

## **Parliamentary Friends of Road Safety Event**

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Thank you for taking an interest in road safety

I would like to acknowledge Members of Parliament who take an interest in, and advocate for, better road safety and in particular the Hon Darren Chester MP, Llew O'Brien MP, Senator Glenn Sterle and Former Senator Alex Gallacher who is sadly no longer with us.

I would also like to acknowledge members of the previous Joint Select Committee on Road Safety.

Today I hope to influence your perspectives on road safety if I may.

I am the director of a research centre that conducts crash investigations, crash testing, statistical analysis and modelling. I see the circumstances and causes of crashes and they repeat decade after decade, year after year, case by case. The one profound thing that is often evident following a crash is the fact that those involved had no intent to crash and certainly had no intent to cause any harm.

Saving lives is difficult. You have to have serious conversations about what is acceptable and what should no longer happen. Hard decisions have to be made about what is better and often not popular. This draws high levels of scrutiny and criticism, much of it ill-informed. Yet when you discuss issues with communities, all want a safer world.

While it is true that we have made great advances in road safety over past decades and offset incredible increases in exposure, given our current scientific knowledge and understanding, slow incremental improvement is no longer good enough.

We require major reform of the road transport system to make it more user friendly and forgiving of error. This will require actual coordination of the operation, design and management of roads, vehicles and road users. We also need to be proactive about energy exchange and interactions in the system and deal with consequence and not just likelihood.

We do not look for the star ratings on the side of planes and trains when we board them – we expect that safety is an inherent part of the operation by default.

Yet the complex world of road transport means that we cannot expect single entities to fix the problem. Traditionally we look to police and road agencies to provide all the solutions but we must understand this expectation has severe limitations.

Part of this ongoing complexity will be the increasing inequity between regional, remote and metropolitan communities. Our most effective interventions have limited practicality or effectiveness in rural and remote environments and we need to find other ways to achieve our desired outcomes. We must innovate and adapt.

Road safety presents a challenge for all nations and in Australia we are killing around 1200 people and injuring at least 36,000 people annually at a drag of \$30 billion to the nation. Take another 10 years to realise if our strategies are working and that will be 12,000 dead and 360,000 hospital admissions at a cost of \$300b to the economy.

Why then are we not resolute in expecting a more urgent and dramatic change in trajectory in our road safety performance? The reason is that road safety is perceived as everyone's responsibility but with nobody accountable other than the road users themselves.

In 2018 the findings from an independent inquiry into the National Road Safety Strategy were delivered by myself and Dr John Crozier from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons with advisors Lauchlan McIntosh and Rob McInerney providing invaluable contributions. I commend the then Minister Darren Chester for initiating the inquiry and acknowledge the support we received from all sides of Parliament.

The key headlines included:

- Implementation failure
- A drip feed of trauma with no end in sight
- The scale of the problem dwarfs current efforts to find solutions
- There is a need to shift the approach from coping to fixing in practice
- A lack of accountability for road safety performance
- A lack of capability and capacity to take the reform agenda forward

A major issue was the lack of integration of global best safety practice into business as usual operations. Those working in road safety were constantly fighting the system. Those outside of road safety did not appreciate the implications of their decision making – something that remains largely unchanged to this day. Adequate change management is a much overlooked critical necessity.

Immediate responses to recommendations of the report included a Governance Review and the formation of the Office of Road Safety albeit several layers down within the Department hierarchy.

The 2019 Governance Review was critical of the Australian Government performance:

*“There is a clear need for greater leadership, strengthened management, heightened accountability and more effective coordination to reduce road trauma across Australia.”*

*“The Australian Government has not provided sufficiently strong leadership, coordination or advocacy on road safety to drive national trauma reductions.”*

It was evident to me during the inquiry that there was severe wear-out by advocates and stakeholders on endless rounds of consultation and poor optics and communication on road safety progress.

Many, many other inquiries have come and gone. The last Joint Select Committee on road safety delivered their report in 2022 with 61 recommendations. There is no shortage of initiatives that the Australian government can get on with strategically.

Lately we have seen with increasing frequency in the media, stories of horror crashes and loss of life, especially amongst young people and families. There is apparent surprise that the situation does not seem to be improving.

I cannot stress strongly enough - we have an inherently dangerous road network which, by default, allows harm to occur. Without major reform and evolving the ways we implement that change, the headlines will continue. On the back of COVID where we are all finding our feet, there is still no sense of urgency about getting on with the transformation required.

Jump ahead to 2023 and we finally have another Strategy and Action Plan in place. Much of it falls into the same traps as its predecessors. They represent long wish lists of good intentions with weakly defined commitments and lack of accountability in achieving outcomes. They are put together by committees on a consensus basis and it shows. If even half the actions were meaningfully achieved, there would be good progress, but a discussion of what critically needs to change and what difference it will make in the overall scheme of things remains elusive.

I acknowledge that Austroads is now starting to ask the right questions as to how jurisdictions actually start the planning process for getting to zero in 2050. The guidance they put out to practitioners is of vital importance to the Nation and needs to reflect the safety reform we desire.

I have yet to see any changes that will directly address the issue of implementation failure seen in the past Strategy and Action Plans. Under the current Action Plan, new governance arrangements are still a work in progress and I do not see any strong language on accountability and what it might mean for 2050 if a particular action stalls or fails.

I do wonder, if I was from a family that had lost a loved one on our roads, do these documents really convince me that we are seeking the reform required to solve the problem or merely reinforcing a coping response?

So what do we currently have to work with:

- Commitment and a desire by all jurisdictions to take the agenda forward and a high level aspiration of zero harm by 2050.
- Successive tranches of funding to improve infrastructure with ever increasing expectations of strategy (Network Safety Plans) to guide investment.
- Local government now meaningfully at the table but still with much to resolve.
- A Commonwealth Government that can chose to directly influence the nature of road infrastructure outcomes and new vehicles entering the system.

- Tangible starting points in building the necessary foundation for reform including an Office of Road Safety and a National Data Hub.

I do regard these positions as precarious however and they will need to be strengthened if the issues of implementation failure are to be addressed. The Office and Data Hub need unambiguous support and empowerment to become strong and capable monitors and enablers of national progress.

Missing the boat in the formulation of the Strategy and Action Plan are the synergies with Sustainability and Climate Change which might present a key angle of engagement with the community. The 2022 ACRS conference in NZ (Australasian Road Safety Conference), the largest in that country to date, tackled this issue.

### **So what am I asking politicians to do?**

*Firstly, shift your perspectives on the nature of the problem.*

- It is not just about how many deaths we have compared to this time last year
- We are set to continue to harm future generations
- The scale of the problem is huge – responses must be proportionate and will take time but the longer we delay the critical actions the more people will be harmed in the future
- We have inherited the legacy of an unsafe system where people are harmed by default
- We must take steps to transition towards an inherently safe one where people can walk away from incidents
- We still must apply what has worked in the past but don't think the job is done when we do so
- We need to build up capacity and capability in the nation to know what to do next and successfully implement the transformation – we must be capable of identifying when we are failing to transform the system and only applying band aid solutions

The Federated model has a history of making things complicated and road safety has not escaped this outcome, however at its heart, Federation supports the combining of the pieces into a whole that can take the nation forward. There are many areas of road safety where support can be provided where there are gaps, where jurisdictions and sectors do not have resource, capability or are dragging the chain.

Let's look at local government.

The Federal funding schemes provide a vital opportunity to upkeep the nation's community assets and infrastructure – but they do so on a competitive basis. Many councils do not have the appropriate people or resources to go for the funding and simply do not try.

Imagine if we performed the risk analysis and only funded the placement of railings on balconies that met a threshold of risk or incident history. Based on principles alone, we expect all balconies to be protected with railings. Unfortunately, as road

safety involves public assets at scale, we compromise on their principles of operation to keep the asset going.

We must explore other ways of delivering support and building capability from a strategic perspective. Simply expecting the local government sector to help themselves in such an environment will not be effective in achieving change in places it is most needed. There is much the Commonwealth can do to supplement and support this sector with meaningful stimulus and capacity building.

*Secondly, take an informed interest in road safety.*

There is death and injury in your electorates, all over Australia:

The fact you are here today is an obvious indication – however who is not in this room?

Understand that road safety is a complex topic with multiple perspectives and viewpoints many of which are flawed. Educate yourself and ask questions of the experts.

Of the many hundreds of things we can do in road safety, only a few will deliver true harm reduction at scale by 2050 – how well do you understand this perspective?

*Finally, make a difference.*

People identify as being Australian. As a nation, we should be setting the highest expectations for road safety performance. As a Federation, we must allow the strongest states to raise the bar yet provide support to those dragging the chain. We must avoid situations where we compromise on the national position because jurisdictions are unable to keep up. This is where an entity such as the Office of Road Safety can play a meaningful role in monitoring performance and identifying where further impetus is required. Achieving successful outcomes in this regard requires robust data and positive perceptions by jurisdictions. This is by no means an easy task to achieve and will require ongoing support from politicians of all persuasions.

Remember that people don't care who owns or operates the roads – they expect to continue to celebrate Christmas and birthdays with their families and friends.

Although the mantra states that road safety is everyone's responsibility, it is the people in this room who have the disproportionately greater potential to influence, magnify and scale up the response:

- Provide bipartisan support for the transformation of the system and not just isolated interventions
- Hold the Federal Department and jurisdictions to undertaking what actions have been agreed to in the current Action Plan
- Support capacity building where you can, and help escalate where assistance is needed

Most importantly, use your time here to make a difference.

You probably will never be thanked for what you do but people will be getting on with their lives oblivious to the difference you made.

Thank You