

SUBMISSION NO. 9

Secretary

17 OCT 2003

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL SERVICES COMMITTEE ON
REGIONAL SERVICES

SUBMISSION: to House of Representatives Transport and Regional Services Committee
In respect of Inquiry into National Road Safety.

By: L.V.H. Barnes of Maclean, NSW

We should be debating a complete change of direction and emphasis. Nothing less than a paradigm shift.

We need to move from emphasis on penalties to emphasis on rewards:

from raising revenue from wrongdoing (especially artificially created wrongdoing)

to reasonable return on investment in education and associated facilities

from misemployment of resources, particularly human resources

to creation of a workforce trained to teach road safety as a positive skill not the result
of beating the system, or "getting away with it".

And to a licensing system that confers real privileges on those who have demonstrably
earned them.

It's a huge job that we can no longer shirk, no longer postpone the moment of truth with the "band aid"
measures whose inadequacy is multiplied by the community antagonism that so many of them engender.
Where to start is the difficult question that we must answer at the outset. Let it be kept firmly in mind that
"a journey of a thousand miles starts with one step" – or it doesn't start at all.

The key to the whole problem is driver licensing. The present system is little more than a bad joke.

It will be argued that testing procedures have become progressively more rigorous. They could only
improve from the risible base of only a few years ago, but acceptable progress is impossible given the
present training standards.

Simply, a "pass" gives no indication – none – of the candidate's competence to drive, with even a
modicum of control, vehicles of higher performance than the one in which the test was conducted, nor in
road conditions of lesser standards or traffic situations of greater complexity. But having passed the test
(sic) he or she is authorised to do all of the above.

Arising from this, and of enormous significance, is the low value placed on a driver's licence. It
continues to be generally regarded as a right rather than a valuable privilege carrying concomitant
responsibilities.

Here, as in much of the entire debate, comparison with the aviation industry is relevant and salutary.

One such comparison may well highlight the inevitable increase in the cost of obtaining a licence.

If some arrangement similar to the HEC Scheme proves necessary this may well be promoted and accepted
as a positive alternative to the present system of punitive revenue raising.

Once higher – much higher – overall levels of driver competency are reached, speed limits should be
progressively eliminated. There may remain a few situations where an arbitrary speed number can be

supported but, in general they are counterproductive. Any attempt to reduce road safety to numbers can only lead to anomalies. (See Appendix A for an illustrative example).

This would still be true in the situation, impossible of achievement, in which those decreeing the numbers were perfectly qualified to do so.

Not only is this universally seen not to be the case but two other defects are also widely understood. Firstly, numbers are loved by bureaucrats as fixed markers from which deviations can be easily (and profitably) policed. And secondly because the speed limit approach is predicated on a false premise: namely that speed *alone* is the prime anti-safety factor, or accident cause.

It is not. Undoubtedly *excessive* speed contributes to accidents. It is very unusual for an accident to have a single causal factor. This is also well documented in the aviation experience. Almost never is speed in excess of an ordained limit a causal, still less the sole, factor. On the other hand, speed in excess of the driver's competence is often the prime, if not sole, factor.

In short, if one factor is to be singled out for the title of "most common accident cause" it is indubitably driver incompetence, not speed.

A specific aspect of driver competence is the ability to recognise and react appropriately to the incompetence of others. This mandates the inclusion of "defensive driving" in the training and testing syllabus.

Let me reinforce this analysis with a personal opinion. I would far rather be a passenger in a vehicle driven at higher speeds than those currently permitted, by a driver properly trained, tested and licensed and whose concentration on road and traffic conditions is absolute and continuous, than by an incompetent holder of the present standard of licence whose eyes are excessively focussed on the relation of a needle to a number on a dial inside his or her own vehicle. Danger springs from the passing scenery, not from the depths of a dashboard.

The role of alcohol in the context of road safety deserves specific mention. Again, the number approach needs reconsideration. A given blood alcohol level is valid only in the bureaucratic mind which is considerably more stereotyped than the metabolism of the general population. Generalisations such as those now relied upon to determine capacity to drive are simply the stuff of which anomalies are made.

The answer again lies in training: in the inculcation of an attitude of pride in belonging to an elite team of those superior beings who are licensed to drive vehicles on the public highways and a strong sense of the responsibility that this privilege imparts. Aviation experience again shows that this is not just an idealistic pipedream.

Of course there will be mavericks and of course they must be apprehended and dealt with before they cause accidents. Their numbers *will* be much reduced by the education and enhanced self esteem outlined.

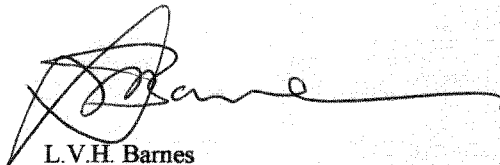
Consequently a system of random checks may still be needed. But this should not be limited to breath testing for blood alcohol level, but should incorporate a comprehensive assessment of vehicle roadworthiness, driver "duty time" and fatigue symptoms.

More comprehensive checks, as suggested, will be more time consuming and thus individual drivers may expect to be "intercepted" less often. This will reduce the "irritation factor" and this may be enhanced, with proper promotion of the scheme, by a perception that more worthwhile results will be achieved.

A vital aspect of the new paradigm must be the concept of rewarding drivers for good performance over time. This should not take into consideration only freedom from accidents but also traffic infringements (crossing double lines, ignoring stop signs and red lights, failing to give way etc.). A police presence will still be required but it will have a more general overview of traffic behaviour rather than the narrow focus on speed as at present.

(There is also undue focus on the wearing of seat belts. It is arguable that this mandatory requirement constitutes legislating to protect fools from their own folly and that this is, axiomatically, bad law.)

The basic concept suggested here is that the present system of demerit points leading to eventual license suspension- the vast majority of such points accruing from infringements of unnecessary speed restrictions and non-wearing of seatbelts - should be abandoned. In its place should be introduced a system in which points are automatically awarded at regular intervals for infringement and accident free performance leading eventually to firstly some form of financial reward, such as reduced registration and/or CTP fees and secondly to some form of easily recognisable merit certificate to be clearly displayed on any vehicle driven by the awardee. Any "demerit" detected would lead to non-award of merit points.



L.V.H. Barnes

Maclean, NSW 15TH. October 2003

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION HELD BY THE SECRETARIAT

ATTACHMENT TO SUBMISSION NO. 9

APPENDIX 'A' - EIGHT PAGES (MISCELLANEOUS)