

Howard & Sylvia Rose

16 October 2003.

Emailed 17/10/03

Attention: Dr Anna Dacre
Inquiry Officer,
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Transport and Regional Services,
Parliament House,
ACT 2600

(Copy Via Email: trs.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Dr Dacre,

RE: Submission: National Inquiry into Road Safety.

Only today did I see for the first time a small article in the Courier Mail newspaper that mentioned the Federal Government's National Road Safety Inquiry, with the comment that submissions close tomorrow.

Your web page indicates that the Hon John Anderson MP has asked the committee to review the current road safety strategy. Given that I have read newspaper reports quoting the Hon John Anderson as making some eminently sensible remarks regarding road laws and the need for review, I was encouraged that this committee may actually be looking beyond finding ways to simply maintain the status quo - with its sometimes unreasonable road laws.

A phone call to your office established that members of the public can also make submissions, not just some quasi government body with fancy sounding authoritative names.

As an individual who is mature, (57 years) responsible, and who drives a safe modern motor vehicle, (Mercedes Benz 500 CLK), and one who has been driving for forty years without any significant accident, (often as much as 30,000 k per year) I feel well qualified to express an opinion. I know that my opinions are shared by most of my friends and associates even though most people will not bother to try and do anything about it. My driving experience also extends to regular long driving journeys throughout Europe where my wife and I travel nearly every year.

There are many points I would like to have considered by the committee that I feel require attention to bring justice to the Australian road law regulations, and to bring about the conditions that will contribute to reducing of the road toll.

Hidden Speed Cameras are a distraction to drivers.

1/. I have a reasonably clear driving record (two speeding tickets over the past five years) because, while I do not claim to always drive at the posted limit I do keep an 'eagle eye open' for speed cameras and speed traps. There is no question in my mind that the lookout for speed cameras is a distraction to the safe handling of a motorcar. Even when one is driving at speed that is within the set limit, it is still a distraction. For those who don't have 'Cruise Control', it is also a distraction to be constantly watching the speedometer instead of the road. In a modern car it is very easy to be 10 – 15 k's over the limit without noticing.

Emotive road safety message that distort the facts relating to road trauma.

2/. I also find it extremely annoying and insulting to my intelligence, to hear constant media messages trying to convince me and other motorists of 'half truths'. This is because the road traffic authorities are extremely generous with the facts relating to road trauma. The reality is that speeding, as defined by current road law, is on its own a very small percentage of road deaths. (7% or so) Other factors such as inexperience, old cars, driving under the influence, fatigue, old age drivers, and sometimes just simply bad luck, are all grouped together, with the end result that in Queensland; we are constantly blasted with the message that 'every k over is a killer'. This emotive statement is annoying and irrelevant, because any speed over zero will have some inherent risk. And there is no evidence to say that 100 kph on an Australian highway is the God given limit of physics or any other factor in relation to safety.

Why do Australian road traffic authorities differ so much in their opinions as to what is a safe highway speed, from the rest of the first world. (Surely our 20 million people aren't smarter than the hundreds of millions in Europe and America)

3/. European speed limits average 130 kph. Germany with the highest speed limits including many roads with no speed limits, in fact has a lower rate of deaths per 100,000 population (8.5) than the average for all of Europe. (10.5)

Several countries in Europe have recently increased their highway speed limits (Denmark on 1 May 2003 from 110 to 130 kph and Luxemburg from 120 to 130 kph. Many states in USA have also increased highway speed limits without increasing their road toll. Do our road traffic authorities ever check out the research of these other countries before writing their own little rule books (Like the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices).

Road traffic authorities lose credibility when they set 100 kph speed limits on single lane country roads as being a 'safe limit', yet on a new four lane or six lane freeway they have either the same 100 kph or 110kph.

If European road traffic authorities can agree that 130 kph (most countries) is a safe highway limit on divided highway, why do Australians have to be penalised and treated as criminals if they exceed 100/110kph. On the long stretches of Australian country roads, the difference between being able to travel at 130 kph and 100kph is the difference between enjoying a stimulating drive and being bored to sleep. (which in my view is more dangerous). I have driven on European roads at 160 – 180 kph and I can say with confidence that nothing focuses one's driving attention, like going a decent speed.

Overtaking laws.

4/. I have never known anyone who has received a ticket for hogging the right lane at less than the speed limit and frustrating following traffic. Traffic enforcement seems to ignore the 'keep left unless overtaking rule'. (In Europe you cannot overtake a vehicle travelling in the fast lane from the slow lane). So if someone is going too slowly they will be 'flashed' and they know to quickly move to the slow lane. In Australia motorists are not educated to keep to the left on highways, and this causes long bankups of traffic (bunching) and frustration for drivers trying to maximise the already slow highway cruising opportunities.

This lack of enforcement of 'keep left unless overtaking' (in laned roads above 80kph speed limit) could be one major cause of the reported higher incidence of 'road rage' in Australia.

In the case of overtaking on single lane highways, where there are short sections of overtaking lane, Australian drivers tend to speed up when they get to the overtaking lane section of road, even when they have been driving slowly prior to reaching that point. This is very annoying.

Given the short length of these overtaking lanes, if one were to observe the (most unreasonable) law of not exceeding the speed limit to overtake, then in most cases there is not time to overtake the other vehicles before the overtaking lanes stop. (Recent University research has identified this as fact).

The law should be amended to allow a 20% temporary increase in speed to the overtaking vehicle so that it can as quickly as possible get passed and back into the inside lane. This should apply all the more to overtaking on a single lane highway without overtaking lanes. It is simple stupidity to attempt to pass a car doing 90 or 95 kph while maintaining not more than 100 kph while remaining in the oncoming lane for far too long, and increasing the risk of head on collision.

Use of revenue from traffic offence fines.

5/. Recently it was announced that in Queensland, speed camera operational hours would be increased from 26,000 to 70,000 hours per year. And our Premier expected us to believe him when he said it was not a revenue raising exercise!

The fact is that governments should be more truthful in their reports. For example the reducing road toll has a lot more to do with new safer modern motor vehicles (than twenty years ago) and also (albeit too slowly) new better roads being built – than the increased enforcement of draconian road laws. (For example all Victoria has achieved with its road laws is ensure that I will never drive a car in that state, or for that matter visit, even though I lived there for twenty years. And with its' draconian laws it still had a higher Christmas road toll than most other states including the Northern Territory with its open speed limits).

I don't have a problem with the fact that governments need to raise revenue any way they can. But I would prefer to pay higher vehicle registration fees to give our state government the money it needs, than be unfairly penalised for breaking unrealistic road laws.

Once government's get their hands of our money, then I would prefer that they use these funds to do something that actually decreases the road toll, rather than just undertaking ad campaigns that simply annoy motorists and achieve nothing. i.e. if instead of paying millions to advertising companies for billboard advertising, governments should use the money for road upgrading and installation of cables lane dividers on all divided highways. (which is proven to save lives as per Swedish studies).

Unreasonable road laws create bad will between the public and the police.

6/. As a law-abiding citizen who appreciates the need for a Police Force and would normally have goodwill towards its members, I sometimes have felt very negatively disposed towards them because of issues relating to traffic law enforcement. At the time of receiving one of the abovementioned speeding tickets (111k in a 100k zone on a divided highway) I wrote a letter, because I was so annoyed that I should receive a ticket for safely driving in an area not far after the speed had reduced from 110kph to 100kph in blue sky conditions. My letter pointed out that police resources would be far better utilised finding the robbers that had burgled our home of \$65,000 worth of our belongings, than having police sitting around waiting to catch safe drivers exceeding unreasonably low speed limits. I received a stupid reply letter from a police sergeant spruiking the government line on road safety issues.

In Conclusion.

Responsible people will observe reasonable road laws. At present some road laws are not reasonable, and many otherwise law-abiding people ignore them because of this.

This situation needs to be changed.

The currently visiting Expert, Alan Buckingham from the Bath Spa University College in the UK, has said that most safe drivers speed. He says that US research has established that those who speed moderately 10 – 20 kph above the posted limit tend to be the safest drivers. Many drivers who are drunk, in old unsafe cars, or slow drivers, or are too old to be driving and who are still unsafe drivers even though driving slowly, are not caught, because of this wrong emphasis on road speed.

Buckingham recommends that road safety policy should shift from the obsessive pursuit of speedsters (as defined by our current slow highway speed limits), and return to fostering a conscientious driving culture.

Australian drivers should be encouraged and taught from the time of obtaining their first drivers licence that it is more important to consider driving conditions, (rain, fog, road conditions) and consideration of other drivers, than to be just learning that they have to keep looking for speed traps.

Summary of items for consideration by the committee.

A. Increase in highway speed limits to 130 kph on suitable divided roads.

Consideration should be given in Australia on multi lane highways to have a higher speed limit in the fast lane. (possibly 100 kph in the 'slow lane' and 130 kph in the fast lane (with trucks limited to 100kph. (It is absurd that 30 tonne truck is allowed to travel at the same speed as a modern car fitted with ABS brakes, traction control and the ability to stop in far shorter distances than a loaded truck.

B. Change of law to allow 20% increase on normal limit for overtaking vehicle.

Investigate the reality of accidents that happen during overtaking, and investigate the facts regarding distances available in the average overtaking laneway on single lane highways.

C. Reduce use of speed cameras to genuinely 'black spot areas.'

Speed cameras should not be placed on long straight stretches of divided highway.

D. Use funds from Fine revenue for really worthwhile road safety initiatives.

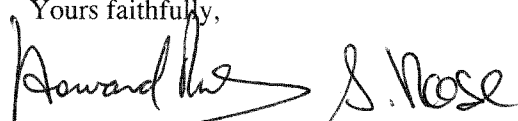
Stop wasting money with advertising agencies. Use funds for things that really make a difference.

E. Make State transport departments tell the truth rather than trying to fool the public with 'half truths'.

Road accidents statistics should be reported in a publicly available document that tells the real reasons behind each road accident resulting in death. That way people can learn from the information. Then concentrate on the real causes. Distribute that document to all Australian households (instead of a fridge magnet), and people will start to learn.

I hope that these comments will be given due consideration by your committee. I know that many of my associates feel strongly along the same lines as I do, that there needs to be change, and more fairness in our road law strategy. And it can be done without increasing our road toll, and may in fact just continue to improve the road toll, as more new cars, better training, and better road will always do.

Yours faithfully,


Howard and Sylvia Rose.