'It is dangerous for cyclists.'

Rhianon NORTON: There is an intersection that was recently upgraded—Verney Road and New Dookie Road. The whole section has been redone. There is a bike lane that starts as you are heading north, and then it says 'Bike lane end'. Like, cool, I have become transparent—awesome; I will just teleport to the next section of bike lane that is 700 metres down the road. Meanwhile there is about 10 metres or more of landscaping that comes into that space where the bike lane could have ended. What sense does that make? Then the bike does get in the way of the vehicle, because you have got it narrowing down between a traffic island. The bike lane has ended and the bike rider has apparently disappeared but now is right in the way of two lanes of cars merging. Where is the sense in that? New infrastructure is being made, and made to disadvantage the cyclist with no forethought as to, 'Oh, what does this mean?' Baffling.

The CHAIR: Anthony. I am just mindful of time.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes, thank you. Thanks for appearing and thanks for your heartfelt evidence, acknowledging also Merri-bek BUG as well, who have previously appeared and advocated very strongly on behalf of local people who ride bikes. I just want to say thank you to them. I just wanted to concur to a large extent with some of the comments that Brett has made around the culture of driving in Europe. I have actually driven quite extensively in Europe myself over multiple occasions in large parts of it. It has always staggered me around the culture of the driving there and the tone of the drivers. It is just so much more respectful and accommodating to people needing to do different things on the road. I think that is really a poignant thing for the Committee to acknowledge on the record. That has always struck me when I have been over there. But I guess my question goes to exactly that: in Australia, I guess, what can we actually take from what is working culturally in Europe on the roads, and how can we try and work to educate or instil that in terms of the behaviours of drivers here on Australian roads? In your experience, Brett—and this goes back to one of the questions I asked earlier around Goulburn Valley road safety—what can we do as a committee and as a government to home in on actually encouraging and fostering positive, friendly behaviour on the roads?

Brett LANCASTER: It is a hard one to answer. As I said before, it is the way the traffic is geared here. One example is the speed limits in place—people are scared to go 103 and get a fine, so it comes in on 90 and you get banked up. I know this is a bit off-topic. When you go for a Spanish licence or a European one—if it is at 90 kilometres an hour, let them go to 120 to overtake. It just flows. You are on a freeway there and everything flows. Here there is under-passing, and it is a frustrating thing. It is not a nice place to drive, in my opinion, just the way we have set up roads in this country. It is a lot different if you have spent a bit of time driving in Europe. You are always looking in your rear-vision mirror for that other driver, being educated about that other person and what they might do and where they want to go. Community—I do not know. I mean, you have got to start young, don't you? I think it would not hurt going back to drivers going through a driving school. I know there is a cost incurred there. If you come from a low-income family possibly the Government subsidises that.

So it will take a few years to see what the results are in the long term, but if you educate from a young age, then it will show in maybe five years. It will take a while for that to come through, but I just do not agree with the way it is at the moment. You know, if you do not have a responsible parent and you jump in the Ls and you just drive, it is not right. I mean, there used to be some pretty graphic TAC ads. If you go down that path again, I do not know. They are still stuck in my head: ‘Hello, Kate’—that one, whatever it was. That is there still from when I was a kid. And I think they worked. They impacted. You can resort to that again. It is a hard question.

Rhianon NORTON: It is almost to the point where it would need to be on TikTok for anyone to see it because no-one watches free-to-air TV really from this current generation coming through. But even going into programs in schools around driving education and even bike safety, start introducing the road rules early with bike education programs. I know when I was in primary school, we were out at DECA here, and we had to stop at the stop lights and practice signalling. And you started learning the road rules as a child rather than going, ‘Haven’t paid attention because I’ve been staring at my phone for the last 10 years, and now I can get my Ls, but now I can’t stop staring at my phone.’ And there is no consciousness about the severity of the impact that they can have on someone else’s life, and people do not care to look outside themselves. Whether the messaging is, ‘If you kill someone today, you’re going to waste more time, you’re going to have to be stopped by police and you’re going to have to go to court,’ and all of these things that will impact you, because the empathy factor is just not there, so why not appeal to the selfishness in people, to go, ‘Look how this is going to impact you if you run someone over today,’ because people seeing a person riding—we are viewed as an object.

Catherine MEREDITH: I think the whole mentality thing, as Brett said, is going to take time to change. So I think therefore you have to look at what your roads are like in the meantime, because you can add bike lanes quicker than you will change a mentality. That is a generational thing. So I think you do have to look at, okay, do we need more bike lanes? Do we need more bike paths? You want to keep people moving. You want to keep people healthy. You cannot do that if you have not got safe riding for them. So I think the two things have really got to work concurrently so that we are making things safer as we are trying to change the mentality.

Rhianon NORTON: Main roads that are between towns in rural areas are going to be the main thoroughfare for cyclists because that is the path you are going to go for water and food and things like that. So on the road between Shepp and Euroa there is nothing. This is one of those. So it just is white line, straight off into gravel, and it is a 100-k-an-hour zone, and you can fit a car each way. There is nowhere to go. It is the same with out to Dookie. Every single road is the same; there is no shoulder, there is not even a little edge to ride on. And if there is a shared road sign, clearly we know that cyclists use it, but we do not give them any road to ride on.

The CHAIR: I am really sorry—I am mindful of time, and we have run out of time. And I know that we could have asked a whole lot more questions, so if there is something that has been spiked today or the conversation had led somewhere where you would like to add further information to us, please write to our Committee. We would greatly accept any further information from you if you have thought of something else after today. So thank you very much for your time. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.