

ARE WE IN THE MAINSTREAM YET? **(THE NZ CYCLING STRATEGY FOUNDATION PROJECT 10 YEARS ON)**

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The Project

In October 1999 I started work on the *NZ Cycling Strategy Foundation Project*. I had been awarded the IPENZ Transportation Group's annual study award (\$5,000), following an application backed by Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority's offer to organise a cycle planning conference to showcase my draft findings. Only one cycle planning conference had previously been held in New Zealand (Hamilton, 1997), and EECA's offer and all the work they put into the conference (Palmerston North, mid-2000) established the NZ cycling conferences as a series, of which this conference is the latest. My employer at the time, Hamilton City Council, allowed me unpaid leave and use of office facilities, and later, in 2003, Cycling Support NZ (a kind of predecessor to BikeNZ) funded my final report's summary booklet *But Cyclists Don't Pay Towards The Roads*.

The project's purpose was to identify what might comprise a New Zealand Cycling Strategy, should the government decide to prepare one. Interest had been heightened by the launch of *Australia Cycling 1999-2004 The National Strategy* earlier in 1999, and an almost-adopted Land Transport Safety Authority-led Strategy in the early 1990s. I:

- visited seven NZ cities in late 1999 – Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, New Plymouth, Wellington, Nelson and Christchurch – and asked both Council people and local cycling advocates what was going on, including local authority actions and what the advocates thought of this.
- met some central government agencies, including the Road Controlling Authorities Forum, the transport agencies of the time (Transit NZ, Transfund NZ and Land Transport Safety Authority and the Cycle Steering Committee/ 'BikeWise'),
- looked at international experience (I was NZ's representative on the Australian Bicycle Council at the time, which helped),
- wrote up my findings in a February 2000 *Interim Position Statement*,
- circulated this widely asking for views, collated these through a slimmed-down version of the Delphi technique (i.e. asking for comments on the comment without attributing these),
- presented my initial recommendations to the July 2000 *Making Cycling Viable* conference in Palmerston North. This was a final consultation stage, and after gathering the comments,
- published my *Into The Mainstream* report Provisional Edition in October 2000.

My informal soundings, while my grant application was pending, established that the Ministry of Transport would not in the slightest be interested in my findings (all their attention at the time was on 'road reform'), but then two months after the start of my project that all changed. The Government changed from National to Labour-led, with the Greens in a position of influence. A National Cycling Strategy was something the Greens had been pushing for, and in fact this became part of their support deal with Labour. Suddenly the Ministry was very interested in my project, asked to meet me, and sent their Deputy Secretary Transport Strategy, Roger Toleman, to the Palmerston North conference.

'Mainstreaming'

I called my final report *Into The Mainstream* because I've always felt that the effectiveness of any strategy crucially depends on how integrated cycling initiatives are in the mainstream of what professionals and governments do. It's all very well having a bucket of money for 'cycling facilities' – or, dare I say it, a National Cycleway – but how are the decisions which matter affected? Like how conducive is our whole transport and urban environment, and particular initiatives within this, to cycling, so that ordinary people – middle New Zealanders – will see cycling as a viable transport option?

My cycle planning experience goes back to 1982. Before my 1995 migration from Britain, I can almost remember when Sustrans started – I clearly remember John Grimshaw meeting myself and colleagues at Birmingham City Council to drum up support for the next phase of his Bristol-Bath disused railway cycleway construction project. Time and again, eager professionals were saying that cycling's 'time had come', and in just a few years we would see a major increase in cycling. That was in 1982. **Why do we keep saying it, and never learn why it always elusively fails to happen?**

One lesson I learnt, again several times over my nearly 30 years in this field, is that change, whether locally or nationally, invariably comes because some individual, somewhere in the system, has had a vision for something, and has then tirelessly slogged away until it became commonplace and accepted. This is probably the main lesson I would draw. Officials and even governments do not change the world – but people passionate about something, which they then single-mindedly pursue, eventually assemble enough support that the governments and officials 'sign off' the change. With the exception of Peter Kortegast when at Nelson City Council, my experience is that any local authority pro-active about cycling will usually be this way because they have local cycling advocates, or a keen Councillor or two, passionate and constantly raising the issues in the public arena and decision-making channels. It's the same with national-level governments.

I don't want to trawl the detail of my *Into The Mainstream* report – this would bore you all stiff. I had 33 recommendations, and all of them have been acted on in some form. They include such matters as:

- cycling strategy development,
- cycling engineering research,
- road traffic law and law enforcement,
- clarity as to what transport funding is for, and project evaluation,
- recognition that cycling becomes safer with increased cyclist numbers,
- positive promotion of cycling, mixing the road safety and health professionals' messages
- coverage of cycling in 'integrated' transport planning,
- dissemination of expertise (through conferences such as this and other networks),
- government funding support for bodies like the Cycling Advocates' Network, and
- cycle tourism promotion (integration with rail).

So the question then arises – **does that mean cycling is now part of 'the mainstream'?**

'Politics'

And another issue – all the progress since my project has been made under Labour-led governments, with a Green Party influence. Does this mean progress on cycling is inherently a 'left-of-centre' or 'green' (/Green) thing? I don't think so – the presence of cycle-mad British right-wing battler Steven Norris at the 2003 Cycling Conference gave the lie to that one. However, there's a lesson here for cycling advocacy – keep the message to its main focus, relate respectfully to all political philosophies, without anchoring cycling to any one:

- Cycling empowers the poor, so it's 'left-wing',
- Cycling helps the environment, so it's 'green', and
- Cycling enables self-reliance, so it's 'right-wing'

We can argue it all ways – and should do. And in the present context:

- Cycling gives accessibility at a fraction of the cost of its alternatives, so it's extremely good value boosting the economy.

Let's not get caught on the back foot by a change in the political context!

Two Mainstreams!

We now have not one but two 'mainstreams'. There's one I'd call 'the Labour years consensus', and a rather separate one which has emerged from the new government. I think we have made some progress with the first, but we need to be quick-thinking to engage in dialogue with the second.

Labour started changing their transport strategy with the 2002 *Moving Forward* announcement. Following this:

- the *National Roding Programme* was re-named *National Land Transport Programme*,
- central government funding under this programme was voted for public transport, walking and cycling,
- new funding allocation procedures were set up,
- a new vision and objectives were set for transport in the late-2002 NZ Transport Strategy, in turn given statutory force under the Land Transport Management Act, and
- seismic changes in thinking saw a previous (unintentionally) discouraging 'cycling is dangerous' message seamlessly merged with 'cycling is the best thing for your health', to produce the positive and balanced 'safe and sustainable transport' philosophy.

This 'post-Labour consensus' mainstream, I'd suggest, is now well-embedded in transport officials' thinking in the Ministry and NZ Transport Agency. In these circles, it has ceased to be 'political'. There is now widespread agreement, among the 'rank-and-file' transport officials, for the ideas that:

- the bulk of the transport budget should go into roads,
- some funding should go into public transport, cycling and walking, and the whole of society and economy will benefit from this, and
- it makes sense to not only provide infrastructure, but also to encourage it to be used in the most efficient way ('travel demand management' and its subset 'travel behaviour change').

But enter stage right the second mainstream! This stresses benefit to the economy – nothing wrong with that, an appropriate response to a recession, and not unlike the response of new(ish) left-of-centre governments in Australia and the USA. But there are some questionable assumptions embedded in the thinking. We need to address these, and address them respectfully and with well-

supported reasoning. We have a new government strikingly characterised by leaders who are ‘fresh’ (as relatively new to politics), highly intelligent, and very, very savvy concerning finance. Our government’s leaders are also often those who have succeeded in business – and hence come through a testing time of ‘thinking on your feet’ and not shrinking from courageous decisions. We should offer them support, ‘add value’, make friends with them, and give credit to any openness and positive steps we see. But equally, we should not shirk from pointing out where we feel they could learn a thing or two. In fact, through a positive attitude, we will earn the right to do so.

Watch one of the ‘new kids on the block’ of government agencies: the National Infrastructure Unit. Read their paper *Infrastructure: Facts and Issues*, which signals what might get into the forthcoming *National Infrastructure Plan*. I see the *National Infrastructure Plan* as in practice replacing the *NZ Transport Strategy* as the driving force of government thinking. These are Treasury economists. This means rather different in their thinking from Ministry of Transport officials. Do they, a cynic may ask, know about transport? I ‘couldn’t possibly comment’ except to say let’s make sure they do.

Some current ‘mainstreaming’ issues

Many at this conference have commended John Key for launching the National Cycleway. It was a good initiative, but let’s also bear in mind that money for ‘urban’ and day-to-day cycling has been cut significantly, by the government over which John Key presides, while roads and especially major roads have had a major boost – all on the grounds of helping grow the economy. What underlying thinking guides that? That big roads boost the economy, but cycling doesn’t unless it’s tourists on ‘great rides’? I see several intellectual dialogues coming up on here.

I heard the Minister of Transport say that he wanted some shift from cars to walking, cycling and public transport, but not so fast that the economy would suffer. What thinking does this show? That it’s good to help walking, cycling and public transport, but that these don’t help the economy and in fact too much of them may be a drain on it? Is there not a case to be made here that boosting walking, cycling and public transport may in fact be particularly effective ways of boosting the economy?

You ‘can’t get logs to port on a bike’, it is said. But with such a high proportion of our urban traffic taken up with short journeys which in many cases could be cycled, walked, trained or bussed – like the school run – would not boosting provision for and use of these forms of transport help get those logs to port significantly quicker? Again, I ‘couldn’t possibly comment’ – but there is room for debate.

Following recent reports of certain cyclist crashes, we can see that ‘redneck’ attitudes among at least some motorists are just as virulent as ever, and the ‘cycling is dangerous’ line is just too media-appealing to let go of in favour of reasoned statistics. We’ve also seen that day-to-day cycling still has extremely low take-up, and continues to decline (or shows little signs of growth). So we aren’t ‘in the mainstream’ yet. If we were, we wouldn’t see these things.

Some good news

Yet there are signs of hope. There used to be amazing ignorance among roading engineers in how to design for cycling. My 2000 *Interim Position Statement* included a ‘rogues’ gallery of classically-naff cycling facilities. Now there is less of this, which I put down to Axel Wilke having a vision for a training course, getting support from the NZ Institute for Highway Technology (based here in New Plymouth) and Transfund NZ to run it – but it has taken a very large number of course runs to

achieve that change. This is another example of change coming from an individual having passion and then persisting over the long haul until something was achieved.

There are other signs of hope. The 'great divide' between road safety and health professionals' messages on cycling has now largely gone. But the old ideas are still around about cyclists being pests or cranks, and cycling is hardly central to government decisions – in fact, that the National Cycleway arose from nowhere as a 'bright idea' worries me that cycling is still being treated in a rather shallow way. When we see the government vote money to everyday, utility cycling, through the overall direction of urban form and transport investment, justified on the grounds of boosting the economy, I will think we have made progress on the newer, second mainstream.

Other 'persistent battlers' one could mention include Tim Hughes, who has always stayed out of cycling advocacy, but has often been a lone voice for cycling in a relatively hostile official environment, especially in the old Land Transport Safety Authority days. His time came, though, and he led the work on the *Cycle Network and Route Planning Guide*, the benchmarking project, and more. Glen Koorey on cycling research, Robert Ibell as the respectful but persistent builder of bridges to government, and a host of local people too many to mention – the list could go on. Each one battled a particular corner, and stuck at it until they saw positive change.

Battlers and officials

Contrast this with 'official' progress. I'm sure our ministry people, like Gerry Dance, Jason Morgan, and previously Ian Appleton and Reena Kokotailo, are dedicated and hard-working, but I've been a public official myself, and know that your role constrains you. My *Into the Mainstream* report was published in 2000 (about the same time as the *National Pedestrian Project's* material), and the government committed to a National Walking and Cycling Strategy in early 2002. It took until 2005 for the Ministry to publish its *Getting There: On Foot, By Cycle* strategy, which was criticised as too general, so it needed an Implementation Plan, which took another year or two. I remember Gerry in 2006 heralding the 'Model Communities Programme' as the Implementation Plan's 'flagship' project – but this has only recently gained funding, after a long battle over its 'business case'. Regardless of the dedication of the public officials, I think this illustrates my point that change, generally, is driven by passionate battlers, and then 'signed off' by officials.

Conclusion: There is Still Work to Do!

In conclusion, there is a lot more to do in getting cycling into its 'mainstream' place within public policy. We need to not only be skilful propagandists, but also cogent reasoners. Even though recent government decisions seem to imply that cycling doesn't do much for the economy and in fact may be more of a distraction, our government leaders are new and fresh, so let's see whether this means they are open to well-reasoned cases being put carefully – and persistently – before them.