# Drive slowly and prosper

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Why are the Heart Foundation and the Arthritis Foundation worried about how fast you drive? There's no evidence that putting the pedal to the metal clogs the arteries or makes the joints ache, yet both health groups are supporting a local government campaign to reduce the speed limit in inner-Melbourne suburbs to a blanket 40 kilometres per hour. The logic of their position is that slower traffic will help people feel safer on the roads and will encourage them to walk and cycle. And that makes for a healthier society. To support their argument, the foundations wheeled out one of world's leading authorities on sustainable transport. His name is Professor John Whitelegg, he's from the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York in the UK, and is the Managing Director of the Eco-Logica Consultancy. His message is simple: slow down!

Peter Mares: Why are the Heart Foundation and the Arthritis Foundation worried about how fast you drive? There's no evidence that putting your foot down clogs the arteries or makes the joints ache, but both health groups have backed a local government campaign to reduce the speed limit in inner Melbourne suburbs to a blanket 40 kilometres per hour.

The logic of their position is that slower traffic will encourage more people to walk and cycle, and that this will result in a healthier society: less heart disease, less arthritis.

One of the world's leading authorities on sustainable transport has been brought to Australia to support the argument. Professor John Whitelegg is from the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York, in the U.K. And he's the Managing Director of the Eco-Logica Consultancy.

Professor John Whitelegg, welcome to The National Interest.

John Whitelegg: Thank-you.

Peter Mares: How strong is the evidence that a general reduction in speed will get more people walking and cycling?

John Whitelegg: I argue that it's very, very strong indeed, and that's on the basis of actual case studies, actual places where anyone can visit, anyone can have a look and by observation and by looking at the data, can actually inspect the evidence and arrive at their own view. And the starting point, I suppose, is that in Germany there are tens of thousands of what they call, in German, 'Tempo Dreizig', which just means it's a 30 kilometre per hour speed limit. And in those areas the Germans are quite meticulous in monitoring what happens. The rate of walking, the level of walking and cycling goes up dramatically in areas which are carefully speed-limited at that level. The city of Graz, in Austria, and moving out of Germany, has been totally 30 kilometre per hour for at least ten years and some of the highest levels of walking and cycling in Europe. And there's a lot of anecdotal evidence as well as scientific evidence that once people are convinced that the roads are safer, crossing the road is safer, getting on your bicycle and not doing the tango with a large lorry or truck is safer, the evidence is there that people will actually get on their bikes and walk a lot more than they will when they fear that they're actually going to be in conflict with heavy volumes of often aggressively driven - but certainly vehicles driven too fast. And they react accordingly and they switch from the car to walking and cycling.

Peter Mares: But I was talking about 40 kilometres an hour. You're talking about 30 kilometres an hour. So, this is just softening us all up, is it?, for actually going a lot slower. Are we going to get down to 20 kilometres an hour?

John Whitelegg: I don't think we'll get down to 20, but I think one also has to be sensitive to the geography. I'm a geographer originally by training and geographers can be really boring and they will tell you that Berlin is very different to London, and Melbourne and Sydney and Brisbane are very different to an Austrian city or a Danish city. And I think in the Australian context I would certainly say "Well, let's give it a go at 40 kilometres per hour. Let's see what happens. Let's see whether we do get higher levels of walking and cycling. Let's see whether people do move out of their cars and respond to the messages about obesity, for example." The thing that I think in Australian cities especially people have to relate to is that there's a very steep curve - by which I mean at traffic speeds or above, let's say 50 kilometres per hour, you're looking at 90 per cent chance of death in a vehicle-pedestrian collision, or vehicle-cyclist collision.

Peter Mares: That is death for the pedestrian or the cyclist.

John Whitelegg: Yes, exactly, thank you for that clarification. We're very good all over the world at protecting the motorist - the person inside the vehicle - but we're very bad all over the world at protecting the pedestrian, or protecting the cyclist. And one of the most amazing things about the work I do, which is global, is that the scientific evidence which shows that the 30 kilometres per hour is the really scientific - what shall we call it? - tipping point. You know, below 30, you have a 95 per cent chance of surviving. A pedestrian or cyclist has a 95 per cent chance of surviving if hit by a car and above 30 kilometres it rapidly goes in the other direction. But with Australian sensitivities, I think 40 [kilometres per hour] is absolutely right... See how it goes, see if it works and then we can look at it again in two or three years time. And it may well work and we may not need to go down to 30.

Peter Mares: I suspect that some car drivers will be listening and thinking "This guy's not going to be happy until there's someone walking in front of every car with a red flag as they used to when the automobile was first invented". The motoring organisation here in Victoria, the RACV, has criticised this speed limit push. They pointed out that in the 1970s and '80s we had higher speed limits on our city roads, and 80 per cent of school students rode or walked to school. Now we have lower speed limits of 60k or 50k - sorry, 50k in Melbourne on most urban streets - yet only 20 per cent of kids walk or ride to school. So speed is not the issue, that's not what's putting kids off walking and riding to school.

John Whitelegg: I would say that's misperception, that's a mistaken view. I've actually done a lot of work - admittedly this work is in Britain, it's in the south of England - on school travel plans. Basically you go into a school where you've got, say, 60 per cent of the kids going to school by car and you do a whole series of talking to people, talking to the children, talking to the parents, talking to the teachers, looking at the traffic engineering and bringing about a situation where you can get a much lower level of car use and a higher level of walking and cycling. And the thing that every time you do a project of this kind, the thing that parents especially say is "I will not let my child walk or cycle: it is too dangerous. Have you seen the traffic on ...." and then they name a particular road, a particular junction. The evidence around the world is very clearly the other way to what the RACV are claiming in the example you just quoted. The reasons why walking and cycling are declining for use of schools are actually a little bit more complicated than just speed and that comes out of the research I do. People are, for example, making all sorts of quite interesting decisions about where to live, where to work, how to deal with house prices... In other words, balancing complicated lives. And often they end up living further away from a school than would be appropriate for a walk and cycle trip. So, it is more complicated. But one thing I'm absolutely sure about is you will never get the reductions in child obesity in Australian cities that are desperately needed if we don't bring down speed limits, give people a feeling that they're very safe and very secure when walking and cycling. And what have we got to lose? You know, give it a go!

Peter Mares: Well what have we got to lose? I guess a lot of car drivers would say it's going to take them longer to get to work. It's going to take them longer to get anywhere. I mean, that's what they've got to lose. And they like driving their cars, I'm sorry!

John Whitelegg: Well, yes. It is not the purpose of government policy anywhere in the world to pander to what people like. It is the purpose of government policy to protect children.

Peter Mares: But it's the purpose of government policy to get yourself re-elected and that means accepting what people want and what people will vote for!

John Whitelegg: You may well be right, there. But I've done a lot of detailed (that dreadful expression!) focus group work - you know, where I talk to several hundred motorists, for example - and I would say that 80 per cent - again, this is in the UK, I've not done it in Australia - and 80 per cent of the motorists say, when they look at the evidence, that they are very happy to go with lower speed limits when they see the impact that the higher speed limits have on child fatality, child serious injury. Motorists are not evil monsters. In the main, they're very reasonable people and they're very happy to drive at a lower speed when they are presented with the information of the severely damaging consequences of higher speed. And by the way, there's detailed research on the loss of time when you're making a journey to lower speed. If you're doing a journey by car of, say, six, seven, eight kilometres and you're driving at, say, 40 kilometres an hour rather than 50 kilometres an hour, you lose two minutes. You know, the time impact - put it that way - is trivial. And people can try it for themselves. Traffic moves more smoothly at lower speeds; traffic makes better use of the highway capacity. People don't drive in a way where they accelerate aggressively and decelerate rapidly. You know, there are many advantages. I actually trust drivers to look at the evidence and arrive at a view. And the problem we've got is that politicians behave like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a passing car. They really don't know what to do and they're frightened of upsetting the electorate.

Peter Mares: Well, indeed. You've come really, I think, to the key point here, and that's the politics of this issue. Now, I think personally, being a bicycle-rider, that your arguments are entirely rational, make a lot of sense; but the politics of the issue are quite another question. In Australia, elections are won and lost in swing seats in our outer suburbs - mortgage-belt areas with poor public transport links and where people are heavily dependent on the car. So, restrictions on the car as seen as an attack on the interests of those voters and not likely to get you re-elected. I mean, it's against all political logic to go down the route you're suggesting.

John Whitelegg: Again, I would love to do a project... I would simply put that to the test. What I do is talk to, say, 500 confirmed, 'hardened' car drivers: people who definitely don't want to walk, don't want to cycle, don't like buses, don't like trains and they want to drive. I would sit down with them, I'd discuss with them the evidence that's there, plain for all to see about the impact this has on loss of time, the impact that this has on their economics or on anything else and show them the evidence about the possibilities and probabilities of death and injury to children and the elderly people. And I find that what motorists are very happy to do is accept the evidence. And they actually then say "Yes, OK, give it a go". You know, it's experimental, we do projects all over the world where we use the word 'demonstration' - you know, let's have a safe speed demonstration city, or safe speed demonstration suburb. And it has to be discussed properly. It's not an attack on motorists at all. All it is saying is "Look, do we want a society where we're likely to squash children over the roadside because they have the temerity to try and cross the road between parked cars and are hit by a car going at 55 kilometres per hour? Do we want the kind of society that creates children-unfriendly cities and elderly unfriendly cities (and we're running into so called demographic time bombs with more of us, including me, going to be over the age of 55, than ever before)? Do we want a friendly city for those kind of people or not? And really, really, what are the consequences of lower speed limits - and they are trivially insignificant, apart from reducing the number of dead children? And what's wrong with that?

Peter Mares: I don't think anyone would argue with reducing the number of dead children and I guess people would say "No, it doesn't necessarily have to be anti-motorist". But it is anti-car. I mean, it is saying the car having everyone getting about in their own individual car, that's not going to make for an ideal city.

John Whitelegg: It's not anti-car at all. The car is a wonderful thing for many kinds of journeys, many kinds of situations, it should be used responsibly and intelligently. But Australian cities, for example, very often have (what's the percentage?) around 30 per cent, 35 per cent of all the car trips are less than two kilometres - two kilometres in length. That's generally recognised around the world as not an intelligent use of cars. You know, we have to go for smart use, intelligent use of vehicles, appropriate use of vehicles and, again, I find in my work, whether it's in Germany or Denmark or Sweden or the UK, or wherever, the people say, "Yes, yes, we agree". And then we have to look for ways of implementing the changes in things like road design, speed limits, enforcement of speed limits and other things that reward the responsible user of the vehicle and punish the irresponsible user of the vehicle.

Peter Mares: Let's now turn to perhaps the other benefit that there is to be had from this, and that's the broader environmental benefit, particularly as we try to deal with climate change.

John Whitelegg: The climate change connections with a discussion of speed and health and child-friendly cities are very strong, limiting speed of vehicles in cities. What it actually does is create a very attractive environment where people are more likely to reduce the use of the car from their own choice, from their own thinking. They work through it themselves and they switch to walking and cycling and public transport - they change their behaviour. If they do change their behaviour that way, there's an immediate, very significant reduction in greenhouse gases in carbon dioxide. So, we actually have one of those classic win-win situations: we create healthy cities, safe cities more walking or cycling, more child-friendly cities, carbon-reduced cities, we deliver carbon dioxide reduction targets to sort out climate change.

Peter Mares: I wonder if there's something cultural at work here? I note in a paper of yours that bus travel in the UK has fallen by a fifth over the last 20 years, while growing by the same amount or more in comparable EU countries. The UK also ranks much lower than Continental Europe in rates of walking and cycling. And I'd hazard a guess that the statistics are probably equally bad in Australia and the United States. So, is this an Anglophone phenomenon?

John Whitelegg: There's definitely something in that. It gets very difficult at one level to explain these international variations. But I've worked as a German civil servant, I worked in the Ministry of Transport at Düsseldorf for three years on transport projects, and one thing you pick up very quickly as a Brit in exile in Germany is that the Germans have a much higher standard of what we now call 'public realm' - you know, urban space. Walking around Sydney in the past few days I've actually been quite saddened - I'm a happy

person and rarely sad! - quite saddened by the poor quality urban space for pedestrians in Sydney. The enormous long waiting times at inadequate spaces allocated at junctions, the fact that the little green man going 'beep, beep beep' stops - I did my own experiment again this morning - stops after 10 paces and leaves you abandoned in the middle of a road, you know. So, I think there are problems in Britain, in Australia, in the United States, which are not the same problems at all. The general environment is much better in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and so on, and they just have a higher level of quality control and design standards in terms of urban space: connectivity, pedestrian facilities, cycling facilities and quality of public transport. And we have to move in that direction if we want to solve climate change problems, if we want to solve obesity, if we want to do something about our very sad record of death and injury for vulnerable groups on urban roads, we have to move in the direction of those other countries. And not worry too much about the cultural explanation. Just do it!

Peter Mares: Professor John Whitelegg, thank you very much for your time.

John Whitelegg: Thank you.

Peter Mares: Professor John Whitelegg is from the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York in the UK. And he's the Managing Director of the Eco-Logica Consultancy. He spoke to me on a visit to Australia earlier this month.

And I reckon our most famous cycler might be on board. Tour de France runner-up Cadel Evans says Australian drivers are the worst in the world. 'When you ride in Italy or Switzerland of France', he says, 'the roads are narrower and there's more traffic, but drivers are tolerant and easier to deal with. Australian roads have much less traffic and are far larger and the drivers have much more space, but they're much more aggressive and negative towards other road users.' That's Cadel Evans.