

# Bicycle police in Japan

## A law enforcement model for Australia

by ALAN PARKER

**O**F ALL the mechanical means of transport the bicycle is the most convivial and friendly, so it should come as no surprise that Japan's 70,000 community police still ride bicycles, in this technically advanced nation. In Japan today a most interesting experience is to come face to face with Australia's legendary "Mr Plod", the friendly local policemen of the 1950s on his bicycle. The uniform is different and the bike has a double cross bar, but there is no doubt about it, Mr Plod is alive and well in Japan, even in the largest cities like Tokyo.

The Japanese system of community policing uses the bicycle patrol to its greatest possible advantage and this system is worth going back to in the inner and middle suburbs of Australia because it not only combats crime but also builds community spirit. There is now a five-person uniformed police bicycle patrol in Melbourne, a welcome initiative. However, the high crime rate will need around 1,000 police bicycle patrol persons within a restructured community policing system in Melbourne. Around 1,200 bicycle police would be needed in Sydney and fewer in the other capital cities. This article outlines why this is necessary and what needs to be done.

### The verdict of criminologists

Some criminologists maintain that Mr Plod operating out of his mini neighbourhood police station (Koban), who is very much part of the local community, whose principal work vehicle is still the bicycle, is mostly responsible for Tokyo's reputation as the world's safest city. In Tokyo the crime rate per thousand population is far lower than Melbourne's. The robbery rate is one tenth, the rape rate one seventh and the bicycle theft rate one fifth. For locals and tourists Tokyo feels very secure to be in, even late at night.

Around 40% of all Japanese police are involved in the local community and Mr Plod is the backbone of the most efficient community policing system in the world (Bayley 1990). In every precinct there is visible police presence. Police patrol their beats on foot or on a bicycle and are not alienated from the community due to being in traffic in a four-wheeled tin box for far too long. For 30 years the combination of this unique system of

community policing and an unemployment rate of less than 2½% has resulted in a very low crime rate.

In high and medium density cities police are so much more visible if they are walking or cycling their beat, while in busy traffic when Japanese police are called to the site of a crime they nearly always go by bicycle as it is much quicker than by car. A visible police presence is reassuring for citizens and a constant reminder to the crook that he may get caught.

Like Mr Plod, these cycling police spend some time cautioning child cyclists and they take bicycle lighting offences very seriously as they do other minor tasks of this type. All the while they are building up goodwill in the community.

The low crime rate in Japan is the real reason for the low level of cyclist harassment and the greater personal security when riding.

### Protecting young cyclists from themselves.

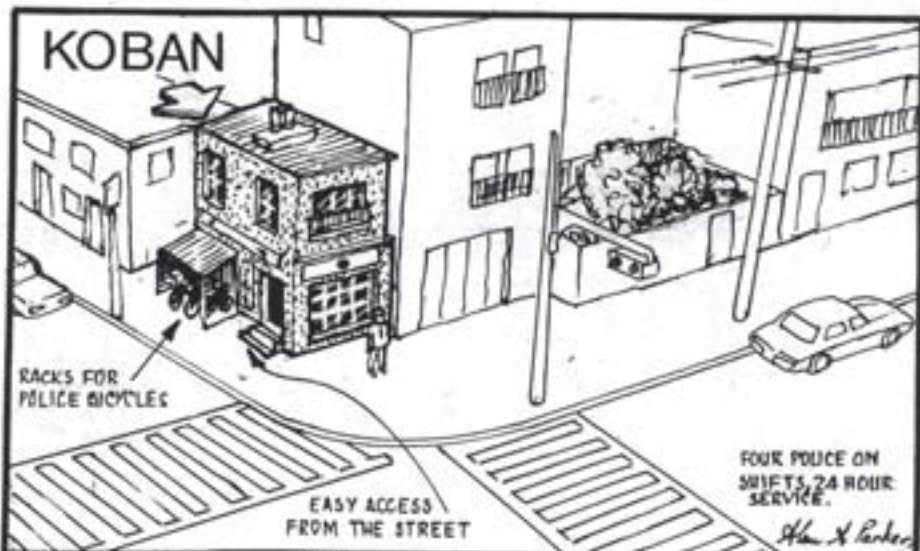
Few child cyclists wear helmets in Japan but most of them have lights on their bicycles and they seem better disciplined in their riding. Today fewer than 40% of Australian cyclists have lights on their bicycles at night. This is the best example of the way traffic law is not enforced and denies cyclists the right to protection from themselves, under the law, as legitimate road users. This is particularly true for young cyclists who are very much at risk be-



cause of careless behaviour and are in need of some friendly advice from a local police patrol person.

In Australia the Geelong bikeplan established for the first time the importance of bicycle law enforcement and that the safety effectiveness of education programmes was very dependent upon enforcement. To quote the original report:

"...unfortunately, no amount of safety education will suffice on its own. Neither children nor adults will do the right thing automatically or consistently. Everyone has to be properly instructed and reminded often. Consequently





continuous traffic safety education with enforcement on the road for both cyclists and car drivers is a must, logically leading bike riders into driver training."

The Victorian Police had some success in cautioning child cyclists in country areas where the local police were part of the local community, as they are in Japan, but in Melbourne where the police are mostly alienated from the community it was only applied to a smaller proportion of primary school children and hardly at all for secondary students. There are successful bicycle education programs running in Australian schools at both primary and secondary level but the effectiveness is reduced by not having the police there to remind cyclists of their responsibility to obey traffic law. Mr Plod urgently needs to be reintroduced to ensure that this happens.

### Bringing back bicycle patrols in Australian cities

The lesson to be learnt from Japanese police experience is that the real problem is the alienation of the Australian police from the community they serve in our major urban areas. Permanent bicycle patrols operating from an Australian version of the Koban are needed to help overcome that problem.

The Melbourne area would need 250 Kobans in addition to the existing 59 police stations that are open on a 24 hour basis. This estimate is derived by using Tokyo as a model (94 stations, 1,200 Kobans and 11.4 million people in 1984). In Tokyo there is a Koban for every

9,000 people; in Melbourne today there is one police station open for 24 hours for every 56,000 people. 250 extra Kobans would provide a 24-hour contact point for every 10,000 people in the Melbourne metro area.

There are negative attitudes expressed by many police to patrolling by bicycle, but these attitudes can be partly overcome by good equipment. If bicycle patrols were introduced in the inner and middle suburbs where they are most appropriate, Mr and Ms Plod would want something a little more dignified than the old style single-speed roadster. Top-of-the-line mountain bikes fitted with two-way radio-telephones and computer notepads would be

more appropriate for the 1990s. Police vans fitted with bicycles have been used for patrol work in low density areas of the UK and this may be a better model in the sprawling outer suburbs.

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