

Safer cars for all

by Alan Parker, People for Ecologically Sustainable Transport

THE Industry Commission into the Car Industry has ignored the need for bicycle/pedestrian safety features on new cars. While billions have been spent on developing new car air bags and chassis that crumple on impact to make car occupants safer, unprotected road users are still being neglected. This is disastrous news for cyclists and pedestrians for, while there is a downward trend in numbers of driver deaths, insurance claim figures show collision numbers are climbing.

A submission to the Inquiry by People for Ecologically Sustainable Transport described design features that would reduce the level of pedestrian and cyclist injury. Car design that enables drivers to see cyclists and pedestrians more clearly helps avoid collisions. Car parts designed to attenuate impact reduce the severity of injuries. A car company has already built prototype cars that are safer for cyclists and pedestrians. The problem is a political one: regulations are necessary to require use of the available safety technology.

There is considerable scope for designing accident prevention into cars. Pedestrian accident studies prepared for Honda indicated motorists had difficulty seeing pedestrians and cyclists at dusk, dawn, and night especially when it was raining. Better lighting systems have been developed. Head, face and neck injuries are what result in most deaths

and hoods have been developed that will crumple and crush to absorb the impact energy (like the expanded polystyrene liner in a bicycle helmet). Leg injuries to adults and chest injuries to children can also be reduced by having a crumple front edge on the hood and a crumple bumper (Honda 1996).

Instead, design innovations are running counter to cyclist and pedestrian safety. The growing use of tinted windows makes cyclists and pedestrians less visible (Clarke 1996) Growing use of bullbars increases the severity of pedestrian and cyclist injuries (Parker 1995). The Australian car industry does not plan to build cars with less injurious front ends. Road safety agencies are ignoring the risks and putting property damage to cars ahead of pedestrian and cyclist safety.

The Industry Commission Inquiry is setting aside long term safety issues which it regards as one of several environmental issues. In the transcript of my presentation the Chairman told me. "Our terms of reference are so broad and we been given such a relatively short time to do it our recommendation was that there be a separate inquiry... This is a very complex question and I wouldn't want to mislead you by thinking we are going to be able to a thorough job on this inquiry, but your point is well made".

The Howard government, in commissioning a revision of the Australian car plan, has failed to heed ethical guidance in the Delhi

Declaration on the safety of "Vulnerable road users" (Roberts et al 1996) which states: "Vehicle exteriors can be designed to be less injurious to vulnerable road users. Such designs should be introduced by vehicle manufacturers and enforced through national and international regulations and by greater legal liability."

The car industry, with protection, is capable of giving scope to creative designers, like those at Honda, and producing safer, more efficient, less polluting cars. If we want a non-violent transport system it means more bicycle and public transport use, stopping urban development that encourages car dependence and safer cars for all road users. If the future car fleet was smaller with a high proportion of safer, small cars travelling slower in cities, car emissions would greatly decrease and cyclists could more comfortably share the roads with drivers.

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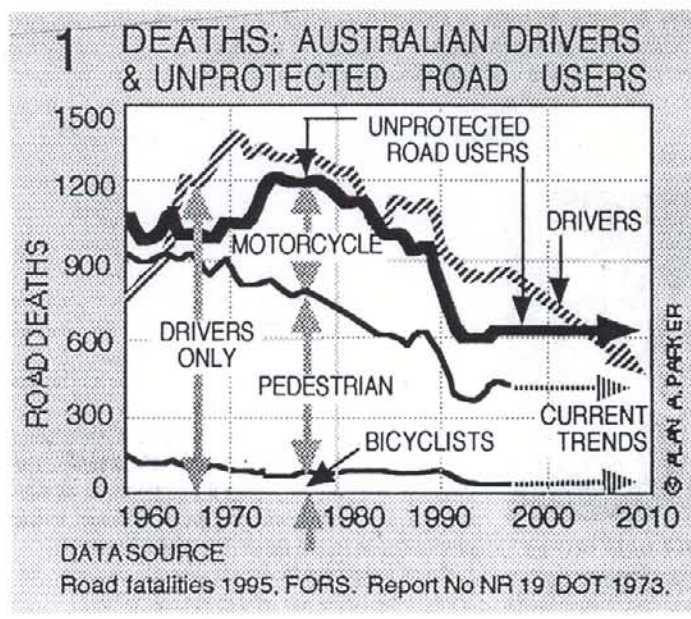
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