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02 October, 2002

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Subject: Road Safety Proposal For Consideration - 'Junior Recreational Rider Licence'

Situation

1. Motorcyclists represent an unreasonably high percentage of accident statistics, given their relatively low usage rate, when compared to total vehicle usage. Initiatives are currently being developed by Victoria Police, TAC and the Government to combat this. Motorcycles, by design, are more dangerous than motor cars and will probably always feature more highly in accident (particularly injury) statistics. However I believe that there is a distinct lack of opportunity for learner motorcyclists to improve their skill levels, legally, to a level required for safe riding.

Current Learner training – motor cars

2. Drivers of motor cars are able to obtain a learner permit in Victoria from age sixteen. Vic Roads recommend that upon obtaining a permit, learners complete a *minimum* of 120 hours driving practice prior to attempting to obtain a probationary licence. Such practice is supervised and initially, when skill levels are lower, is often undertaken at times when traffic volumes are low and dangers are minimised.

Current Learner training – motor cycles

3. A Victorian person is able to obtain a learner permit from the age of eighteen. To obtain the permit, they must attend an accredited rider training facility and complete either a one or two – day course. An example of this is HART (Honda Australia Rider Training). The length of the course can be chosen by the applicant. The course is conducted off road on private property. It involves basic motorcycling skill practice, roadcraft theory and a traffic law knowledge component. Actual riding practice hours could be measured in single digits. A person need have no previous ability or practice time prior to attending a course. Thus, after only a very short number of hours, a beginner may obtain a learner's permit, which permits unsupervised solo riding on our highways, anytime the learner wants to.

4. Whilst not deriding the value of the courses, or the professionalism of the service providers, which I personally found to be excellent, my experience upon obtaining a learner permit, was that I felt that several successful members of my class would not have been sufficiently skilled riders to safely travel our highways on a motorcycle.

5. As motorcycles are inherently more dangerous than motor vehicles by design, it strikes me that riders should be given more opportunity than motor car drivers, to become suitably skilled to navigate our roads safely. Currently, they have far less opportunity. Two years/120 hours minimum *vs* one or two days/less than ten hours.

Other practice opportunities are limited

6. It is possible for a pre - learner permit rider to practice on their own motorcycle, on private property or during competition (racing). Most do not have access to suitable property and public riding parks are closing all over Australia, due to litigation/insurance problems. Competition is only popular and practical for a small minority of riders, due to a number of reasons not limited to cost, travel, lack of skill and desire.

7. Practicing in State Forests or on other crown lands is currently illegal. Initiatives such as recreational registration are useless to kids who are unlicensed.

How many bikes are out there?

8. Figures obtained from the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries (FCAI – Appendix A), indicate that approximately seventy thousand (70,000) motorcycles are sold in Australia each year, since 1999. To understand the chart, it must be understood that all ‘minibikes’ are off road bikes. ATV’s represent four – wheeled agricultural and four – wheeled ‘sport’ bikes (commonly known as Quads). Bikes designed for use primarily on bitumen roads, ‘road bikes’, have accounted for only around twenty five per cent (25%) of total bike sales, consistently since 1999. ***Thus, around 75% of total bike sales, each year since 1999, are of dirt bikes.*** Even taking the ATV’s from the equation, dirt bike sales are roughly double that of road bikes each year.

Victorian sales

9. Accurate Victorian sales figures are not available. Our Government no longer collects this data. Motorcycle importers do not generally disclose actual sales figures, for business reasons. I have however, spoken to sales managers at motorcycle importers, who have indicated that the breakdown of motorcycle sales in Victoria is consistent (in terms of ratios of types of bikes), with the figures provided by the FCAI. Further, that Victorian sales represent approximately 27 – 30 % of national sales overall. Sales appear to be strongly linked to population, with the largest selling states (in order from largest) being New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, others.

Where are all these dirt bikes used?

10. To race a motorcycle, a person requires a competition licence. Motorcycling Victoria indicates that it represents four thousand, eight hundred and thirteen racers. This includes all forms of motorcycle racing, not just dirt bikes. Other states racing numbers are likely equivalent or less. Since 1995, over one hundred and eighty thousand (180,000) dirt bikes have been sold, excluding ATV’s. That leaves a huge number riding elsewhere and does not

include the dirt bikes sold in the 1970's and 80's, when dirt bike sales were possibly equivalent to or greater than current figures. Accurate numbers are not available, however it is obvious that some ride on private property, whilst some ride on crown lands. From my experience, a vast number of these bikes are ridden on crown lands. Many are not registered and the riders are unlicensed. I have policed in metropolitan and country areas and found that the illegal (unlicensed/unregistered) rider is a common occurrence. I have personally come across hundreds of such riders.

11. The Special Solo Section are responsible for policing dirt bike riders, amongst other tasks. In the 2001/2002 financial year, they intercepted 904 dirt bikes. Of these, 284 infringement notices were issued to unlicensed riders, 350 for unregistered bikes and 84 were deemed sufficiently unroadworthy to receive a Notice of Unroadworthiness. These figures, with 'only' 904 intercepts, may at first glance seem insignificantly low. It must be understood however, that these figures were produced by around four members only. Further, of those 904 bikes intercepted, over 38% were unregistered and over 31% of riders were unlicensed. Whilst no official statistics are recorded regarding the ratio of children that make up these figures, the Special Solo Section estimate that it is in the order of 50%.

12. Such illegal riding often causes problems. Issues with noise, dangerous riding, non-compliance with road rules, environmental concerns and accidents arise. I have canvassed many police stations with off road riding areas within their response zones and it is apparent that issues regarding off road motorcycles are widespread across our land. I personally run an operation every Easter, to combat problems caused in the local forest by off road bikes. Problems caused by some of these riders are in part responsible for the existence of the Special Solo Section. Traditional reactive/punitive policing methods appear to be a largely ineffective deterrent, due partly to the popularity of the sport and the sheer size of our country.

13. This illegal riding, often by youths, has occurred for decades and will continue to occur, despite being illegal. It is the common practice of many motorcycle - orientated parents to be able to ride with their children on our crown lands, so as to enable them to develop into safe and respectful riders and adults. Such practice, under guidance from a suitable mentor, certainly helps develop the necessary skills to prepare the youths for riding or driving on our roads upon gaining a licence. It is the desire of many more, who are put off by the illegality of the practice. These people, by and large, are not criminals, but ordinary citizens. Their law breakages are forced by lack of places to ride. The importation and sale of the motor cycles is allowed, however adequate provision is not made for their use.

14. To complicate matters, little or no education is offered, either by way of formal tuition or provision of written material, in relation to the safe and responsible use of the dirt bike upon purchase, other than what may appear in owner's manuals. When you buy a road bike, one assumes you have a licence and therefore at least a basic competency in riding one. The bike must also pass a roadworthy and thus be mechanically safe and sound. No such requirements for dirt bikes, which are by far in the majority.

The value of dirt bike riding for road riders

15. From speaking to hundreds of motorcyclists, it is apparent that a huge number of road bike riders began their motorcycling with a mini bike as a youth. In motorcycling circles, this is an established fact. This crossover from dirt to road riding is common and skills learnt on the dirt are valuable on the road. Dirt bike riding involves constantly changing variables in track condition and teaches good bike handling skills, in a relatively safe environment (low traffic numbers). Dirt bike riders transferring to a road bike, only then have to improve their roadcraft skills, as they already possess good bike handling skills. Those without dirt skills, however, are faced with the dangerous prospect of having to learn roadcraft and bike riding skills at the same time, in the dangerous environment that is our road system. It seems sensible that proper instruction is given from an early age to foster better riding skills and attitudes. In other sports, our youths are routinely coached from an early age to ensure that their sport is a safe, fun and rewarding experience. Junior motorcyclists mostly miss being properly instructed on the necessary basics, due to a lack of opportunity.

Proposed Junior Recreational Rider Licence

16. I propose a licence that would enable youths to practice riding motorcycles off road, guided by a suitably qualified mentor. Similarities can be drawn with the Junior Firearms Permit and our current motor car learner system. The key elements of my plan are as follows:

- Available to youths aged twelve (12) years and above. This coincides with attendance at Secondary College for most and a marked transition toward being an adult.
- Fully registered, or recreationally registered motorcycle required. Nearly all minibikes are capable of being recreationally registered, at reasonable cost.
- Both student and mentor must attend a certified course to obtain their licences (mentor is licenced as well – as an endorsement on their driver/rider licence)
- Course would include, as well as basic practical riding skills and road law knowledge testing, sessions on safe and responsible riding, environmental concerns, respect for other bush users.
- Licence augmented with appropriate printed educational material (Vic Roads currently have no printed advisory material for dirt bikes)
- Licence allows access only to roads accessible with Recreational Registration, generally being forest roads coded '3000 – 3999' in the Vic Roads State Directory, and uncoded roads.
- Service providers are already in place, being the same ones training riders to obtain their learners and probationary licences.
- To facilitate delivery, many motorcycle clubs may be able to arrange for numbers of pupils to be available at their club venues, to be visited by service providers.
- The total yearly cost could easily be far less prohibitive than one on the spot fine for riding without a licence (\$500) and therefore appealing financially to riders
- Combination of the program with a media advertising campaign would be sensible, coupled with a 'crackdown' enforcement program after the public has been given the chance to comply with the new opportunity.

- An incentive would most likely be required to entice parents to embrace the new arrangement and it's increased financial and time (course attendance) burden. I recommend a reduction of the TAC premium (perhaps by \$50), for those involved.
- Remove the 250cc limit rule. Some larger youths are more physically suited to 400cc or 600cc bikes and are therefore safer on them. Many 250's, such as Honda's popular XR250 trail bike, have maximum rider weight limits of 100kg. Heavier kids would be discriminated against with the 250cc rule.

Possible benefits

- Youths are able to obtain the necessary experience to prepare them for riding on our roads, in a legal and supervised manner.
- Mentors and youths alike can be schooled in the necessary skills, helping to make more motorcyclists safer and more aware of their responsibilities.
- Adult mentors are able to access information and guidance that they may not have been privy to before.
- Many skills and practices learnt would be advantageous to future motor car drivers as well and Recreationally Licenced youths should make safer motor car drivers.
- Many currently unregistered bikes would convert to being registered. This brings with it the advantage of TAC insurance cover, the ability to monitor the 'roadworthiness' of the bike, including their exhaust noise level (help eradicate noisy bikes)
- Engine and Chassis numbers of bikes would be recorded, which should assist police in the recovery of stolen dirt bikes.
- Motorcycle accident rates should decline.
- The TAC will currently pay for injured riders medical bills, even if their bike is not registered. At least under this plan, they should receive a premium upon registration of a bike.

Accident research

17. The Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) has done some study in relation to accidents involving motorcycles. Limited studies only have been done in relation to dirt bikes. We are not able to tell, for instance, at this stage, how many dirt bikes are involved in accidents, or the severity or cost of those accidents. According to Vic Roads, the studies have revealed, however, that prior experience on a dirt bike actually increases the chance of a later collision on the roads. I do not know how this data was collected or analysed. I do agree that such an assertion could possibly be correct. I suggest though, that this may be due to those riders having never received any proper training or education in relation to safe and responsible riding in the dirt. As such, many could easily learn to ride dirt bikes in an environment where there were 'no rules'. The transfer of such an attitude to road riding is obviously improper and dangerous.

Conclusion

18. It seems to me that the importance of dirt bikes, in the area of the motorcycle accident rates, has been inadvertently overlooked. I lay no blame upon any person or department. It merely seems to me that the parallel has never been drawn. I believe that the proper education and training of our learner riders is of paramount importance. Currently, they generally receive grossly inadequate training. A huge number currently ride unlawfully in our forests and crown lands and will continue to do so, no matter what we do. We should attempt to formalise and control this activity, for the benefit of the riders and the wider community. Such a system, properly enacted, administered and policed, has the capacity to allow riders to significantly reduce the harm to themselves and others as a result of their riding. We should see reduced accident rates, with subsequent monetary savings.

Recommendation

19. The Victorian Government is currently calling for submissions on how to tackle our motorcycle accident problems. Forwarded for consideration for submission.

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