Cycling's wind of change may sweep aside valuable lessons . . . .

Something's going on

Even a cursory glance from a non-specialist shows it: something is changing in the area of planning for cycling – the biggest changes in 15 years.

Within the last year or two, cycling seems to be something ordinary lay people – rather than sporties and greenies – support and want more of. John Key as a canny politician with fine nose for votes, has got behind it with extra money – and there's nothing like this for getting everybody's ears to prick up. But wider than this – cycling in a relatively short time has become distinctly 'sexy' in the general public mind. Some have called cycling *"the new golf".*

But I'm concerned, because some of the mistakes of past decades look set to be made again. Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Wind of change

Within the last year or two, we have seen:

- the NZ Cycle Trail delivering the first of its 'Great Rides' and spawning its 'Expansion Project', aiming to link these iconic stand-alone rides into a nationwide cycle touring network.
- a Cycling Safety Panel, set up in 2013 on recommendation of a coronial inquiry (itself unusual, in looking at several incidents together), recommending some far-reaching changes (December 2014).
- an 'Urban Cycleways Fund' (August 2014) of $100M (over and above the National Land Transport Fund).
- creation of a National Cycling Team (2014) at NZTA – a step-change in staff resources devoted to the topic.
- a project initiated by Hastings businessman Paul McArdle to build bike training facilities at his children's school, now becoming a nationwide movement.
- 'Frocks on Bikes' and similar movements (gents, there is a male equivalent, the 'Tweed Ride'), the significance of which is to normalise cycling, by yanking it out of the 'sweat, lycra and macho' associations into something 'normal people' do.
- the advent in NZ of a new form of cycling facility, the 'separated cycle lane' (examples being Beach Road, Auckland, or St Vincent Street, Nelson, with several other local authorities keen to follow suit).
- an emphasis on people who don't cycle now, but (so it is perceived) 'would like to' – the 'interested but concerned' sector, as defined by Portland cycle planning specialist Roger Geller.

Is all this positive?

Before we all rush to say *"Of course it is!",* consider this.

Geller is not the first to urge us to focus on would-be cyclists rather than those who already ride. John Grimshaw, founder of the UK's enormously successful Sustrans, parted company from urban cycle campaigners in the late 1970s to develop a disused rail line between Bristol and Bath, which became the flagship project for many others which were to follow. This was while his fellow Bristol cycle campaigners were focusing on the on-road situation,

and giving us (eventually) some of the first advanced stop boxes – because that's where those campaigners wanted to cycle.

Grimshaw wanted to attract family groups – those who didn't cycle because they found road traffic too intimidating. For many years, there was a bit of a stand-off between Grimshaw's Sustrans and the urban cycle campaign groups (whose equivalent in New Zealand would be the Cycling Advocates' Network). Grimshaw said the family groups, and other would-be non-cyclists, wanted to be separated from road traffic.

Sounds familiar? Today, advocates of 'separated cycling lanes' – photos of which appear prominently in the Cycling Safety Panel's December 2014 Final Report, and in other official material wanting to be seen as 'up with the play' – say the same, echoing Geller's thinking, that those who don't cycle but would like to "*want separated facilities*". Do they really want this, and even if so, will this deliver benefits?

Going back earlier than Grimshaw – to 1950s-1970s – some settlements have been substantially planned on the basis of the same assumption, with pedestrian and cyclist circulation being via a network of routes completely segregated from motorised traffic. England's Stevenage New Town, and Canberra's new 1960s development area, were notable examples. It didn't work, for various reasons. The cycle routes sometimes did not go to destinations cyclists wanted to reach, and an antagonistic anti-cycling culture developed among both car drivers and road engineers – of *"Get these cyclists off our roads and onto the network we have provided for them".*

Battle was joined perhaps most exhaustively in Milton Keynes, one of the last, largest and most car-oriented (and segregated-path-oriented) of England's New Towns. Here local cyclist John Franklin cited statistics showing that cycling was actually more dangerous under the segregated approach, than it was with cyclists sharing the road with motor traffic – with crashes actually higher on the off-road paths (let alone the road system). He advocated *"vehicular cycling"* and went on to write *Cyclecraft* (1988), a seminal manual which went to to gain so much respect that the UK Government republished it in a revised and officially endorsed edition in 1997. This guide gave cyclists the skills to cope with motor traffic. The advice was similar to that given to learner car drivers – be clear to others as to your intentions, and claim the road when necessary in order to carry them out. *Cyclecraft* went on to form the basis of the *Bikeability* cyclist training programmes.

It seems we had learnt that safety results from learning how to share the road, rather than separating the user categories from each other. New Zealand seems about to un-learn this through the vast imbalance in the current initiatives.

Segregation, in fact, is impossible – paths need to cross roads, and driveways are accessed across the 'separated' paths – and even where it is achieved, personal safety may become an issue because of a secluded environment. Segregated or 'separated' (the new in-vogue term) networks may have a valid place in cycle planning, possibly as a broad-scale arterial network for cyclists, but they can only ever be just one part – not a foundation – of our urban cycle planning (and, therefore, what gets funded).

And it gets worse. Because the newly-in-vogue 'separated cycle lanes' are within the road boundaries (rather than, say, paths through parkland), there are all sorts of design 'fish-hooks' which should concern us. Cars need to cross them. Pedestrians and cyclists need to cross them. Cyclists will be coming (at some speed) from directions from which other road users may not see them, or even look for them. And research into these potential problems is at a very early stage.

We are now familiar with something else learnt since those days – the "*safety in numbers"* phenomenon. This is that, for whatever reason, the per capita cyclist crash rate goes down with higher cyclist numbers. It took many years for this to become established, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but there are now many studies showing the same thing. Some explain this by saying that motorists are more used to seeing and responding to cyclists. Others say that the cyclists are more experienced and thus skilled, in coping with motor traffic. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that motorists and cyclists sharing the road not only breeds safety, but that hard data from professionally-reputable studies back this up. Cyclists aren't likely to learn road-sharing skills on the 'separated cycle lanes' now coming into vogue. It also shows there are safety benefits from increased cycling – not just environmental, congestion and health benefits – whether or not dedicated infrastructure is provided for it.

Another breakthrough was the *"Five Point Hierarchy of Measures",* first adopted by the UK Institution of Highways and Transportation in 1996 and since adopted more widely, including in NZ official documents. This turned conventional cycle planning on its head by saying that reducing traffic volumes and reducing traffic speeds were the two most important measures which could be taken to improve cyclists' safety. 'Cycling facilities' in the form of off-road paths or on-road cycle lanes, came lower in the list of priorities (at the bottom, in fact). Where in this hierarchy would 'separated cycle lanes' fall?

I get worried when I see in Gerry Brownlee's August 2014 press release (and wonder who wrote it), announcing the Urban Cycleways Fund, that urban cycle networks lack 'connectivity'. What does he mean by this? I suspect an assumption that all routes for cyclists must take the form of 'cycling facilities' – a fallacy learnt to be a fallacy in years past. Other official voices have said similar things since, with the key words 'connected' and 'separated' being peppered throughout the rhetoric.

I get similarly worried when I read (for example, in the Cycling Safety Panel's 2014 Final Report) that the state of cycle planning in NZ is not *"fit for purpose",* and that official guidance will therefore be re-written. Dare I suggest this reads rather arrogant? Fifteen years ago, best practice cycling facility design largely existed outside documents like MOTSAM, with the Austroads Guides being ahead of ours, and much of the expertise residing among cycling advocates. There was a major turn-around in the early 2000s, as much of this expertise was brought into mainstream official guidance, with a notable example being the LTSA's 2004 *NZ Cycle Network and Route Planning Guide*. Official documents should always be open to suggestions for improvement, but to imply current official guidance is to be dismissed as not *"fit for purpose"* seems rather over the top, uncalled-for, and actually insulting.

And where did 'cycling strategies' go – the 'must-have' local authority documents of the early 2000s? The new money and the rhetoric is going predominantly into building infrastructure, 'networks', physical stuff on the ground. Although 'soft measures' like travel planning and road safety education are still officially supported, most of the gung-ho enthusiasm we seem to hear from our politicians and their public servants (and the new funding) is directed at building 'cycling facilities', and especially of the currently particular in-vogue type. The strength of a strategy is the balance between its diverse elements, 'hard' and 'soft' – are we forgotting this?

<u>And now? Advance cycling, not 'cycling facilities'</u>

In several cities, we have cycling facility proposals facing a very rough ride from public opposition. Examples are Wellington's Island Bay and other routes, and a series of routes in Christchurch. Some of this opposition is because the design is based on relatively new concepts (notably the 'separated cycle lane'), and there are 'fishhooks' in its detail – like safety as driveways and pedestrians cross, or whether the 'separated' path gives way to side roads (which may negate its attractiveness to cyclists). Some opposition is based on cost – designs as radical as this do not come as cheap as we are used to with painted cycle lane markings on the road. Some opposition is from that hoary old chestnut, loss of on-street parking (which may not be such a disaster as often supposed). Meanwhile, I would suggest that the 'elephant in the room' is often either ignored, or at least downplayed, and that is the role of motor traffic in cyclist accessibility and safety.

No matter how good or bad the new facilities' designs are, the cyclists who use them also need to use conventional roads. Very few journeys can ever be entirely, or even mainly, along such 'separated' facilities. This is an 'inconvenient truth': no matter that (so the thinking goes) *"interested but concerned"* 'would-be' cyclists *"want"* separated facilities, they also need to learn how to cope with traffic, because it is among traffic that much of their journey will inevitably lie. And traffic needs to slow down as necessary for this, which in turn brings to the fore whether we are to see 'efficient' traffic flow as an end in itself, and whether perhaps we should get as enthusiastic about reducing and slowing traffic, and road designs to calm it effectively, as we apparently now all are supposed to be about 'separated cycle lanes'.

Finally, another valuable lesson from the past. The seminal 1977 Geelong Bike Plan, whose 'Four E's' (*Engineering, Education, Enforcement and Encouragement*) set the template for cycling strategies for many years afterwards, had a watchword *"Every street is a bicycle street".* They meant that we need to plan that cyclists may need to use any part of the urban road network. Let us not let our fascination with 'separated cycle lanes' blind us to the valuable lessons of the past, not least the need for decent sharing between cyclists and motor traffic as of greater importance than perfecting the design technicalities of 'cycling facility' infrastructure.

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