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PERSPECTIVE

REVOLUTION ON

Cyclists claim the high moral ground and they are pushing their pedal power harder than ever.

Story Mathew Dunckley

It has been a long, uphill slog for Harry Barber to get cycling to the front and centre of the transport debate. As head of Bicycle Victoria for nearly 17 years, he has pushed the case for pedallers in a long obsessed with cars.

However, Barber felt the ground shift beneath his tyres earlier this year as he was listening to state Roads Minister Tim Pallas speaking at the launch of a cycling plan. Pallas explained that having commuters on bikes would relieve pressure elsewhere on the system.

"He said it would save the government having to buy 100 trams or 19 metro trains," Barber says.

It was a pivotal moment. "It means cycling is now part of the transport system and is a transport investment, not something you have to do because a lobby group will squawk about it or as a lifestyle decision," he says. "Years ago, bikes were seen as a toy. We got past the toy thing to being seen as recreation and now we are part of transport."

It is not just bike-friendly Melbourne where ever-increasing amounts of precious road space and riverside paths are handed over for lycra-clad commuters.

The signs of every cycling revolution are everywhere in Australia's cities. Sydney parking bays will be torn out to help move cyclists through the city's rabbit warren of narrow streets.

In Brisbane, millions of dollars have been ploughed into state-of-the-art change sheds, showers and bike racks.

It is the physical manifestation of a seismic shift in the transport philosophy of the nation's cities.

No longer is cycling the optional add-in that is forgotten as soon as the token broken bit of bitumen pathway is painted up.

Today, cycling and its associated infrastructure have become a part of the broader mobility mindset around the world. Even car-crazy New York is getting in on the act with rules mandating bicycle access to city buildings.

"Active transport has been a poor cousin for a long time and we are only just now starting to realise how good it can be," the executive director of integrated transport at Queensland's Department of Transport and Main Roads, Alton Twine, says.

"We are having to rethink mobility in its total context." A typical stretch of road carries 800 people an hour, Barber says. Bikes can triple this, as can a tram. But a tram costs upwards of \$5 million – and for that a city could also buy itself five kilometres of bicycle track.

The reasons for the rise in cycling and associated spending are many and complementary, says Twine, who also sits on the intergovernmental Australian Bicycle Council.

A more health-conscious public, high petrol prices, better facilities,

PHOTO



Wheels of change . . . Bikes have shifted in perception from toys to recreation to transport. Photos Peter Braig

FOR GO OR SHOW, THE RIGHT GEAR CAN COST

For some, cycling is about how you look while doing so; for others where you stop for coffee is just as important.

The sport has its own fashion idiosyncrasies. Short socks or long, shorts to the knee or higher up the thigh, waxing versus shaving and even what colour shirt you wear.

For those not in the know, Rupert Galland, from top-end cycle outfitter Assos in South Melbourne, says socks are on their way to getting shorter again and shorts are likewise making their way up the thigh.

Galland says his shop's gear is not heavy on logos and branding, instead catering for those who want something simple. Simple, but not cheap.

Top of the line Assos shorts cost \$399, while the matching shirt will sting a further \$250.

Galland says it is not just hardcore enthusiasts willing to spend this kind of money but also novices.

"Because if you are not fit, a good comfortable pair of shorts will make more of a difference to you," he says.

"If your bum is not broken in, you need extra padding down there."

An outfitter with expensive tastes could add to that lot a



To have the best you've got to pay for it but I guess it makes them feel good about what they are riding.

Chris Herron

helmet (up to \$500), glasses (say \$400), a cap (\$25), and then there's gloves (\$69).

So, fully dressed but with nothing to ride, how about a bike identical to that of your hero, say Lance Armstrong? The Clarence St Cyclery in Sydney offers just such custom-made Trek bikes, which, with all the trimmings, can push \$20,000 each.

The store's marketing manager, Chris Herron, says these carbon fibre bikes are improving all the time and can now weigh as little as 6.5 kilograms.

"The strength to weight ratio is enormous," he says, noting that NASA has taken an interest in the technology.

Add to that the newly developed, electronically controlled gear-changing kit and brakes at a cost of about \$8000 and, Herron says, you are starting to look top of the line.

Then comes the hero factor: Herron says many buyers simply want to have their wheels look just like Armstrong's or one of his teammates. And, yes, these star-struck enthusiasts are grown-ups.

"To have the best you've got to pay for it but I guess it makes them feel good about what they

are riding," Herron says.

Fixed-gear bikes have also gone from a fringe fad to mainstream in recent years.

Vince Attree, manager at St Kilda Cycles, says most manufacturers now have a "fixie" road bike in their repertoire.

Attree says the fixie phenomenon appears to have peaked and he predicts the next big thing will be folding bikes.

"For urban commuting, people are going for folding bikes," he says. "We have seen a massive rise in consumers requesting folding bikes."

The quality of the clips and locks of fold-up cycles have improved markedly and sales have taken off in the past six months, he says.

Those buying the foldaway bikes include commuters heading for trains and trams, yachters, caravan owners and people living in small apartments.

As for the must-have gadget of the summer, Attree says it is the Garmin cycling GPS. For a cool \$650 this device will tell the keen cyclist not only where they are but their speed, heart rate and altitude for calculating climbs.

Mathew Dunckley

cheaper bikes, a higher profile for the sport, traffic congestion, overcrowding on public transport, and higher-density development are all part of a cocktail that has spurred a spike in bike use.

Just over 1.2 million bikes were sold in 2008, slightly down on 2007 but well ahead (19 per cent) of car sales, according to the Cycling Promotion Fund. Ten years ago, some 650,000 bikes were sold nationally every year.

And they are being ridden. Bicycle Victoria's annual Super

Tuesday count of cycle commuters recorded a 10 to 15 per cent rise in cyclists across Melbourne and sharper spikes in the inner suburbs over the past year.

Similarly, Sydney Council estimates the number of cyclists commuting to work in its jurisdiction has increased by 37 per cent in the past five years.

The best measure is the census, which asks people how they travel to work. Between the 2001 and 2006 censuses, the number of Australians cycling to work

increased by 28 per cent. In Melbourne, the increase was a staggering 48 per cent.

This has prompted action at all three levels of government. Councils are spending big over the next four years, especially Sydney (\$76 million) and Brisbane (\$100 million), on bike paths and other works.

Melbourne City Council looks set to have Australia's first public bike-share scheme up and running within months.

State governments too are

engaging at ever-greater levels. The Queensland government has pledged \$556 million to be spent over the next 20 years to develop a regional cycle network in the state's south-east in concert with local government.

Victoria has committed to spending \$100 million on cycling in the years up to 2014. Even the federal government is getting in on the act. Infrastructure Minister Anthony Albanese has funding for cycling network projects under the government's stimulus efforts.

THE ROADS

NEW LINK IN THE CHAIN

Looking for a way to create more than just a standard bike shopfront, Paul Schub turned his attention to the fleets of bikes parked in office building basements around Melbourne's CBD.

The Velo Cycles director, together with father-and-son business partners Julian and Harry Fishman, had always had the bicycle servicing market in mind but they then added a distinctive twist.

Even before Velo opened its North Carlton premises it began pitching a mobile servicing business to companies.

The idea is simple. Velo will service the bikes of commuters while they are working, making them ready for them to ride home that night.

In the 12 months the service has been running, Schub's teams of mechanics have lubed and lined the cables on a few hundred bikes at a price of \$75 a service.

Big customers include National Australia Bank, VicRoads and the construction consortium working on Melbourne's \$1 billion Monash freeway upgrade.

"There has been a massive increase in cyclists and a lot of businesses are trying to promote cycling to their staff," he says.

"It saves them on car parking, sick days and all sorts of things. To encourage their staff to cycle they will actually fund the cost or pay for their staff to have their bikes serviced. We fill that niche."

Schub says the company also considered a roadside assist service for bicycle breakdowns but could not make the numbers stack up.

"It doesn't work financially," he says. "You would have to charge an enormous amount because Melbourne is so massive. You are really putting yourself out when perhaps you can't really do it."



While the sums look large, and represent a vast ramping up of spending on the sector, Twice argues cycling easily makes up 1 per cent of trips taken, yet does not attract anywhere near that proportion of the transport budget.

Spending is crucial for cycling infrastructure. "There is a strong correlation between riders and infrastructure," Barber says. "If you want to really encourage riders, the best thing you can do is build space for them."

And some cities are trying hard to encourage them. Sydney aims to have 10 per cent of all trips undertaken by bicycle by 2017 - that's a 500 per cent increase. "[Lord Mayor] Clover [Moore] is out in front with ambition and determination and putting her money where her mouth is," Barber says. "[Her] program is ambitious in a place where people said it can't be done."

To achieve its goal, the city has plans for a 200 km cycling network, including up to 55 km of separated cycleways and another 145 km of cycleways, dedicated cycle and shared paths.

Melbourne has already reached Sydney's target of 10 per cent of trips, while Brisbane wants to triple the mode share for bicycles to 6 per cent by 2016.

These policy targets represent literally tens of thousands more cyclists winding their way through peak hour into the big cities.

"This may not please everyone. Motorists voted cyclists their No. 1 dislike, comfortably ahead of trucks and taxis, a car insurance firm survey found."

Despite the strong growth of recent years bike enthusiasts say there is untapped potential. Some 1.35 million Australians make car journeys to work of less than 5 km, figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show. This is just outside the accepted magic 4 km mark that seems to be a

cycle commuter's standard range. Then there is the fact women are substantially under-represented. Still, the surge in biking has been noticed by the private sector.

"There is a burgeoning business in servicing modern-day cycle commuters and their employers."

A whole industry has sprung up catering to corporate cycling. Companies offer on-site bicycle servicing, custom-designed change rooms, accident insurance, roadside assistance and even corporate bike-fleet management.

Office buildings are reflecting this change and cycle-friendly design is "out and proud", says a senior associate at architecture firm Ashton Raggatt McDougall, Jesse Judd. "Gone are the days when you were relegated to the back of the car park," he says. "It is now kind of upfront and easy access... like the cafe in the foyer, it is one of those facilities that workplaces are mandating."

The change has been so rapid over the past few years, Judd says, that developers of commercial buildings will provide more bike parking than required to gain planning permission or environmental credentials - a classic case of market demand leading regulation.

Judd says the rush to install the facilities, at the expense of cars, is linked to demand from employees.

"I'm finding on every project we have delivered over the past few years they [bike parks] are used to their full capacity."

Car parking ratios are being smashed as developers and their tenants opt for more bike

facilities opt for more bike facilities, too. A single basement car park typically cost \$40,000, compared with a few thousand dollars for bike racks.

Noticing this demand for end-of-trip facilities, specialist bike



GREEN BREAK WITH THE PAST

Cycle commuters heading to work in older buildings know the drill all too well. After winding through a maze of cars and ramps, they make their way to dingy showers in the corners of a basement.

In this far from tantalising end-of-trip scenario, Mark Rossiter saw a business opportunity. With an architect friend, Rossiter designed modern changing rooms that could be retro-fitted into car parks. Their company Penny Farthing's main template, known as a Green Pod, was modelled on the Australian standard size for car parks, recognising many buildings have little or no facilities for cyclists.

The standard pod comes at a cost of \$60,000, which includes a swipe-card access system and accommodation for 28 bikes, 28 lockers and two showers.

It is also self-cleaning, which Rossiter hopes will make it more attractive to building owners.

"A Green Pod is like a small building designed around car spaces," he says.

The company has been going for 18 months and Rossiter says it has just started to take off.

Mathew Dunckley

parks are popping up around the country, with Brisbane in the vanguard. A privately run 400-bike facility is operating at King George Square, while the Queensland government has funded an even bigger \$8 million centre with capacity for up to 900 bikes at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital site in Herston.

Membership of the facility costs about \$390 a year, which for many staff is cheaper than public transport, says the hospital's venues and catering manager, Relda MacGregor. The site offers secure parking, showers, a towel service, a drying room and even a room to iron clothes.

Commuters using the facilities cycle anything from 2 km to 36 km each way on their journeys, MacGregor says.

The project has heavy buy-in

from the Department of Health and the Department of Transport in recognition of the health benefits of cycle commuting.

The facility's slogan, "Get active, be healthy", speaks to the synergy between transport and health policies, MacGregor says.

Share-bicycle schemes, which are already popular in Europe, are also about to hit the road in Australia, notwithstanding the logistical hurdle of the nation's compulsory helmet laws.

The Melbourne scheme is expected to be the first operational version when it opens in the middle of next year.

Operated by its lobbying role on behalf of motorists, and United States company Alta Planning and Design, the scheme will facilitate 600 bikes being scattered across 50 docking stations around the central business district.

The bikes will be available to members for \$50 a year, and also for casual use by anyone with a credit card. The scheme received \$5 million in seed funding from the state government, and the RACV's general manager of membership and motorist services, Gordon Oakley, says there are hopes the scheme will have 10,000 members within 18 months of its launch.

The targets are tourists, shoppers and CBD workers, but Oakley says overcoming the state's compulsory helmet laws will require some creative thinking.

"Some organisation might buy a corporate membership and rather than all employees having their own helmets, the corporation might give them access to 12 or 20 helmets," he says.

Sydney and Brisbane are also planning bike-share programs. There are serious issues for employers, such as WorkCover issues, which vary from state to state. Commuting is covered in

NSW, while in Victoria workers are covered only on the ride home from work but not on the way in.

The number of fatalities involving cyclists has fallen two decades, figures from Victoria's Transport Accident Commission show. This is largely a result of improved driving habits of motorists. But since 2000, cyclists have become more prominent in the ranks of those seriously injured in accidents. Victims on bikes now account for 6.7 per cent of those seriously injured on the roads, compared with 4.4 per cent at the turn of the decade.

Because these statistics also only include accidents involving motor vehicles, some suggest the vast majority of cycling injuries would not fit this categorisation.

Melbourne business Bikes@Work advises employers on managing bicycle fleets, and risk mitigation is part of this process. Staff are trained in how to look after bikes, with follow-up checks for workers with risk factors, which is all par for the course.

"If someone comes up with a cardiac [risk], they would have a health check," founder Rosy Strong says.

But she warns businesses need to balance the risk-management paperwork. "To make it attractive, you would want to make the whole process not have too much red tape."

A growing number of workplaces are buying bikes for short trips, particularly in local government, where some councils are even salary packaging bikes instead of cars, Strong says.

A physiotherapist, she sees health benefits as a strong reason for employers to encourage their employees to use bikes. "I just wanted to make the healthy and sustainable option an easy option for workplaces," she says.

FBA/BS