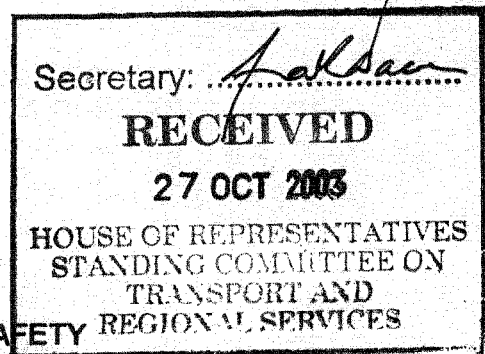


26 October 2003

Inquiry into National Road Safety
Transport and Regional Services Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Mr Neville

INQUIRY INTO NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY

I would like to make a submission to your inquiry into national road safety. I was unaware of the closing date but I understand late submissions will be accepted.

I consider there is one serious anomaly in Australia that, if addressed, would assist in governments meeting targets in the National Road Safety Strategy. This anomaly is the absence of open road speed limits in the Northern Territory.

Consider:

1. The NT has by far the worst serious injury / fatality crash rate of any state in Australia, some 3 times worse than the Australian average. Internationally, the NT's crash rate is much higher than in any comparable country.
2. Rural roads in the NT are not subject to any speed limit. Similar roads in all other Australian states have speed limits of 110km/h or less.
3. There are probably no other single carriageway (two lane) roads in the developed world which are unrestricted. Germany, famous for its unrestricted roads, in fact only allows unlimited speeds on the better standard, less trafficked autobahns
4. Practically all roads in the NT are two lane, single carriageways with nominal sealed shoulders, wide mix of vehicle types including road trains and 4WDs with caravans, and variable alignment standards.
5. Allowing unrestricted speeds in the NT sends a contradictory message to the rest of Australia where road safety campaigns target speed as a major factor in crash rates and their severity.
6. The absence of speed 'cops' on rural roads in the NT is likely to increase the perception that other road safety infringements will also go undetected (eg drunk driving, seat belts). If speeding offenders were fined in the NT at a similar rate to other states, the revenue would help fund greater police presence on the territory's roads, thereby improving compliance with all road safety legislation.

The NT has a poor road safety record with serious injury crash rates much higher than elsewhere in Australia and in comparable countries. Its fatality rate, for example, is about 3 times the Australian average.

There are likely to be many factors that contribute to the high crash rate, including alcohol, distance, seat belt wearing and social issues. However, most of these factors occur equally in other parts of remote Australia which have much lower crash

rates. The only factor that appears unique to the NT is that its rural roads are largely unrestricted and excessively high driving speeds are common.

The fact that NT roads are unrestricted is widely known throughout Australia. Most car and motorbike magazines include articles reporting how they have tested vehicles legally at speeds that would result in a gaol term elsewhere in the country.

For example, the September 2003 issue of Wheels Magazine, reputedly one of Australia's more responsible motoring journals, includes an article called *'Northern Exposure – Three fast cars, two quick bikes, no limits. BMW's ultimate speed machines go for broke in the Territory'*. The article goes on *'If speed kills, I shouldn't be alive to write this yarn. Believe the state authorities' persistent, misleading message, and my 2300km spent driving and riding mostly in the 200km/h plus zone should leave my bleached, broken bones scattered in the scrub beside the Stuart Highway. If the NSW RTA's claim that speed "accounts for 44 percent of fatal crashes on country roads" there should be hundreds of ex-Territorians with me.'* The article continues in a predictable fashion waxing lyrical about *'It (BMW's M5) streaks towards the Alice' (at 250km/h!)*.

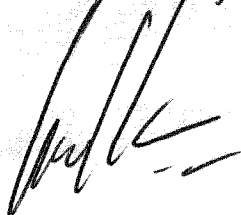
Consider what message this type of reporting sends out to the younger male drivers around Australia who are the main target of road safety campaigns. What effect do slogans like "Speed Kills" and "There's no such thing as safe speeding" have when the target audience knows that it is perfectly legal elsewhere in Australia to drive at whatever speed you can achieve?

What credibility do the police have for stopping a driver on a dual carriageway in NSW or Victoria for doing 120km/h and telling them that they are driving dangerously – when it's perfectly legal to drive at 250km/h on a two-lane road in another state?

For these reasons, I would suggest that the safety issue of unrestricted roads in the NT actually has severe consequences across the whole of Australia. It appears untenable to allow this situation to continue while retaining a commitment for the safety targets in the National Road Safety Strategy. The Strategy is targeting a fatality rate of 5.6 fatalities per 100,000 population by 2010; the NT's current rate is 36.3 deaths per 100,000.

It has been suggested that even if the NT had a 110km/h maximum speed limit it would not be enforced. However, bringing the NT in line with the rest of the country would in itself be a major advance in road safety by removing the inconsistent message on speeding the current situation presents. Also, there is no reason why the NT Police would be any different from police in remote areas elsewhere in Australia. With fines in other states of over \$1,400 for exceeding the speed limit by more than 45km/h (say, 160km/h), it is hard to imagine that the NT Government will fail to see the financial attractiveness of enforcement. And if the police are out checking speeding, they will also be able to check for other infringements, such as alcohol, seat belts and vehicle defects, thereby improving overall road safety within the NT and Australia.

Yours sincerely



Geoff Clarke