

Drivers, cyclists need to rethink attitudes



KARL O'CALLAGHAN

It is often said that WA drivers are among the most discourteous in the nation and that Australian drivers generally have a low consideration for other road users.

Having driven in other countries I cannot unequivocally state that Australians are the worst drivers, but they are certainly not among the best.

The latest war of words between drivers and cyclists, however, puts our worst attitudes on display.

This is not a pro-cycling opinion column although I will declare up front that I regularly swap between cycling, riding a motorbike and driving a car. Although all three modes of transport are subject to the occasional blast of vitriol, cyclists cop more than their fair share.

Some might deserve it, most do not. There are strong indicators that all is not well with our driving attitudes.

One of the best indicators of courtesy and tolerance on our roads is how we merge.

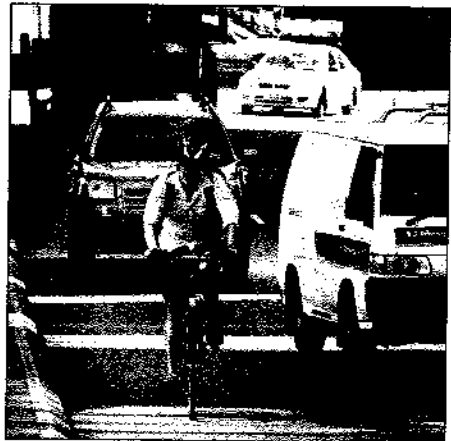
Merging is more about consideration than legislation. *The West Australian* reported on a national survey last November which pointed out that drivers here are perceived to be among the worst mergers in the country and also rated poorly on giving way to pedestrians.

Sadly, many have no concept of giving way, whether it be to pedestrians, cyclists or other cars. Giving way inherently requires us to consider the position of others and we seem to be far too competitive for that.

Cadel Evans, our national cycling hero, said in 2008 that "there is nowhere he feels less safe on his bike than in Australia".

This is a big call for an athlete with his level of experience.

Evans went on to say that drivers in



Driver tension: Cyclists often suffer abuse.

Australia have attitudes not just towards cyclists but towards all other road users.

Road infrastructure is being expanded to support a bigger number of bicycles. The new Great Eastern Highway improvement, for example, will provide a lane for cyclists and the number of bike paths is increasing.

There are many places, however, where cyclists have no choice but to ride on the road.

The Road Traffic Code prohibits bicycles being ridden by someone 12 or older on a footpath, unless it is a shared or dual-use path. Many are not.

If a bicycle lane is provided as part of the carriageway, it must be used by cyclists. However, there is no law that requires cyclists to use a shared-use path and they are entitled to use the road as an alternative.

Bicycles are defined as vehicles and broadly have the same restrictions and caveats placed on their use. Cyclists must obey lights, signs and directional markings like anyone else.

They must accept that some of the negativity they cop is much about the view of some cyclists that it is acceptable to ignore many of the rules. Cyclists could go a long way to mending their relationship with motorists simply by addressing this issue.

There is a law that states that bicycles

shall not cause an unreasonable obstruction to traffic. There are many factors which might force a cyclist to move further away from the kerb, however, including drains, grates and manholes.

In addition, motorists have a track record of leaving broken glass, broken mirrors and sharp plastics on the road after a bingle, all of which end up at the side of the carriageway.

Much motorist aggravation with cyclists is about the fact that they are inconvenienced by having to slow down, change lanes and pass.

Research conducted in Britain 10 years ago sums this up nicely — "the unpredictability and the inherently or deliberately 'different' behaviour of cyclists are seen to be particular sources of irritation to drivers when those issues then compromise the drivers' own convenience".

Convenience is not something we can legislate. It is the way that drivers in WA handle inconvenience that concerns me and it certainly drives an unreasonable level of hysteria.

By law in WA, bicycles have the same right of access to the road as motor vehicles and are largely governed by the same rules.

There is no doubt that they might cause an inconvenience but no more so than a slow truck or wide load.

The tension between motorists and cyclists is not one of mechanics but rather one of attitude.

Don't accept my word that the attitudes of drivers in this State could be considerably improved, there is plenty of independent evidence around to support it.

Motorists have to learn to deal with inconvenience; it is a fact of life on our modern road network.

For their part, cyclists could do a lot worse than understand that they are vehicles, too, and they need to obey the rules that are applicable to every other vehicle.

Karl O'Callaghan is WA's Police Commissioner.