

**Submission
No 22**

INQUIRY INTO SPEED ZONING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEMERIT POINTS SCHEME

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The Chair
Joint Committee on Road
Safety
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
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Cc

Andrew Fraser, MLA Coffs
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28 February 2014

Re: NSW Parliament's Inquiry into Speed Zoning and the Demerit Points Scheme

Dear Chair

I welcome this opportunity to convey my concerns regarding speed zoning and road safety in general to the Staysafe Committee. While I realise that the focus of this enquiry is into speed zoning and demerit points, I am of the opinion that it is more productive to take a more holistic approach to road safety. I will therefore address topics in my submission that fall outside of this narrow area. If the Committee decides not to consider these points during this enquiry, I hope the members will nevertheless take the items raised on board and discuss them in a more suitable forum.

Speed Limits

Australia is a large country with a small population, which often results in long driving distances. Compared to Europe, Australian freeway speed limits are far too low. For comparable roads, the speed limit on Italian and German freeways is 130 kph (with many German Autobahns having much higher or no upper limit), whereas in Australia the limit is 100 or 110 kph. These speed limits are an anachronism from a time when both roads and cars were of inferior quality. Freeway speed limits for cars and motor bikes in Australia should be 130 kph, with trucks and busses remaining at 100 or 110 kph. Admittedly, some of our freeways are sub-standard, and the current speed limits should remain; the inclined section of the M1 north of the Hawkesbury River bridge being a case in point. But where freeways are reasonably straight and level, the increased speed limit should apply.

Unfortunately, lowering the speed limit is often seen as a panacea for dangerous driving. It is not! Take the example of the horrible crash at Urunga, 8th January 2012. At 5 am on this Sunday morning, the drunk driver of a utility was driving north through the township where

a 60 kph limit applied. The utility was doing at least 80 kph and driving on the wrong side of the road, when it collided head on with a southbound truck. Seconds earlier the utility had passed under a deactivated speed camera! The truck veered off the road, struck a house where an 11 year old boy was sleeping, killing the child. The utility driver as also killed.

Understandably, local residents were outraged and demanded action. As a result, the state government lowered the speed limit at Urunga from 60 kph to 50 kph, thereby scoring some political point with the local populace, but not doing a thing to improve road safety. 60 kph was and is a perfectly safe speed for that road. None of the evidence emanating from the crash suggests that the 60 kph speed limit was a factor, and I defy anyone to explain to me how lowering the speed limit will prevent a drunk behind a steering wheel from doing what that ute driver did. Does anyone really believe that had the speed limit been 50 kph prior to 8 January 2012 that the ute driver's actions would have been any different? So what has been achieved by lowering the speed limit? Just this: Drivers who were driving through Urunga at 60 kph perfectly safely are now crawling through the township at 50 kph, being frustrated in the process. Now, I'm not advocating returning to the 60 kph limit. That boat has sailed. At any rate, Urunga will be bypassed in a couple of years, so the issue of a national highway with a 50 kph speed limit in that location becomes moot. However, we need to refrain from such knee-jerk reactions in the future. The *Coffs Coast Advocate* 19 February 2014 carries an article (page 5) where Karangi residents in the Orara Valley are calling for a reduction in the speed limit because people are overtaking across double yellow lines. As if that would stop people who currently speed and overtake on double yellow lines! This is another example of a small number of drivers doing the wrong thing and endangering the lives of the rest of us. It is also an indication of the frustration felt by local residents that the prevailing road rules are not being enforced. But rather than lowering the speed limit, which will only affect law-abiding drivers negatively, the real answer is to get the irresponsible drivers off the road! If they are regularly doing the wrong thing on that road, it should not be too difficult to catch them. Try stationing a police offocer on foot near the road, and unmarked cars either end. An observation, a quick radio call, and Bob's your uncle! Lowering the speed limit does not necessarily reduce crashes. In country NSW, more crashes (4,325) occurred in 2011 in areas speed limited at 50 kph than in 60 kph (2,703) or 100 kph speed zones (3,582) (Road Traffic Crashes in NSW, 2012 <http://roadsafety.transport.nsw.gov.au/downloads/crashstats2012.pdf>).

Tailgating

Despite the fall in the number of road fatalities since the 1970s (ABS Yearbook 2009-10 <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/D18CA4EA930FF0D2CA25773700169CE5?opendocument>), I put it to you that the current road safety campaign focusing almost exclusively on the "fatal four" is a failure. It is my assertion that the drop in road fatalities is mainly due to improved motor vehicle safety, starting with the compulsory wearing of seat belts in 1971. Technological improvements such as ABS braking, dynamic traction control, crumple zones, and multiple air bags have all made cars safer. I claim that the "fatal four" campaign is a failure because it has become stale and predictable, and because it ignores

important reasons for motor vehicle crashes, such as mobile phone use and tailgating. There were a total of 41,521 road traffic crashes in NSW in 2011 (<http://roadsafety.transport.nsw.gov.au/downloads/crashstats2012.pdf>). 11,408 or just over one quarter were due to vehicles moving in the same direction colliding, in other words head to tail crashes caused by tailgating. There were also 13,223 crashes where the vehicles left the carriageway. It can be safely assumed that a number of these were caused by the tailgating driver taking evasive action and missing the vehicle in front but losing control of his/her vehicle and leaving the carriageway. Unfortunately, changing driver behaviour is an almost impossible undertaking. Drivers need to not only be convinced that their driving behaviour is potentially dangerous, but they must also fear getting caught. Without an effective deterrent, any road safety campaign is essentially a waste of time and money. Tailgating is also the number one annoyance for NSW drivers. A survey of over 1,500 motorists in NSW and the ACT found tailgating (42%) (...) the biggest bug bears for drivers. (<http://www.mynrma.com.au/about/media/tailgating-beeps-us-off-most.htm> 23 April 2012)

Tailgating Trucks

These vehicles and their drivers fall into a category all of their own. Some of the most frightening experiences I have ever had on the roads have involved 42 tonne trucks driving one car length behind my car at 100 kmp! I had been driving a steady 100 kph, and the truck came up behind me doing much more than 100. So much for speed limiters! The law should be changed so that any truck driver guilty of this sort of behaviour is deemed to have committed a criminal offence. It is no different to a person walking behind you on a footpath threatening you with a knife or gun because you are not walking fast enough for their liking. Any truck driver caught, charged and convicted of such an offense should face serious goal time.

In addition to the woefully inadequate police highway patrols in marked cars, unmarked cars should be used to weed out these criminals. The existing speed camera and red light camera technology could easily be adapted to measure the distance between moving vehicles and the adequacy (or not) of this distance in relation to their speed.

You may also consider banning trucks from the fast (i.e. right hand lane on freeways, as is the practice in much of Europe).

As I mentioned earlier, driver behaviour is extremely difficult to change. A campaign with high shock value, similar to the very effective "Grim Reaper" 1987 anti-aids campaign, does have a chance of working. This campaign could easily be coupled with ongoing driver education via public service ads on television. An anatomy of an accident could show both the events leading up to the crash and the aftermath.

Mobile Phone Use

Far too many drivers are still using their mobile phones whilst driving. It is frightening that almost half of all drivers make calls using handheld phones whilst driving (http://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/newsevents/news_ministerial/2013/130612-no-more-excuses.html). I walk past the Sawtell Road/Hogbin Drive roundabout in Toormina almost daily, and not one day goes by where I do not see a number of drivers talking on their mobile phones whilst negotiating the roundabout one-handed. A police officer standing there would see exactly the same thing. If enough people get booked, and the word gets around that miscreants will get caught, the incidence of mobile phone use whilst driving will decrease. I know that almost 43,000 infringement notices for mobile phone use were issued in 2012, but that is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Much more deterrent is needed in this area.

Speeding

It may come as a surprise to you, but drivers who speed do not do so only on highways. An effective campaign targeting speeding should include placing portable speed cameras on 50 kph suburban roads. Not a car containing speed cameras, but cameras in a suitable container situated on the footpath. Please don't be fooled by the arguments of so-called civil libertarians who oppose methods designed to catch the guilty. They are only trying to protect law-breakers for their own selfish reasons. Arguments such as "speed cameras are only revenue raisers" and "the driver may have accidentally exceeded the speed limit momentarily" are spurious. Speed cameras would not raise any revenue if drivers were not speeding. If a driver really exceeded the speed limit for the first time in his life, his/her driving record will show this, and they can be let off with a warning. However, habitual speeders and tailgaters are legion, and they should be caught and punished.

To sum up, a new, fresh approach is needed in relation to road safety. Sensible road rules in tandem with effective deterrents are required. Modern cars and roads now allow safe travel at greater speeds than in previous decades, and technology has made travel safer by providing safer cars and improved detection methods. But technology has also created problems, such as mobile phone use by drivers. We need to develop technology further to overcome these problems, perhaps by monitoring mobile phone signals being emitted from single occupant vehicles, and using technology to deter and catch tailgaters. Ongoing driver education through graphic TV ads, and perhaps retesting drivers every 5 years to weed out those that have developed bad habits should all be considered.

Regards

Erhard Dehmelt

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