



# AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF ROAD SAFETY

ABN: 12 841 412 581

*Patron: Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC  
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia*

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An Open Letter to:

Hon Adam Giles MLA  
The Chief Minister  
Department of the Chief Minister  
GPO Box 4396  
DARWIN NT 0801

14 November 2013

Dear Chief Minister,

## **RE: OPEN SPEED LIMITS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

In September last year I wrote to the then Chief Minister on behalf of the Australasian College of Road Safety regarding the consideration which was then being given to the reintroduction of a de-restricted speed limit outside urban areas. I set out the wealth of evidence world-wide based on a series of scientifically valid studies that show that increasing speed limits will inevitably result in increased numbers of road users being killed and seriously injured.

This year at a meeting hosted by the AANT in Darwin I heard from Government representatives of the road safety improvements being made across the Territory; improvements which should contribute to reducing some of the unnecessary trauma from road crashes.

We understand that the Government is well aware of the serious personal and economic impacts of unnecessary trauma and offer our congratulations for those efforts.

We were disappointed to learn now that the Government intends that speed limits will be abolished on a 200 kilometre section of the highway between Alice Springs and Barrow Creek in a trial to begin after Christmas/New Year.

Electronic driver assist technologies such as MyKey are sweeping into the international car and vehicle markets, and rental car companies and insurers are already moving to equip or offer financial incentives for their use in limiting top speeds of vehicles.

We are aware that RioTinto have limited the speeds of their drivers ex Kakadu to Darwin to ensure that their drivers arrive safely. We expect that many trucking and bus firms also not only limit but closely monitor speed performance of their vehicles in the NT.

The roads in the NT, as you are aware, do not and are never likely to meet the safety standards of the major freeways and autobahns where faster speeds than your current posted maximum limits or 130km/hr are permitted with conditions. Recent AusRAP test results on the Stuart Highway confirm that it is of a much lower standard.

I am sure the Government does not expect the Ghan to travel at EuroSTAR speeds on the NT rail tracks, even though the tracks are relatively new. They are not adequate for those speeds. There is only one Stuart Highway and there is no separation of traffic. While some cars may be capable of high speeds, the road and the surrounding infrastructure must also match that capability for all circumstances.

The proposed trial will see a greater variability in the speeds of all vehicles in the 200 km highway section such that the number of potential conflict situations will be increased, given that more overtaking will occur and hence there are more instances where vehicles are interacting at much higher closing speeds in close proximity to one another.

In addition, drivers will be less able to make consistent judgements about other vehicle speed behaviours because that behaviour is less consistent – this increases risks associated with misjudgements when overtaking, merging, entering and exiting roads as well as dealing with the mixed traffic of trucks, road trains, caravans, coaches, cars, motorcycles, cycles, pedestrians and wildlife. The trial appears to be for a small group of motorists attempting to save perhaps 30 minutes in a long journey while putting not only themselves, but every other road user at an increased risk.

While the German autobahns are often quoted as an example where unlimited speeds are permitted, the European Transport Council in 2008 found that “empirical evidence indicates that all instances' of introduced speed limits on German motorways have caused very large casualty reductions.” Advisory speed limits of 130km/hr are now in place and we understand that if a driver is involved in an accident at or over that speed then they are deemed to be at least partially responsible.

We are aware that many of our members and others have written to the Government expressing their concerns about the proposed trial, and like them we would welcome publication of the any supporting research for the trial and also the methods proposed for analysing the results.

We are unaware of any evidence that suggests drivers are effectively able to estimate, recognise and manage their ability at unrestricted speeds.

Increasing speed limits where roads and vehicles are well below world best practice in the hope of reducing fatigue induced crashes will result not only in unnecessary deaths and injuries but also many associated social and economic impacts.

On any measure road crashes and trauma results in the Northern Territory are well below world best practice which we believe cannot be attributed to geography and remoteness alone.

The College would like to work with the Northern Territory Government in this UN Decade of Action on Road Safety to help reduce the crash and trauma rate and to achieve or improve on the targets agreed by Governments across Australia under the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020, to which the Northern Territory is a signatory. The Vision Zero process championed by many jurisdictions around the world is working.

As Catharina Elmsäter-Svärd, the Swedish Infrastructure Minister said this year at an international conference in Stockholm;

*“Launching Vision Zero was approved by all the political parties in our Parliament in 1997. Since then attitudes towards the policy have gone from scepticism and disbelief - to an overwhelming acceptance from the Swedish public and stakeholders.*

*Statistics shows the impressive progress made; a 40 % reduction of fatalities over a period of 10 years.”*

Sweden, while smaller than the NT, does have roads of similar lengths and many variable conditions.

We wonder when we could expect the Government to be able to make a similar announcement in the future. Why should NT residents, as well as interstate and international tourists, delivery and haulage operators not expect a similar improvement in the safety of the road system?

Communities are increasingly requiring governments and companies to act with a sense of corporate responsibility to reduce unnecessary events and trauma. We note the Work Health and Safety (National Uniform Legislation) Bill supported by the NT Government imposes a specific duty on officers of corporations and unincorporated bodies such as clubs and associations to exercise due diligence to ensure that the corporation, club or association meets its work health and safety obligations. Many users of the Stuart Highway will be employees carrying out their normal work and should the trial proceed will be exposed to a new and additional risk.

Directors of companies are required to ensure they undertake due diligence in the management of the safety of their employees through the provision of safe workplaces, safe equipment and adequate training. They can be prosecuted for serious breaches of due diligence.

We believe the same levels of responsibility and accountability should be required for government and ministers as those imposed by governments on corporations and directors. Government of course are also employers and are the monopoly providers of road infrastructure. It may well be argued that the road could be declared an unsafe workplace. The unlimited speed trial would fail any corporate responsibility test .

In light of the above, we strongly urge the NT Government not to proceed with the 200km open limit trial.

Again we offer the assistance of the College in explaining the risks of higher speeds on inadequate road infrastructure to the community.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lauchlan McIntosh', written in a cursive style.

**Lauchlan McIntosh AM**

President

Australasian College of Road Safety