

Ms Fran Bailey,
Standing committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services.
House of Representatives,
Parliament House,
Canberra.

1. A national cycle route network:

The role of bicycles in a sustainable future for Australia is well recognised (see Australia Cycling: The National Strategy 1999-2004, Austroads Publication No. AP- 61/99). The importance of cycles for regional Australia is not so well understood.

In the context of your current sittings, the role of the bicycle is many faceted. Local travel, within towns, is an obvious niche in which cycling is of growing importance, as per the National Strategy. Provision of local infrastructure, especially in places where interstate highways traverse townships, is critical. The costs of motor vehicle travel, per km, within a small town, are magnified by high input costs, low intensity usage which raises cost per km, draining away significant economic flows from alternative uses.

A national cycle route scheme into which local towns can fit their requirements, and from which expertise and financial help can be gathered, would significantly increase the ability of regional Australia to commit to the National Cycling Strategy. This will have flow on effects in local towns' economies.

The touristic importance of a national cycle route would be in encouraging high spending long stay tourists, of a similar demographic to the backpackers who are currently the highest impact tourists, due to their long stays. Cycle tourists spend more time, and thus more money on accommodation and food, in the towns through which they travel. They do not have the facilities to carry all their daily requirements for a journey covering many hundreds, let alone thousands, of kilometres, unlike the car, motor home or van travellers who make up a significant part of the present tourist spend. The cycle tourists do their spending on the way, providing greater benefits to the locality than do other travellers.

Currently, there are many problems to be overcome by the would-be cycle tourist. As one myself, I appreciate these difficulties, and understand that they must discourage many tourists from spending more time and money in regional Australia. Long distance transport for cycles is difficult, with rail and bus options not always co-operative and often expensive. Air travel, paradoxically, is sometimes much cheaper for the pushbike than rail or bus, but air travel doesn't go to all the desired route destinations. Facilities en route are often not very good either.

A cycle route strategy would work at overcoming these difficulties.

2. Provision of professional services in regional Australia:

There is much debate and controversy about provision of medical services in regional Australia. The problems of medical provision are mirrored, perhaps less intensely, in most professions. There must be an alternative approach discovered, one or more strategies which have not been fully explored thus far. I would like to suggest that it is not merely, or mainly, a question of money, especially for medical services. The main question is that of the professional provider being able to access a network of colleagues for support and relief, something considered routine in large cities. The working conditions of the relatively isolated professional are the central concern. The declining centre loses providers, this prompts more losses, and service provision is compromised, making it even less attractive to potential replacements. I would suggest this is an important reason Tamworth has such a severe shortage of GPs. Who would wish to go to a position which, despite the money on offer, requires very long hours, and very under resourced support services.

Measures to encourage service providers 'back to the bush' have to be directed to this fundamental concern. The various measures recommended by enquiries and committees have to be judged by whether they address the question of collegial support which allows service provision in a context not too far degraded from that of provision in the major cities. Physical distance and time have to be taken very seriously, in ways which have often been ignored by the professions themselves, based in Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra. Shrinking distances by telecommunications may be a part of the answer. More extensive, and expensive, provision of travelling support services could be another part of it. Currently, institutions such as Divisions of General Practice, provide continuing education, courtesy of drug companies to a large extent, as well as of public spending. This type of support is but one small aspect of the need for support provision on a weekly, or in some cases, daily basis. Alternatives of accepting a lower standard of service in regional centres is what we are currently doing by default. Without a strong public policy for subsidising provision of collegial network support services, the default is what we will get.

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Sincerely,

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