

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Thursday 24 August 2023

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

#### **WITNESSES**

Dr John Symons, President, and

Elena Pereyra, Vice-President, BikeWest; and

Dr Sundance Bilson-Thompson, President, Freestyle Cyclists.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

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.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. I will just get everyone to mute if they are not speaking to help minimise interference.

Because we have got a couple of different organisations today, what we thought we might do is invite each of you to have a brief opening statement. You can talk to your submission, or you can add some extra information that you might like to have us ask about and unpick today to create some questions. Then we will go to Committee members, and they will ask some further questions. If you feel like you can answer it, you can just use the hand-up function on the Zoom there and put your hand up, and I will come to you to answer. We may not get through everything today. We will try and do as many questions as we can and get as much out of this session as possible. I am not sure who would like to start. Maybe, John, we will start with you, if you would like to give an opening statement.

**Dr John SYMONS:** Sure. I am just going to introduce myself, and I will throw to Elena in a moment. It is all a bit much to condense into 1 or 2 minutes, so we were just hoping to answer the questions and give more detail with respect to those questions, if that is okay.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, perfect.

**Dr John SYMONS:** My name is John Symons. I am President of BikeWest. We are an advocacy group for western Melbourne. Basically for us it is that we want to get more people on bikes with all the enormous range of benefits that come through that. Often the primary thing comes down to safety, which is one of the key issues. In my day job I am an academic at Victoria University. One of my areas of focus is I do look into the economics of road safety interventions. I have published in the *Lancet* on this as well as worked with UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA and the FIA Foundation, where I have done many studies in this area. The last big one I did was for the FIA Foundation, where we did some modelling around this area for the launch of the global decade of action on road safety in New York at the United Nations. I am currently working on another WHO project including this. As well as being my interest, it is also my work life. I will hand over to Elena to introduce herself.

**Elena PEREYRA:** No worries. Thanks, John. My name is Elena Pereyra, the Vice-President of BikeWest. My background is in architecture and regenerative urbanism. I am doing a PhD in the social spatial implications of infrastructure as urban commons. My role in BikeWest is particularly around equity and justice and kind of urban participation, including sustainable transport. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Elena, and thank you, John. Sundance.

**Dr Sundance BILSON-THOMPSON:** Hi. By way of introduction, I am a physicist. I teach in the Adelaide University physics department. I am the President of Freestyle Cyclists. We are an advocacy organisation in the same sort of way as our previous presenters from BikeWest; we were talking about them being a representation group for western Melbourne. We focus on transport cycling. We try to be nationally focused rather than state-focused, so we try to incorporate changes and information and progress from different states together to influence other states so that we are working at a national level. Our basic view is that cycling in Australia is held back by an overemphasis on the wrong aspects of safety policy. We should be looking at overseas. We should be looking at what works well in Europe, in North America and in other places, especially Europe—Europe is a very good example; it is very good for cycling—and seeing how the rest of the world looks at promoting cycling. I have been President for the past few years. I also have some experience as I stood as a Senate candidate for the 2016 federal election for the Australian Cyclists Party, so I have been involved in

campaigning for better cycling infrastructure and policies at a federal level as well as at a sort of volunteer level.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. I might head to the Committee members to ask some questions of you. If you do feel like you can answer them, you can just jump in. There are only three of you to jump in, but jump in or raise your hand—that would be helpful. Jess, I might go to you first.

**Jess WILSON:** Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you, everyone, for your time today and for your submissions. I think that one of the things highlighted in your submissions is that governments or authorities should probably focus more on road infrastructure than behaviour. Behaviour is something we have heard a lot about over the course of these hearings—that it can be a successful process to change behaviour but it is also a very long process to change people's behaviour. We have seen a change in behaviour post COVID, so this is an added complication. I would be keen to get your thoughts on the balance there and how the Government could focus on educational programs and behavioural programs and where there might be greater investment in infrastructure that might also help change the safety, I suppose, outcomes on roads.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. John.

**Dr John SYMONS:** Okay. The first time that we are aware of it being documented about people just behaving nicely and treating each other with respect is from 1913, and there have been subsequent road education safety programs every five to 10 years all around the world—and none of them have had any benefit whatsoever. So I think we have to move beyond this education program. The thing that drives behaviour is infrastructure; you have to get the infrastructure design correct in order for the behaviour to change. For whatever political reason, that does not seem to be the approach in Australia, but there is ample evidence, as Sundance was saying, in Europe, North America and now South America and even places in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Addis Ababa, where they are introducing protected cycling lanes. We have much to learn from overseas, and it starts with infrastructure. The UN released a report, the *Global Outlook on Walking and Cycling*, in 2016, where they said that 20% of all the road budget should be dedicated to active transport. We endorse that view. And when you improve the infrastructure, behaviour changes with that.

**Dr Sundance BILSON-THOMPSON:** I would like to pitch in there as well and say that I agree absolutely that infrastructure leads behaviour rather than the other way around, partly because we have a culture in Australia that really treats car use as if it is the default and as if it is the most legitimate form of transport, and as a result cyclists can often be viewed as interlopers in a space where they do not belong. Providing better infrastructure—providing roads that are actually designed to have separated bike paths rather than just a sort of ad hoc, last-minute, painted-on lane—really sends that message that cycling is a legitimate form of transport and that cyclists are people who deserve to be respected. I do not think you can really approach the problem correctly by trying to just tell people to be nice to cyclists. You have to show that they are legitimate transport users. You have to provide physical separation, because physical separation is what actually makes people safe, and as more people start to ride because they feel more encouraged to ride, they will start to empathise with cyclists more, and that is where the behavioural change comes in, as a secondary effect from that.

Once again, going back to the European example, in the Netherlands about 35% of commuter journeys are made by bicycle. That is actually more than the number of commuter journeys that are made by private motor vehicles. Motorists are extremely considerate of cyclists in the Netherlands because every motorist is also a cyclist, whereas in Australia you have a fairly large chunk of the population who just will not ever ride bicycles—they are in this sort of 'No way, no how' category in the Geller groupings of attitudes towards cycling—and those people do not empathise; they look at cyclists almost as a different species. There has been some really interesting research, which has come out just in the last year or so, which shows that the overemphasis on things like PPE, hi-vis clothing and the like is actually counterproductive. It actually leads to people dehumanising cyclists, viewing them as less than human, and that leads to the higher likelihood of aggressive behaviour towards cyclists. So if you really want to make cycling safer, you have to step away from the idea that we can push some of the responsibility onto cyclists and change behaviour, and step back and understand that the physical separation—the physical barriers that stop people from being harmed by preventing accidents from occurring in the first place—is the most important step.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Elena.

**Elena PEREYRA:** I would just add very similarly that everyone kind of knows someone who is a cyclist in many of these other countries, whereas here it is not someone that is your friend or neighbour or family. Part of that change is to create infrastructure where everybody feels safe so that everybody can participate. Otherwise it is just the people who are more likely to take risks and use that infrastructure that are then the ones that people see on the roads, and that is where you get more of that aggression happening, I guess, because you have the fast and furious riders rather than a broader cross-section, and so cyclists get pigeonholed as a particular type rather than just somebody that is, you know, a vulnerable road user.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Anthony, I might head to you next for a question.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for appearing and for your submissions. I just want to pick up on the point around the differences that different approaches by government make on improving road safety, just on your point around investment and policy on infrastructure versus behaviour programs. I just want to get your thoughts in response to, I guess, the difference that Victoria's approach has had when it comes to, for example, drink driving. We have had submissions from the TAC and we have had submissions from the Department of Transport, for example, and they have talked about the massive reduction in the road toll over the many years and decades since the .05 limit was introduced with drink driving, how we have had a 49% reduction basically since 1977 on the road toll when it comes to drink driving road crashes, and the role that public education and awareness and enforcement has played to tackle that as an issue.

I mean, what are your thoughts around a similar approach being adopted and introduced by the Victorian Government to promote awareness amongst motorists when it comes to respect and safety for vulnerable road users—people riding bikes, walkers and the like? I am just keen to get your thoughts on that.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, John.

**Dr John SYMONS:** To be brutally honest, it would be a complete waste of time. Using the TAC and breathalysing as an example, what goes along with that of course is enforcement. So the rate at which people get tested in Victoria is approximately you on average will be tested at least once per year, and this is probably the highest rate of being tested around the world. So the chances are if you are driving on a regular basis, you will be checked to see if you have a blood alcohol limit over .05 if you are a fully registered driver. Of course there is the graduated licensing scheme as well where you have to have a zero alcohol limit, but the key is enforcement.

Now, the shared road space with respect to the 1-metre laws are broken on a regular basis, and they are completely unenforceable. There is a recent paper by Nolan et al which shows that one in 20 passes by a car—of a driver going past a cyclist—on average are near misses, basically under 1 metre. So one in 20 people driving past a cyclist will break the law, and there has basically been no enforcement of that. There has been no prosecution of that. So therefore just encouraging people to be nice and to give people space simply will never work.

In addition to that, there is the aspect of human fallibility which is the cornerstone of the safe system approach. That is the first principle of people make mistakes. If you make a mistake, so you might drive too closely, you can actually kill someone just by being distracted looking at your phone, which we know is an increasing problem. Or you just might be looking at something else or whatever, or you may be having the inattentive blindness phenomena where people are looking but they do not see, and then you collect a person on a bicycle and potentially kill them.

So that simply will not work, but particularly with the speeds with which people drive in Australia. If we had 30-kilometre-an-hour speed limits, that may be acceptable, but because we do not, it is unacceptable. And it will simply never ever work, as previous examples have shown. They have never worked, and they will never work.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, John, for that. Just to get a variety of questions, I will go to our next person. Wayne, I might head to you next.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you everyone for your submissions. How do you feel about the large SUVs, and how do you think the Government can discourage large SUV sales in the cities to reduce the dangers to cyclists and vulnerable road users?

**The CHAIR:** Anyone like to share their thoughts on that one?

**Dr John SYMONS:** I do not want to dive in, because if Sundance or Elena want to say something, I would like to give them an opportunity to respond. But if they do not have any comments on this, I will. So, Sundance, do you have anything you would like to say about that issue?

**Dr Sundance BILSON-THOMPSON:** I am happy for you to dive in on this one. I wanted to very quickly say that I support all of the previous points that you made as well about enforcement with behaviour being difficult and you need physical separation. I just wanted to second that, but I am happy for you to dive in and talk about the SUV issue straightaway if you have something to say about that.

**Dr John SYMONS:** Just going back to that enforcement issue very, very, very quickly, in Spain there was an area where they did not enforce alcohol or speed limits for a period. They decided, 'No, it's all fine. Everyone is behaving nicely.' They took away enforcement. What do you know? People started drinking and speeding in excess in that particular section, so we know that is a factor.

Anyway, going back to SUVs, New Zealand is about to introduce laws where they increase your registration costs with respect to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and also the mass of the vehicle. They are going to take those additional funds in order to help the transition to electric vehicles, so they will cross-subsidise for the electric vehicles. Within seconds of New Zealand announcing that, the Australian Government said, 'There's no way in a million years we're ever going to do that.' So from an economist's point of view it is an excellent idea. I would completely endorse it. But from a political point of view I find it very difficult to see how that could happen in Australia, given the popularity of these vehicles. They are not just popular here; if you go and look at the trends in both the US and even in Europe to some extent, they are increasingly trendy. It would be deemed to be political suicide to go after these cars. But I think if we are to take road safety seriously, those options need to be looked at. Particularly the New Zealand example seems to be a very good approach, and I would recommend that the Committee investigate what the New Zealand Government has done.

**Elena PEREYRA:** I would say just briefly in addition to that, in terms of registration or increasing parking costs or permit costs, there is also the question of whether private ownership is the solution or if it becomes more a conversation about access rather than ownership. Increasing people's access to car rental and share car type schemes would mean that they could opt to have a smaller, more appropriate car if they wanted one in urban environments, or not to have one at all if the infrastructure and public transport system was sufficient that they actually did not require to have a personal car, but then to be able to have access to these other vehicles if it is for the purpose of holiday and weekend kinds of activities. Otherwise they are by and large not needed on a day-to-day basis in the city.

**Sundance BILSON-THOMPSON:** I wanted to add also that in terms of controlling SUVs, you are up against a cultural attitude which, like I said at the start, treats driving like it is default, like it is legitimate. Cars are viewed in Australia as a necessity. They are viewed as a symbol of personal freedom. And we have got to remember that these are machines that cause great social harm. They cause environmental harm, they kill people and they cause pollution. They do not just kill people through accidents, they also cause social harm and kill people through air pollution which leads to upper respiratory tract diseases, so there is a kind of invisible road toll associated with these sorts of vehicles. Switching to EVs will help some of those issues but not all of them, because EVs require basically the same amount of energy and materials to build as petrol-powered cars do. Basically what I am getting at is that you are up against a lobby, a political lobby that supports people owning machines that cause social harm and views them as a symbol of personal freedom and personal liberty. If you think about it, that sounds a little bit like the gun lobby in the US. We are talking about a situation in Australia with personal transport that is not too dissimilar from the situation that we look at in the United States and shake our heads in dismay at, like, 'How can they not regulate this thing?' I agree entirely there is this idea that New Zealand has got of saying that you introduce higher taxes, recognising that the amount of money people should pay in order to own a vehicle or a machine that can cause social harm should be proportional to the amount of harm it can cause, so bigger vehicles can cause more harm and people should pay more for that privilege. And yes, we really should look at whether or not these things are actually necessary parts of people's lifestyles or if they are just a bit of an indulgence. There is a ridiculous ad that I see on TV every now and then which shows a woman taking her dog to the beach in an SUV. The dog is about the size of my forearm. You do not really need an SUV to do that, but it is a very strange public attitude to portray that you should need one of these vehicles, and we should—we need to—push back against that attitude.

**The CHAIR:** John, do you have something extra?

**Dr John SYMONS:** Just very quickly, roads were not always for cars. Up until about the mid-1920s roads were spaces for people to walk, to cycle and to drive as well, but unfortunately with the increase in speed and the increased number of cars they were killing people more and more and more, and that is why the expression ‘jaydriver’ came about. It preceded the term ‘jaywalker’, because people who did not know how to drive appropriately in the city came in and killed people as they were walking down the streets. So we are talking about giving space back to people walking and cycling, not giving it to them for the first time. The reason this has happened is because it came from a 1924 road safety conference in the US which was called by Herbert Hoover in response to this dramatic increase in deaths on US roads. The only people invited to this road safety conference were the car manufacturers. What a surprise. They all said, ‘Well, the way you solve this problem is to get pedestrians and cyclists and whoever else off the roads. Roads are now only for cars.’ It is not always the case and should not be the case frankly. But, okay, the genie is out of the bottle. There are cars. We need to then allocate some space for people who walk and cycle.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, John. I am just watching the time. I reckon we will have about one question to finish this off. John, I might go to you next.

**John MULLAHY:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for attending today. We had some earlier evidence about some of the road safety education—and obviously you have provided some evidence today—about teaching physics along with road safety when people are learning about the road rules. What I was hoping to get to was: how can the Victorian Government improve pedestrian and cycling connections to public transport stops and interchanges? Dr John, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, John.

**Dr John SYMONS:** I will try to be as quick as I can. I believe you have had our presentation printed out for you.

**The CHAIR:** We have.

**Dr John SYMONS:** Can you look at slide 4, please—I think it is slide 4. It is the key design principles. Is that the one? It is an orangey brown graphic. Can you see that? These are the key design principles put together by the UK Department of Transport. Okay, unless you satisfy all of these nine principles—this one is specifically aimed at riding but the same applies to walking—you will never get a significant mode shift to cycling. The key to linking public transport to cycling is they provide synergistic benefits because the strength of one complements the weakness of the other and vice versa. But in order to do that you need to follow these key design principles, and I am not aware of one project in Victoria that satisfies all nine key design principles. One, you have got to separate them out. You cannot mix them with pedestrians. They must be treated as vehicles. The routes must join together. We have a horrible tendency to ad hoc—a little bit, little bit there—and if you cannot get where you want to go to the whole way safely, people will not take that trip by bike. And they also deviate routes out in the middle of nowhere. Once you go beyond a metric of 1.3 in either time or distance, people will not take that trip if you deviate them that far beyond a straight line. And paint simply does not work in telling people to get off their bikes. It is a further barrier and an additional thing for people to do. Sundance was referring before to the Geller typology of cyclists—the four types of population. There are the strong and fearless, who we associate with cycling in Victoria—a tiny, tiny, tiny percentage of the population—the confident and enthused and the interested but concerned, the vast majority of people. You need to get people who are aware of the different risk tolerances that different members of society have. If you only build stuff that is suitable for people who have an extremely high tolerance for risk, then only they will use it.

**The CHAIR:** Sundance?

**Dr Sundance BILSON-THOMPSON:** Yes. I would recognise that everything that was said there was great. I would say also we need more bicycle parking at transport interchanges. If you look at the way they have bicycle parking at equivalent facilities, say, in Europe, they just have masses of bike parking. That is a big thing. If you can only find a lamppost or something to lock your bike to, that is not going to encourage people to catch the train and ride a bike and interchange between those two different transport modes. I just wanted to add that in as well.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, thank you. Elena.

**Elena PEREYRA:** I would say also that there is already a document from the Victorian Government—that is, the Strategic Cycling Corridors. I think it comes back to what John said earlier about investment in cycling and active transport being 20% of the road budget. Just build them. You have already got the map. Build those and then build more, and make them good, high-quality pieces of infrastructure that are going to suit the broadest cohort of people across society. I would say the other thing also is that in other places buses are fitted with capacity to carry bicycles and also that people can use public transport to get to holiday destinations as well, including national parks and regional areas. In Australia—in Victoria—they are just not very well connected. If you get caught out with a train not running and there are bus replacements, then they do not take bikes, so you are stuck. There are a huge number of barriers that just prevent people from linking up those trips because it is just not convenient. I think we had a slide that sort of referred to that—on page 11. We cannot just tell people that they should ride bikes because it is good. We cannot just tell people that they should drive less or behave better. We actually have to make sustainable urban mobility desirable, reliable and preferable so that everybody can take it up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I am so sorry that we are going to have to end it there today. But it was a really interesting conversation, a perspective we have not had throughout these hearings, so it was really great for you to answer our questions. Thank you for providing those extra slides as well, and we will certainly have a closer look at those. Thank you again for your time. I really appreciate it.

**Witnesses withdrew.**