

Julian Conway

The Senate Economics References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

July 18, 2015

Dear Chairperson,

Please accept this as my submission to the Senate Hearing on Personal Choice and Community Impacts.

I wish to voice my objection to mandatory helmet laws. Please recognise that I am NOT anti-helmet. I encourage riders who commute in high density traffic areas or perform risky cycling such as racing or stunt riding to always use a helmet. I also recognise that, as a member of a mature, civilised society, **this should be their choice.**

I have been a bicycle user for more than forty years. I began using a bicycle as a child to get to school. Growing up in the inner west of Sydney, the bicycle was practical, convenient, safe and affordable. It remained my primary means of personal transport until I moved to the North Coast of NSW to raise a family. I still ride daily, although the greater distances regretfully means it is now a secondary mode of personal transport.

I was dismayed when bicycle helmets were made compulsory in NSW in 1991. I correctly foresaw this as the decline in practical bicycle use and the excuse to avoid investing in bicycle infrastructure. At the time I was a professional cycle courier in Sydney, and saw the compulsion to wear an ineffective plastic hat as a hindrance to my chosen profession. I chose to object to the law, and paid the fines as a result of my objection. Despite being the victim of several accidents involving motor vehicle aggression, never was a helmet responsible for mitigating injury.

Adults are granted privilege and/or right to perform many dangerous things. We drive cars that can travel at enormous speed. We drink alcohol in social settings with the aim of getting drunk. We smoke tobacco that is a proven cause of cancer and stroke. We eat food so unhealthy that obesity and heart disease is the assured outcome.

All of these activities are proven more deadly than the simple, gracious act of riding a bicycle. Why do children seldom ride bicycle to school anymore? Somehow it is seen as a dangerous activity. A veneer of danger caused by mandatory helmet laws. Instead, parents drive their children to school, thus increasing the danger around the school, and perpetuating the traffic cycle.

I firmly believe the laws were introduced as a knee jerk reaction to a spate of injuries (that helmet use may or may not have mitigated) and the resulting media outcry. But these laws are wrong. Why does the rest of the world (aside from New Zealand) reject national helmet compulsion? **Why are the countries with the lowest rate of injury from accidents involving a bicycle also the countries with the highest per-capita bicycle use?**

Attitudes in Australia toward bicycle use have declined steadily since the introduction of mandatory helmet laws. I experience this on a daily basis, in the form of verbal abuse. These people are encouraged by many main stream media voices who encourage the demonisation of bicycle use. **These attitudes can and must be changed.**

The first step is to recognise bicycle use as an efficient means of transport and provide a budget for infrastructure to suit. Next, a low key reversal of unnecessary stigmata laws such as mandatory helmet laws will stop sending the wrong message to potential bicycle users.

We have the potential to be a world leader in bicycle friendly cities and communities. If just one tenth of the budget for the planned "WestCONex" freeway in NSW was devoted to bicycle infrastructure, we would have a world class system that would allow many people to leave their car at home.

Whilst still a long way off, these dreams could become a reality. Removing these unnecessary laws Australia wide will go a long way toward legitimising bicycle use. The bonus benefit is dropping the pathetic "nanny state" image we have cloaked ourselves in.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Conway