

I am absolutely staggered by the comments from media, public and even more extraordinarily, our politicians, in response to the attack on a group of cyclists by a motorist on Southern Cross Drive last Thursday.

The fact of the case is that this motorist committed a purposeful act that endangered life. And the response is, what? - other motorists passing the crash hurl abuse and obscenity at the riders, the Daily Telegraph responds by starting a poll asking 'are cyclists a problem on our roads?', a commentator on Channel Nine's 'Today' show remarks that the motorist 'should not take the law into his own hands' (what law?) and finally Eric Roozendaal, our NSW Roads minister, says that cyclists should avoid peak hour.

We exist in a tired but vicious circle in which commentary influences public opinion, public opinion elects politicians and politicians in their turn pander to these populist knee jerk but ill considered reactions in a grubby attempt to garner favour.

In reverse order, and the order in which the commentators should know better;

In more enlightened parts of the world cycling is positively encouraged as an alternative means of transport and one of many tools in the fight to ease congestion in major cities, not to mention its beneficial effects on public health. Does the minister's suggestion that cyclists avoid peak hour extend to cyclists commuting to work or does he target only those indulging in training or recreation? (Not withstanding the fact that many of these people out on early morning training rides still have to get to work afterwards). This intellectually challenged politician should tender his resignation forthwith for such woolly headed thinking and inflammatory comment.

As for the Channel Nine commentator who said that the motorist should not have taken the law into his own hands - is this some new law that I have hitherto been unaware of? This was a flagrant attempt to maim or kill, as starkly aggressive as deliberately ramming a pedestrian or knifing someone on a crowded bus because they would not give up their seat.

The Daily Telegraph poll (which would have more suitably been entitled 'are aggressive drivers who purposely endanger life a problem on our roads?') served as a rallying point for any driver wishing to vent their spleen against cyclists and it is perhaps these comments that are most disturbing of all. So many of these posts not only fail to condemn but actually praise this driver!

The problem is that every comment of this kind confers legitimacy on the actions of this criminal driver and in so doing encourages this opinion and conduct in others. (Only today (Sunday) as I was driving to a Mother's Day lunch I witnessed another driver hurling abuse at a group of ten riders who were behaving totally responsibly.) This seems to be becoming a fun and acceptable game.

Changing the attitudes of the general public is a long term process of education but at least those in a position of influence should act responsibly rather than pandering to opinion in order to win votes or sell newspapers. Eric Roozendaal and the Channel Nine commentator should be asked for their resignations and the government should start a bicycle awareness and defensive driving advertising campaign at a similar level of intensity to those conducted to change attitudes to drink driving, smoking or drug use.

Most depressing of all is that this vitriol directed towards cyclists exposes a mass psyche at great variance to those values commonly upheld as epitomizing what it means to be 'Australian', fair play, mateship, tolerance, a fair go for all etc. etc. Politicians love this phrase, at every opportunity ascribing various people's conduct as 'Australian' or 'un-Australian' if they disapprove.

After thirty years living in this country I finally became a Citizen last year. That the culture of my adopted country is such that it can foster such attitudes of violence and intolerance fills me with despair. 'Australianism' is a myth and I am deeply ashamed that I ever took the oath of Allegiance.

James Prior