

SPEED CAN KILL AT ANY SPEED

By Kevin Glancy



Australia is one of the few remaining countries in the world still clinging to the notion that as far as road safety goes, there's really only one policy that matters. It's a policy based on a simple slogan – speed kills. It must work because it's a state government policy that has withstood the test of time and as we know, governments are always right. Aren't they? They must be. I've been driving for over 50 years and the policy has never changed. It's the only road safety policy that I, along with millions of others in Australia, have ever known. It's always been about speed and how speed kills.

But hang on. You would think that by now, following at least 70 years of speed limit enforcement, that such a policy would have had some dramatic results. Of course, we all know it hasn't and tragically, there are still too many Australians losing their lives on our roads. Yet lazy, revenue obsessed state governments, throughout Australia, lacking leadership and imagination, continue to drive speed limits lower and install more and more speed cameras.

The only change to their policy, since the model T Ford did it's stuff, has been to reinforce their continued obsession with speed limit enforcement using more sophisticated camera and radar technology. As a consequence, there is little motivation for a driver to sharpen his or her driving skill and why would you bother, when a confusing range of speed limits plummet towards pedestrian pace and state governments

continue to take photographs of cars on their way to an accident.

Over the last 20 years, as far as driving is concerned, state governments have managed to reduce a whole set of desired driver skills right down to the lowest common denominator – the speedometer. And if you're good at watching it, in the eyes of the state government, that makes you a good driver. The by-product is the removal of the opportunity or the motivation to become a skillful and responsible driver. Instead state government preoccupation with speed enforcement has created a new breed of driver.

Now we have the mediocre, selfish driver who thinks that because they are travelling under the speed limit that they have the right to occupy the right hand lane and hold up traffic. The driver who thinks that when approaching a round-a-bout from the right – that they automatically have right-of-way. The driver who thinks that driving 5 kph under the speed limit makes them a good driver because they make those following them slow down. The drivers who think that it's all about them, forgetting that we are all sharing the road and should all be working together to achieve some degree of transport efficiency.

In most industries efficiency is seen as a safety factor. If something is efficient it's more than likely safer. The transport industry should be treated no differently and yet while car makers have done their fair share of making vehicles far more efficient, state governments continue to remain in the dark ages. Isn't it obvious; make our transport system more efficient and it will be safer. It's not just about better roads but about getting away from reducing speed limits and motivating one dimensional speedometer driving practices. The aim should be to get a motorist from A to B efficiently and that involves optimum speed of travel, focus and a good attitude. A driver should not have a license unless he or she can drive efficiently and cultivating that kind of attitude

towards driving should begin in primary school.

Such is the 'dumbing down' of drivers by state legislators that many drivers are now incapable of dealing with an emergency on the road. They know only one thing about driving – how to drive under the speed limit. The trouble is that the notion that if we drive slowly we can avoid an accident is a fallacy.

Speed is like any gun – any speed in the wrong hands can be dangerous.

In South Australia, when the Labor state government reduced the speed limit in urban areas from 60 kph to 50 kph, accidents increased by 20.5% in the first six months. It's worth repeating. Lowering the speed limit actually increased accidents by 20.5%

When Labor came back into power in SA several years ago its first major budget item was the purchase of 19 new speed cameras. This was despite the fact that at the time, that government's own statistics revealed that speed, as a cause of accidents, was ranked 15th in South Australia. Yet still, the current South Australian Labor Government continues to ignore the 14 more significant causes of accidents and instead defies logic by concentrating its road safety policy on the 15th cause. This is symptomatic of every state government's approach throughout the country.

The recently elected NSW Liberal state government said much about this issue particularly with regard to the removal of speed cameras prior to its election and once elected it has failed miserably to live up to its promises and rhetoric. It reveals that both Labor and Liberal are failing motorists at a state level and are simply obsessed with revenue-raising in their approach to road safety. It is disgraceful policy behaviour by both sides of politics and continues to place lives at risk.

Lex Stewart, NSW RTA Road Safety Manager between 1990 and 1997, confirms that state government's are on the wrong road. According to Lex, the number of road deaths has barely budged over the past decade as ever more drastic penalties have been enforced on motorists. He said Australian authorities were "unusually obsessed" with speeding, at the risk of under-emphasising the dangers of drunk driving or driving without a seatbelt. (Miranda Devine – Daily Telegraph 10/9/12)

He claims that speed cameras are purely 'punitive, not educational'. "We need to ask those obsessed with speed cameras why Germany, with no speed limit at all on its autobahns, has a fatality rate of 0.7, which is substantially better than NSW's 0.9 and Australia's 0.8."

The NSW Auditor-General's report into speed cameras last year revealed a 'damning indictment of current RTA incompetence and arrogance'. The report found 70 per cent of submissions viewed cameras as revenue raisers, and only 28 per cent of cameras produced statistically significant improvements in road safety."

Lex Stewart believes that the use of roving highway patrols is far more effective and when he was in charge of road safety in 90 per cent of the state west of Lithgow, wanted every motorist to see a blue flashing light on their travels.

He told police in his patch that if a driver is travelling at 112km/h in a 110 zone you pull him over, and 'have a chat', about the inadvisability of breaking the speed limit, the hazards of fatigue and the whereabouts of the closest rest stop. Then you send him on his way without a ticket. Lex saw that approach as a way of getting the community involved and providing them with an opportunity to take responsibility for driving safely.

I couldn't agree more. Can you imagine the renewed respect that motorists would have for police with such interaction

instead of the current perspective that sees police as little more than tax collectors for state governments?

Lex also says that while politicians and bureaucrats 'piously' rail against speeding, claiming it is the No.1 road safety problem, 'there is little hard data to back them up', he said. But the blanket assault on speed is absurd: 'Why not make all speed limits 10km/h?'

Ultimately, that is the logical policy conclusion and it highlights the stupidity of all state governments because there is absolutely no upside to such a policy – speed limits can only be reduced – inefficiency increased.

Governments have demanded that manufacturers make safer cars and indeed they have but what is the point when the cars they make are forced to travel inefficiently, creating more pollution because they are being driven at less than optimum performance. This is despite incorporating far better braking systems, much improved road holding, collision avoidance features etc. State Governments continue to lower speed limits even further and employ more speed cameras without any thought that quite possibly, the consequences of their illogical behaviour could have an adverse effect and push 'speed' that is any speed, right up to the top of the hit parade of accident causes.

In South Australia, statistics actually revealed that the number one cause of accidents on their roads was inattention. Is it any wonder with all the speed cameras and low speed limits, particularly on smooth, wide dual carriageways that people are inattentive, when all their time behind the wheel is spent watching their car's speedometer and trying not to fall asleep? You can bet that if honesty and accuracy played any part in road accident data that similar statistics would be found in every state in Australia.

Yet in every state in Australia they completely ignore the

main cause of traffic accidents and persist with a revenue based approach to road safety. Turning drivers into complacent robots, bored witless by lower speed limits and speed camera enforcement. State Road Ministers should be charged with manslaughter for their contribution to serious road trauma.

You cannot wrap drivers up in cotton wool as it leads to complacency on the road and worse; such a singular policy focus on the requirement to watch a speedometer motivates selfish driving habits and ignores the very basic driver responsibility – driving with a good attitude and being attentive. Drive with a bad attitude and a lack of skill and you have the perfect combination. It's the cause of every road accident at any speed. Hence why lowering speed limits does not necessarily achieve a lower accident rate.

Current state government road safety policy simply creates an inefficient and dangerous transport system in which everyone has an opportunity to be a victim. Is it any wonder that there is chaos on the roads when legislation removes the desire to be better at something?

According to recent New South Wales, RTA statistics; around two thirds of all deaths on NSW roads occurred while drivers were travelling under the speed limit.

Apart from confirming the destructive nature of current road safety policy, that statistic alone, actually suggests the ridiculous notion that if you don't want to be the 66th traffic victim, then your odds of survival on NSW roads might improve by driving at speeds above the speed limit. But of course that would be against the law and while I use that notion to make a point I do not wish to encourage anyone to drive above the speed limit.

While no one would advocate that kind of lawless behaviour, the facts speak for themselves. There is something intrinsically wrong with the current approach to road safety

in Australia and the concentration on speed limit enforcement is a one dimensional strategy that is simply not working. There is also a distinct possibility that, if the state authorities continue to lower speed limits and continue the emphasis on speed limit enforcement, then the death toll on our roads will, at the very least be sustained at the current level, or possibly increase as they force more and more people to drive under the speed limit.

You cannot breed responsible drivers unless you give them the opportunity to be responsible.

Reducing a speed limit is like the swimming pool fence. When state governments made it a law to erect a fence around the backyard swimming pool, some parents considered that their responsibility for their children's safety ended at the swimming pool fence; because by inference, that's what the government told them. They were no longer responsible for their children's safety provided they had a fence.

You have to motivate people to take responsibility for their own actions and the swimming pool fence law has not achieved that outcome. Today, the backyard pool is still the biggest cause of children's deaths by drowning. The fence, like the low speed limit provides a false sense of security. Kids will find a way of getting through the fence and motorists will find a way to bump into something no matter how slow they are travelling. It's what we humans do – we have accidents.

In any event, the emphasis on speed as the cause of road trauma by state governments is far too simplistic. Whether it actually reduces the extent of road trauma suffered on Australian roads is doubtful. It certainly doesn't engender respect for authority, as speed cameras are now perceived by most to be nothing more than yet another tier in the many levels of taxation thrust upon the over legislated motorist.

What is the point of an infringement notice arriving in the

mail several weeks after the offence has been committed? If the perpetrator of the offence was going to cause mayhem on the road then it's too late, it's already happened. Did the photograph save anyone's life?

In the UK, Chief Constable Paul Garvin refused to install speed cameras in County Durham because he believed that fining people for speeding does not reduce crashes. He sensibly believes that accidents are almost always caused by other factors including, drinking, drug-taking or simple carelessness. So instead of cameras he established a training course for drivers aged between 17 and 18 and for drivers who have recently had a collision. The result is that in the UK, County Durham now has an accident rate 43% lower than comparable counties and it has 34% fewer road crashes than the national average and not a speed camera to be seen.

Several years ago, in New South Wales, the Police went on strike for around a month, a period that included the notorious October long weekend. While on strike the NSW Police refused to issue any traffic infringement notices or enforce amongst other things, the speed limits on NSW roads. The accident rate recorded in New South Wales during that month of October in the mid 1990's was the lowest since 1956.

Did the State Labor Government at the time learn anything from that extraordinary statistic? If they had considered why the accident rate was so low they might have realised that more than likely, it was because drivers in that state had the unfettered opportunity to be responsible for the way they drove a motor car and when they were given that opportunity – for the most part, they acted responsibly.

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Footnote: This is part one of an ongoing feature

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