

The safest roads are out of bounds!

In most Australian states bicycles are banned from using freeway break-down lanes. In some cases the alternative roads are badly congested and badly surfaced, yet road authorities persist with their arbitrary prohibition of cyclists on these freeway 'safety' lanes. The results of a new study completed recently in the freeway capital of the world, California, show that in most cases freeway type roads are actually safer for cyclists than normal main roads. In this look at the cyclist-on-freeway issue Alan Parker* suggests that the reasons for the ban may not be based on logical reasons at all.

Cyclists are banned from using 167 kilometres of N.S.W. freeways and 324 kilometres of Victorian freeways which the road and construction authorities (CRB, 1981) claims are five times safer per mile travelled than other main roads.

Freeway bans are a major infringement of the basic cyclist's rights of equal access to all roads established in Australian common law and traffic law as a colonial spin off from the 1888 highway act in the U.K.

There are many examples of how freeways force cyclists to use longer routes that are more dangerous, which is why we must re-establish the cyclists rights to all roads taken away from us in the fifties by road construction authorities who were given the power to create bylaws that banned cyclists.

For example, on the route from St. Kilda to Newport the Westgate Bridge cannot be used and the old route on main roads through the City and Footscray is about five times less safe per mile travelled. On this route the cyclist has to ride twice as far so that this trip is about ten times less safe.

The present policy of banning cyclists from the safest roads is actively discouraging bicycle use and contradicts the policy of encouraging bicycle use of both the N.S.W. and Victorian governments. Both governments have proven equally ineffective in making the Road Constructon

Authority of Victoria and the N.S.W. Department of Main Roads do what responsible road building authorities in places like California have been doing for years.

The only argument put forward to justify banning cyclists from freeways in Victoria is that high speed roads are dangerous for cyclists. This is absurd as cyclists are not banned from high speed roads which are dangerous but those high speed roads that have a 2.5 or 3 metre wide safety lane separated from the other vehicular traffic lanes. The real reason for banning cyclists has nothing to do with safety, but is historical in origin going back to the time when Californian Freeway designs were copied willy nilly by immature Australian road engineers who had never built any before.

The modern freeway, called an Autobahn in Germany was one of Hitler's creations taken over by the Americans who built more of them in California than anywhere else in the world. The Californians know more about freeways than anyone else as a consequence.

Now that the Californian government has developed a fair and safe policy for bicycles on Freeways, the Australian road authorities don't want to know about it.

It is vital for cyclists to remember that the right of road construction authorities to ban cyclists was never discussed debated or arrived at from any serious consideration of cyclist

needs in the fifties anywhere and the legal powers were hidden away in acts of Parliament drafted and written by bureaucrats who just wanted to get cyclists out of the way, as if they did not exist. This happened in California and Australia during the 1950's but in California, John Forester and organised cycling groups took political action to change the situation in the seventies, and this is what Australian cycling organisations have to do now.

In the middle seventies the Californian transport and highway engineering bureau started to take cyclists right to equal access seriously. They also wanted to make their contribution to encouraging cycling as the Government of California had declared cycling to be beneficial to the individual and society.

The Highways Divisions of the Californian Department of Transport conducted a three year trial in which 400 kilometres of freeway was opened to cyclists. There were no accidents. The decision to allow the trial to take place was based on the principle that bicycles are vehicles and therefore cannot be banned from public roads unless that road is actually dangerous.

The three year trial showed conclusively that freeway safety lanes are safe for cycling and of benefit for the same reasons freeways are of benefit to motorists.

1. The freeway is safer than the alternative route.
2. The freeway is a more direct and convenient route.
3. The freeway safety lane is separated from the motor vehicle lanes and a more pleasant riding experience than the alternative route.
4. Freeway on and off lanes can generally be crossed by experienced cyclists with less risk than most main roads they are permitted to use.

Cyclists are still not allowed on many pre-1971 Urban Freeways with very frequent ramps for safety reasons, however the Californian Department of Transport is slowly and surely providing alternative means of access and cyclists are provided for on all new bridges. (Caltrans, 1978). In addition to the freeway safety lanes 1.2 to 1.5 metre wide, sealed edges forming a narrow bike lane are provided on 3,500 kilometres of rural highways, which has greatly encouraged bicycle touring.

By the year 2,000 cyclists will be banned from about 400 km of freeways in N.S.W. and 500 km of freeways in Victoria. This will prevent cyclists from using the safest and

most direct routes to capital and major provincial cities. A similar situation will apply in all other states.

Cyclists are banned from British Freeways (Motorways) but in the U.K. cyclists were much better off, with separate bike paths alongside major bridges and tunnels being provided and when a British Freeway replaced an old road it was left intact for cyclists to use.

In rural Victoria the freeways absorbed sections of the old road during their construction so that the old road route was not available to use. The roads near Ballan and Werribee have been turned into freeways thus blocking main road routes to major provincial cities.

In Melbourne the Eastern Freeway safety lanes are the safest cycling routes East from the City Centre of Melbourne and the alternative roads for cyclists are both inconvenient and dangerous in comparison. The Tullamarine and Mulgare Freeways are also good direct routes that are NO-WAYS for cyclists.

In Melbourne the bicycle paths built in the South East of Melbourne do not connect with the Yarra River bikepath, because the CRB has built the South East Freeway with no alternative means of access for bicycles.

Until such time as the Road Construction Authority provides the link between the Yarra River bike path and on the new arterial road planned for the Gardners Creek valley cyclists will be further disadvantaged compared to Melbourne's motorists.

The State Bicycle Committee of Victoria has a policy (Scott M., 1978) of allowing cyclist access to the Westgate Bridge, subject to certain restrictions, but as yet there is no policy on cyclist use of freeway safety lanes.

The Bicycle Institute of Victoria's campaign to gain access to the Westgate Bridge will be renewed again in 1984.

What the State Government must realise is that the Westgate Bridge is the biggest and best shortcut ever built in Melbourne and we demand our right to use it.

The Bicycle Institute has suggested that the Victorian Minister of Transport change the appropriate Act to remove the power to ban cyclists from freeways. The act of Parliament establishing the Country Roads Board in 1958 is now under review following the reorganisation of the ministry of Transport and the creation of the Road Construction Authority (RCA) and the new RCA Act 1984 has to be

drafted so as to recognise the cyclist's right to use all roads long established in Australian common law and traffic law. The legal contradiction between the CRB and common law must be removed.

The Bicycle Institute will be asking the Minister for Transport to issue two ministerial directives as follows.

(i) to provide for the bicycle as a vehicle and recognise the cyclist's legal right to use all roads as embodied in Common law and traffic law.

(ii) to prepare a plan for bicycle access to the Westgate Bridge based on the Bicycle Institute's and State Bicycle Committee proposals.

REFERENCES

- Caltrans, 1978 — *Planning and Design Criteria for Bikeways in California*, now officially incorporated as Chapter 7 in *The Highway Design Manual of the Californian Department of Transportation, Office of Planning and Design*.
- Caltrans, 1982 — *Californian Department of Transportation, Division of Highways, Office of Bicycle Facilities. Policy and Procedure. Shoulder requirements for bicycle travel. Document No. P 78-14 as revised 2-24-82.*
- CRB 1981 — *Country Roads Board — Submission to the Parliamentary Road Safety Committee Inquiry in the Victorian Road Accident toll during 1981.*
- SCOTT, M., 1978 — *Cyclist access to the Westgate Bridge. The issue of the alternatives.*

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