



Mr Paul Neville MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services
Road Safety Inquiry
Parliament House
Canberra

Dear Mr Neville

To continue to improve Australia's safety record further on top of the significant gains that have been made in the past 20 plus years requires governments to adopt more aggressive policies despite some of them being potentially more politically difficult. Among the policies that must be considered are the following.

1. Improved driver training requirements for new drivers.

New drivers in Australia get their licenses very easily. They are not required to undertake any lessons in wet conditions, at night, at highway speeds, or correcting vehicles while braking or skidding. They are also not required to demonstrate competence in these areas when they get their license.

To make inroads into the fatality and injury rates of the 17-25 year old age group, it is essential that basic driver training equip them for the main conditions in which people will drive regularly and with the basic skills to avoid accidents should they find themselves, for example, in a skid or having to brake hard and suddenly.

2. Maintaining driver skills and knowledge.

Once a person obtains a driver's licence they will generally never be asked to demonstrate that they know and understand the road rules.

There should be a periodic requirement, for example, ten yearly, for a person to complete the same written test as a new learner driver, and to pass that test. If a person fails, they should be required to retest until they pass and could, for example, be required to display P-plates again for 12 months.

This approach would ensure changes in road rules are learned by all drivers, not just new drivers. Roundabout rules are a good example of where older drivers continue to display a lack of knowledge about the relevant rules.

3. Road rules changes

There is one significant anomaly in current road rules which contributes to unsafe driving. It is the treatment of driving substantially under the speed limit.

Two scenarios illustrate the point. First, a vehicle driving at 75kph on a 100kph country road. This causes significant angst for other drivers wishing to drive at the speed limit, particularly when there are few opportunities to pass. Other drivers then tend to take risks to get around the slow driver. Second, a vehicle driving at 45kph in a 60kph road in an urban area during a busy period. The vehicle causes significant traffic flow disruption and again encourages risky behaviour among other drivers. In both cases, (if the prevailing road conditions warrant it), there should be no reason for a vehicle to not travel at the speed limit. If the driver is incapable, they should no longer hold their license. If the vehicle is incapable, it should not be permitted to remain registered.

4. Vehicle maintenance

A large number of vehicles on our roads are unroadworthy. For example, a recent RACV study in Victoria identified that nearly half of the vehicles examined had a defect which made them unroadworthy.

One approach to unroadworthy vehicles could be a regular annual blitz on particular categories of defects. For example, late autumn blitz on lights. Currently approximately 15% of cars in NSW, for example, have at least one faulty tail, brake or headlight.

More generally, older vehicles offer an average level of safety below that of newer vehicles. An older vehicle in poor condition has an even worse safety level. Consequently, there is a need to ensure that those older vehicles which remain on our roads are well maintained and remain as safe as possible.

Recognising that most cars up to 10 or even 15 years old tend to still be in good condition, governments could consider annual vehicle inspections for vehicles over, say, 15 years old to ensure they are adequately maintained. Arguments that this would impact the most on the less well off are incredibly dangerous as they are effectively saying that if you are less well off, you have the right to drive an unroadworthy, unsafe vehicle.

The experience of many European countries with strict driver training, strict requirements for drivers to maintain their skills, and strict vehicle maintenance regimes demonstrates that these do contribute to fewer accident and fatality rates.

I hope the above assists the Committee with its deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Mark Cove