

Does cycling advocacy in Australia represent a minority movement or much more?

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Write or say anything publicly that is remotely critical of cyclist behaviour in Australia, and you will incur the wrath of a growing body of active and media savvy cycling advocacy groups.

This is the way it should be.

Australia's long history of strong cycling advocacy dates back to the late 1800s. The groups which followed played a key role in securing the place of the bicycle in this country.

Debate on cycling issues is important

Cycling issues today are becoming increasingly relevant across the domains of sport, health and wellbeing, environment, transport, politics, economics and culture.

Close scrutiny of arguments and opinions about the bicycle in society is important. Such focus is a healthy sign of the potential for the cycling movement, if indeed we can call it that. Many think we shouldn't.

There are different types of criticism of cyclists from the one-sided [shock jock jibes](#), the [tabloid media stories](#), [opinion editorial](#) and [commentary pieces](#), and even [insider reflections from cyclists](#) themselves.

But the online forum comments and social media responses show that the reaction from the cycling advocacy world is similar regardless of where the criticism originates – swift, indignant, passionate, and conversant with the evidence.

The piece I posted here on The Conversation last week attracted a backlash of sorts from some in the Australian cycling advocacy world.

In dispute was my suggestion that cyclists can do better when it comes to riding behaviour. Common complaints were that my focus on behaviour amounted to victim blaming, and that the notion of collective responsibility for riding behaviour is moot because cyclists are a heterogeneous and vulnerable group.

Cycling identity and advocacy

At issue here are fundamental questions of what cycling is in this country, and what responsibilities might attach (if any) to different cycling identities or groups. These issues deserve greater attention.

Just like the different types of cycling out there (i.e. defined by bike types, racing discipline, ride purpose, sub-cultures or "[tribes](#)" and so on), the Australian cycling advocacy field is also far from homogeneous.

There is the [Australian Bicycle Council](#), whose role is to oversee the Australian [National Cycling Strategy](#). It is made up of [representatives](#) from commonwealth, state, territory and local government agencies, non-government cycling organisations and the bicycle industry.

There is also the [Cycling Promotion Fund](#), an industry group established in 2000 through contributions from the Australian bicycle industry.

Most recently, an [Australian Cyclists Party](#) has formed and is currently registering members in each state and territory with the intention of fielding candidates in coming government elections.

There are the formally constituted national and state based organisations like the [Bicycle Network](#), [Amy Gillett Foundation](#), [Pedal Power ACT](#), [Bike Safe](#), [Bicycle NSW](#), [Bicycle Queensland](#), [Bicycling Western Australia](#), [Bicycle Tasmania](#), and [Bike SA](#).

There are also the academics who conduct research and advise on cycling policy issues – for example, people like [Professor Chris Rissel](#) (University of Sydney), [Dr Jan Garrad](#) (Deakin University), [Dr Marilyn Johnson](#) (AGF and Monash University), [A/Prof Jake Olivier](#) (UNSW), [Professor Raphael Grzebieta](#) (UNSW) to name a few. Some of these academics are also active within cycling advocacy organisations, but they

[don't necessarily agree](#) on all areas of transport cycling policy.

Not least in the Australian cycling advocacy field is the growing number of less formalised groups and collectives such as [Cycle](#), [Helmet Freedom](#), [Freestyle Cyclists](#), [Bicycle Transport Alliance](#), [Safe Cycling Australia](#), and the diverse range of bicycle user groups ([BUGs](#)) in each state and territory.

Cycling advocacy for what, for who?

Broadly, there appears to be agreement within the Australian cycling advocacy field on the goal of normalising cycling to get more people cycling more often, and in working towards better cycling infrastructure for improved cycling safety.

However, there is ongoing debate about the best means of achieving such ends, and where the emphasis should be - as we have seen on the issue of mandatory helmet legislation [here](#) and [here](#) for example.

Another area of difference between some cycling advocacy groups exists around the question of how cycling is defined, and who is representing who.

Ed Hore of the group [Cycle](#) told me recently:

There is a big shift going on at the moment. We are seeing a change from the likes of Bicycle Network controlling what happens, to the Bicycle User Groups starting to become more active and socially aware.

Others like [Helmet Freedom](#) are concerned about the overly narrow focus on certain types of cycling:

These days, almost all cyclists in Australia cycle for sport or recreation,

with a small percentage cycling to work. This includes the large state advocacy organisations and some national ones, who almost exclusively represent sport & recreational cycling, despite pretending to be more inclusive. Some of these large advocacy organisations do not even support the safe passing distance law as there is 'no evidence' that it will improve safety.

Similarly, the [Freestyle Cyclists](#) group was founded because:

There are no organisations in Australia that are specifically focussed on cycling as an every-day means of transport – sometimes called Utility Cycling. We just call it Cycling.

The cycling advocacy field in Australia is diversifying. Different groups are emerging to focus on what they see as specific gaps to be addressed around the unique needs of sport cycling, recreational cycling, transport and utility cycling, to name just some areas.

Ed Hore, for one, believes there is room for improvement:

Cycling advocacy groups really should be talking more, to identify areas of common ground and move beyond criticising each other. I'd like to see the groups getting together regularly.

The value of unity and solidarity

I have always thought of cycling as an everyday thing that most of us either do now or have done in the past. I like the old saying, *"It's like riding a bike: once you learn you never forget"* because it reminds us that the simple act of riding a bike stays with you forever.

Even in the midst of diversity in cycling identities and experiences, I also prefer to think of "cycling" as a pursuit, and "cyclists" as a group, with

shared interests, needs, benefits, and responsibilities.

I believe a unified collective identity can strengthen the position of cycling interests in current policy debates around transport infrastructure and design, road rules and related legislation, and safety needs.

I'm not talking about the simplified one-dimensional negative image of cycling portrayed sometimes in the [mainstream media](#). Instead of the caricature of all cyclists as aggressive Lycra-clad nuisances on the road, the truth is far more human and familiar.

A shared human experience

Interestingly, some groups are already emphasising the human identity of cyclists through personalised messages on ride wear (such as [The "I am someone's..." jerseys](#)) and other [awareness-raising](#) strategies.

This is a good start, but there is more we could do in communicating the cyclists-are-everybody truth.

For example, a mainstream media campaign that reveals the human reality behind the [crash and injury statistics](#) and countless near-misses out on the road is worth considering - though some will disagree for fear this approach will discourage new cyclists.

Alternatively, blog stories and video footage of cyclist and car incidents are easily found online these days. The sharing of such material through social media is another way to increase the visibility of cycling so that all road users see us, figuratively and literally, wherever we ride.

Bicycles are everywhere and everyone

I argued last week that cyclists can do better when it comes to some of our riding attitudes and behaviour.

I still believe that. Not because I think the cycling safety issue is all our fault. Not because I think drivers should get away with dangerous driving. Not because I think cycling is inherently unsafe.

I believe this because I see cycling as an everyday thing for everybody. Cyclists are not "the other", and not a minority "out-group". Bicycles and cyclists are everywhere and everyone.

Acknowledging the things that cyclists can do better on and around the roads, pathways and other public spaces we ride in does not threaten the better safety outcomes we all want. Nor does it undermine the normalisation project that [cycling](#) advocates believe in.

Instead, it can strengthen the message by reminding other road users and pedestrians that cyclists are responsible, human, and everywhere, not a minority group of blameworthy individuals involved in a passing fad.

As cyclists we don't have to be perfect. But I do think we should care about our presence in public spaces, and how our riding attitudes and actions impact others.

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