

## Submission to the Victorian Government Inquiry into the Victorian Road Toll.

Tim Connors

Compared to other forms of moving people around, private motorised vehicle transport remains far less safe to both users and third parties. Safety standards are lax, unenforced, and near misses are almost never investigated and lessons (to manufacturers, drivers, road engineers) left unlearned. For such a serious injury and death toll, the unsafe systems around mass private vehicle transport rarely get a second thought in the eyes of the public, legislators or media. Death tolls are only reported when something unusual beyond the elevated norm happens.

Roads are configured for traffic to move too fast. In the parlance of occupational health and safety, limiting speed relies almost entirely on administrative controls rather than engineering controls - speed limits and sparse camera enforcement, rather than building roads to slow people down. Well intentioned ideas still being implemented despite evidence to the contrary, such as clearing trees from the side of the road, simply result in people driving less carefully via risk compensation. Traffic control features concentrate entirely on vehicle throughput (even when this doesn't make sense on parts of the network where there isn't an excessive demand problem), instead of letting humans get to their destination. As well as engineering roads so it wasn't possible to travel at today's unsafe speeds, average speed could be brought down for example by placing more weight on letting pedestrians cross roads by tuning lights to change on demand, rather than forcing a pedestrian to wait pointlessly for minutes after pressing a beg button that has decided it is more beneficial to present a green light to the opposing road that has had no traffic on it for the past minute. The only engineering changes being made to roads of recent years is to strip back vegetation leaving a scar on the landscape, or installing wire rope barriers, which are engineered with only the private car in mind, and dangerous to all vulnerable road users.

Vehicle standards are lax by comparison to safer, more engineered transport modes. Vehicle standards don't require lights to be on at all times. Recent cars have finally come nearly standard with daytime running lights, but even these are largely useless in varying weather conditions, giving the driver a false sense of security that they are visible to other road users when they see their own dash light up. "Always on" lights have been nearly mandated for motorcycles for 20 years now, and despite having smaller batteries, this does not create any practical problems for bikes, so there is no reason not to force lights to come on with the ignition on all vehicles. Indicators are poorly distinguished from other back panels lights on many current model cars. Excessive window tinting is allowed by the standards, and rarely enforced when in breach. There is a current focus on driver assist panacea, but a recent drive in a current top of the line model demonstrated to me personally that the technology was a dangerous distraction, attempting to take over (before disengaging its inputs suddenly when a road narrowed!) and creating dangerous situations on roads that were only slightly more complicated than usual.

There is a predominance of large and poorly engineered vehicles in current manufacturer catalogues and in the suburban fleet. 4WDs and large SUVs are given competitive tax advantages and are not required to follow the same road safety standards as other cars, and yet are mostly used for suburban travel. Such vehicles are far more deadly to other road users, and are not safer, contrary to their marketing image, towards their own occupants.

Driver standards are lax, with drivers poorly trained, kept poorly up to date with licensing requirements (road rules), and with almost non-existent policing compared to other transport modes. Driver awareness is very low. There should be ongoing education campaigns, reaching the kind of people who need to see them – eg, that other road users have rights; how to drive safely around bikes; giving way to pedestrians at intersections. The only way of checking that people have indeed been following education campaigns is to regularly test them. Politicians may balk at the cost of testing 4 million drivers in Victoria every year at Vicroads offices, but technology could mean the testing wouldn't have to require people visit an office, and could be largely automated.

Most laws are routinely and predictably disobeyed – mobile phone use, lights turned on at night, roadworthiness with, for example, both headlights working at night, use of indicators, lane discipline, speed. It is very rare in current times to see police enforcement against bad drivers or unroadworthy vehicles, with policing almost entirely having devolved to automatic traffic infringement notices sent out via speed and red light cameras at a relatively small number of well-known fixed locations. A very large number of drivers are continuously distracted by mobile phones or in-vehicle infotainment systems (by bike, I see about 10 drivers using phones per day on average, but police enforcement only about once every hundred days on a handful of well-publicised crackdowns per year). Detection and enforcement is sporadic enough to be ignored by most drivers.

Drivers have been found to be at fault in nearly 80% of all car-bike collisions in Australia, yet the police, courts and media make automatic assumptions that “a bike crashed into a car” and is the primary party to blame. Most western European countries have reduced their road toll by reducing their reliance on private motor vehicle use, implementing measures such as strict liability to assume that the driver of the more massive vehicle, statistically more likely at fault, is held to be at fault unless they can prove otherwise. This automatically results in drivers taking more care around vulnerable road users and thus even increasing their own safety as they pay more attention.

Law enforcement seems to have an absolute focus on absolute speed, rather than speed excessive for the conditions. The NSW roads agency places signs on low traffic country roads stating “9 out of 10 speeding deaths occur on bends”, which is a tautological statement not in favour of lower speed limits, but in drivers being in better control of their vehicles, not hooning. It demonstrates how simply relying on speed cameras on straight sections of road to keep speeds down is not going to be highly effective in stopping deaths from happening. Rather than encouraging traffic to disperse such that collisions don't become an issue, Victorian police focus on making sure everyone bunches up behind drivers doing 10km/h slower than the speed limit, unable to overtake because speed differentials are too small and passing lanes manifestly inadequate. Driving at 5km/h above the limit is stringently enforced against, but driving too fast through corners and being unable to stay within a lane has a tiny probability of being observed by law enforcement.

Roads bodies, ministers, the police and judicial system place very little priority on the safety of anyone other than occupants of cars. The contempt for vulnerable road users is displayed by Vicroads and politicians in projects like the Level Crossing Removal Project, and how only unsafe bicycle routes are provided as an alternative to the closed Upfield bike track, with simultaneous refusal to address the adjacent Sydney Road despite community lead consultations – you'd never see a major freeway closed for 18 months with no alternative put in place. The police lobbied against a 1metre passing rule, leading to Victoria being the only state without such a rule planned or in place. Their reasons were largely that they couldn't judge 1metre distances and the workload would be too onerous (perhaps admitting the quantity of poor quality driving of existing road users), even though they've demonstrated they're perfectly capable of judging 1.5metres when it comes to social distancing enforcement. Reports of near misses including video evidence are ignored by police, instead of taken as a learning opportunity for the driver.

Australian roads are not safe systems for professional drivers. Professional drivers work hours far in excess of hours worked by ordinary workers who aren't in charge of a dangerous object. Truck drivers assume they can go around a bend at a speed their vehicles are not capable of stopping at in the visibility they have. On less frequently travelled roads, logging trucks are usually observed travelling at such high speeds around blind bends that they can't even stay within their own lane, and yet logbook enforcement just assumes average speeds and that all roads are straight. There is no requirement for heavy vehicles to keep left on multi lane roads, nor keep to a low enough speed that their kinetic energy is contained. An example could be learnt from studying German autobahns. Trucks are required to stay to the far right lane on most of them, with very prominent illuminated signs every few kilometres along the road, and with very frequent patrols by vehicles equipped with programmable signs on the rear of the vehicle, physically pulling out in front of errant trucks, directing them back into their lane. Trucks are limited to 80km/h, and in busy conditions, just form one continuous line in the far right lane. Other vehicles are free to disperse at their natural velocities, such that at low traffic times, velocities are high but likelihood of collision is low, and in high traffic, velocities are low and likelihood of collision is still low. Fatality rates are far below the Australian average, but the converse is that their drivers are far more skilled than ours. Nevertheless, an Australian quickly adapts on an autobahn out of necessity, or dies quickly, bringing those skills (proper use of mirrors, head checks and lane discipline) back to Australia with them.

The high death toll on Victorian roads is largely an attitudinal problem, from lobbyists and legislators, roads engineers and agencies, educators, licensing officials and law enforcement, through to drivers. Private motor travel could learn safe systems approaches from other forms of mass transit and from other countries. Reducing the road toll will require less emphasis on moving people by private car, and expansion of rights to other road users.

Thankyou for considering my submission.