Title: ***The Politics of Road Safety***

Author: **Lori Mooren, Director, Safety and Communications Pty Ltd**

Abstract *The aims of this paper are to explore the political, technical and administrative inputs to the effectiveness of road safety programs. Processes involved in introducing specific road safety initiatives, including Safer Routes to School, Double Demerits, and other policies, are also analysed for the involvement of the political and administrative arms of Government. Evaluative reports on the New South Wales road safety program are reviewed and examined for factors in the consistencies and inconsistencies in their findings. Road safety researchers and practitioners can be more effective when they understand and utilise the politics involved in road safety policy making.*

This paper is largely based on my own experience working as a senior road safety bureaucrat. Holding the position of General Manager Road Safety with the Roads and Traffic Authority of New South Wales for three years taught me a lot about the importance of managing political, technical and administrative aspects of policy and program development.

When you stop to think about it, road safety itself is a political question. In fact, there are several political questions we might ask ourselves as road safety researchers and practitioners.

Do we want it?

The first question is do we, as a society, really want road safety? In Australia and New Zealand it would appear so. If this wasn't the case surely governments wouldn't be putting money into it, and Ministers wouldn't be associating with road safety initiatives.

Mind you, the degree to which politicians are prepared to put their names to some road safety initiatives has varied over time. For example, George Pacculio (the first Chairman of the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Road Safety) once told me that when he put forward the random breath testing bill, no Minister at the time was prepared to introduce this initiative.

This was despite the clear scientific evidence that such an intervention would save lives and injury.

Even today, road accidents and deaths are reported on a regular basis without significant public outcry -- at least relative to that following plane crashes. But there is always some public reaction and community remorse. And surveys in Australia have indicated that people want something done to reduce these tragedies.

How much of it do we want?

The next question then is: how much road safety do people want? Another side to the question is what will we give up for the sake of reducing injury factors or eliminating road injury risks?

I don't know the answer to these questions. But, apart from conducting surveys to find out whether Australians would put more than a $1-2 million price tag on a human life, there are a number indicators about what people would do to reduce specific road injury risks. We can measure peoples' willingness to wear helmets in motor vehicles. We can measure peoples' support for, or resistance to, lower speed limits or more enforcement of speed limits. We can measure customer demands for occupant safety features in motor vehicles, to name a few.

Our Swedish colleagues may advise that all of this is unnecessary if a *Vision Zero* policy is adopted by the government. This is because under this policy the very existence of any serious injury risk to a human is unacceptable and needs no quantification.

By comparison, Australia and New Zealand road safety policies are more moderate. Road safety is 'balanced' against other demands on government resources. The New Zealanders say they are pursuing 'safety at reasonable cost.' Australian governments generally attempt to continually reduce road trauma. The implicit policy here is that road injury should be reduced at a steady rate consistent with the rate of investment.

It is difficult to determine, in dollar terms how much investment is expected from the Australian or New Zealand communities because as long as the 'road toll' is going down, there tends to be no call for increased investment, with two exceptions.

One exception to this exception is when a government is new and wants to make a statement about their commitment to road safety. However, this often coincides with a public sentiment that something more should be done, perhaps due to a declining rate of crash or fatality reductions. Such is the case in Victoria currently.

The other exception is when a crash occurs and the local community seek increased site-specific investment. This often happens where the community had previously sought changes to the road environment and/or at a site where a child had been killed in a road crash.

Who do we want it for?

This brings me to the third question. Who do we want it for?

My experience is that road users are not equal – politically speaking. As General Manager, Road Safety with the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), I once attended an RTA planning session where one of my colleagues suggested that, as road users, pedestrians' needs be given more consideration. To this a road development engineer responded, "But, pedestrians are not *really* road users. They don't *use* the roads. *They just cross them.*"

However when, for example, a child is killed on a crossing, literally hundreds of thousands of dollars are often diverted into fixing the road – whether or not road environment features at the site were factors in the crash.

I don't know of research that can tell us if in fact the community demands a higher level (Vision Zero, perhaps) of safety for young children than for older people, but this is a perception that influences political decisions. There may be a notion of 'innocent victims.' But I can tell you from direct experience that the pressure on Ministers from the public and media about the safety of children is intense.

Meanwhile, bureaucratic thinking in this regard has road developers focused on provision for motorised vehicles, and road safety programs focused on more vulnerable road users.

How Policies are Made – *the Way things are…*

Government policy making results from three basic driving forces: community pressure, intellectual debate, and bureaucratic forces.

This sometimes results in an inconsistency in government policy. The implied policy in Australian and New Zealand jurisdictions is reduced injury for the greatest number. But the New South Wales Safer Routes to Schools program exemplified a disproportionate investment of funds into the safety of school children at the expense of safety for all. School children represent such a small proportion of the total community risk. Yet hugely increased resources were diverted from other road safety programs three years ago to enable the Safer Routes to Schools initiative to be available to *every child.*

Researchers and practitioners may be surprised or appalled at the way in which government makes policy. Sure, research evidence is taken into account when policies are made and program funding is determined. But equally, government ministers consider what the community expectation is regardless of what the technocrats and bureaucrats tell them about the best ways to meet road safety objectives. Moreover, the perception of a problem is often a more important impetus to policy change than a problem uncovered by research.

Some years ago in New South Wales there was a spate of incidences involving conflict between road users resulting in property damage or injury. The media came up with the catch-phrase, 'road rage' to describe these occurrences.

While road safety researchers could demonstrate that this kind of incident was not likely to be a significant factor in road trauma, the Minister for Roads was asked by the Premier to do something. The Parliamentary Committee on Road Safety (Staysafe) also inquired into the matter.

Even though there was legislation in place to enable the Police and the Courts to sufficiently prosecute all known cases of those incidences, new 'road rage' legislation was proposed by the Minister. This legislation was initially resisted by the Attorney General because changes to the already complex set of laws in the NSW Crimes Act was not desirable when other parts of that Act or the Traffic Act could be used to deal with the problem.

Then there was a meeting between the Minister's advisor and the Attorney General's advisor involving departmental officers as well. The room was tense. Our job was to convince the Attorney General's staff to support the Minister's proposal. They wouldn't budge. Then, suddenly the Minister's advisor said, "does

anybody remember that movie with Dennis Weaver, called *Dual?"* (In this movie, Dennis Weaver, who was driving a small sports car was chased by a semi trailer, driven by an anonymous driver, all over the country.) The mood of the meeting changed. Within 20 minutes the Minister was on the phone with the Attorney General agreeing the final details of the new bill. The Bill was called *Predatory Driving.*

While I pointed out to a colleague later that it was a lucky thing that these advisors are not Mr Bean fans, there are serious lessons that we can draw from this. So often I have seen and indeed experienced the frustration of "political interference" in policy making. Of course it's frustrating when policies and programs that run counter to the prevailing body of professional knowledge are introduced by those who "don't know what they are talking about." But, how silly it is to think that Government Ministers should not do other than rubber stamp the bureaucrat's – or technocrat's -- word.

We must remind ourselves that *politics* is derived from *policy*. Political work *is* the practice of making policy. So, the question really is how can we assist the policy maker to make more effective policies. Conversely, how, as practitioners, can we make use of the political process to be more effective in achieving community objectives.

The 'Strategic' Approach

In the early 1990's the Australian road safety profession began to adopt a so-called strategic approach to road safety program planning. That is, we analyse the data, we project trends, we estimated (crash and injury) savings that can be achieved through various interventions, we set targets, negotiate partnerships, allocate resources and implement programs. And then what happens? Politicians come in and reek havoc. Then the media come into it too and all hell breaks loose..

That may be the way it feels to the committed road safety government professional or researcher. But it's not really like that.

Politicians are involved much earlier – or should be. These people are the public face of road safety policy making. But who or which politicians should we involve in the process.

Like other States, NSW has a Parliamentary Road Safety Committee (STAYSAFE), a Minister for Roads and Transport, a lead State agency (RTA), variously vocal community interest groups, and an occasionally interested media. Perhaps there is a greater concentration of accountability for road safety in this State (vested in the Minister for Roads and his Department (RTA).) But, for the purposes of this analysis the basic government structures are similar enough in all States and New Zealand for these lessons to apply.

The New South Wales road safety program will be looked at from a variety of technical, bureaucratic and political perspectives to ascertain the involvement of 'science' 'administration' and 'politics' in developing and evaluating road safety programs.

Bureaucracy, Technocracy and Polit-ocracy

Let's look at how road safety programs are planned and evaluated. I think we will find that effectiveness and other measures of success will vary depending on whether a program is assessed from a political perspective, bureaucratic perspective or technocratic perspective.

While the terms political, bureaucratic and technocratic may conjure up cynical notions, I suggest that each perspective is legitimate. More than this each are important aspects of planning and evaluating government programs such as road safety.

The bureaucrat, or administrator, is executes programs to achieve the objectives of the elected government. S/he likes to put things into categories to help make sense of a big complex set of tasks or objectives. So a senior bureaucrat feels comfortable if resources are divvied up evenly, or with a definite logic, between all of the various activities of an organisation. Then the concern of the bureaucrat is the efficient use of the resources in carrying out an activity or achieving objectives.

The technocrat likes everything to be driven by science. S/he assumes that the objective at hand is given and that all reasonable people should be expected to take all reasonable actions using all or any known and feasible technology to achieve the objective. Like the bureaucrat, the technocrat rarely questions the assumptions and values inherent in the objective at hand.

The politician likes to satisfy the needs or desires of his/her constituents. Senior politicians in positions of power try to serve community demands in accordance with community will. In a democracy, this usually means the greatest good for the greatest number. In less democratic political climates politicians lead people to want what they want to provide. In compassionate non-democratic climates politicians may dictate what is deemed good for the masses. Policy decisions are based largely on what the community is perceived to need or desire the most.

Let's take a road safety example to illustrate these perspectives. Two years ago, an Austroads project pointed to the possibility of adopting a "willingness to pay" approach to valuing human life for the purposes of planning road safety programs.

Technocrats said that while it was a bit messy to scientifically determine the value of Australian human life a survey could be constructed to do this. Experience in other countries showed that the value of human life increased through this process, so pragmatic road safety technocrats tended to support this move.

To my knowledge politicians were not consulted but, depending on which way they wanted it to go and/or how democratic they were feeling at the time, would have supported the move to willingness to pay, as it is more consistent with determining community will. On the other hand, ministers may not have wanted to draw attention to this issue, as it seems a bit cold and calculating, but, more importantly, might undermine the flexibility afforded under the existing system. Parliamentary Committees, made up of junior politicians who do not have direct policy making powers are more likely to favour public inquiries into the matter.

Some government bureaucrats argued that a move to a willingness to pay valuation method could upset the *balance* of government programs with road safety receiving an '*unfair*' increase in priority and perhaps funding.

In the end the proposal was put on ice to enable by this government authority to enable a more thorough organisation wide examination of the implications before adopting this approach.

Safer Routes to School – *Yes, Minister*

The first question the Minister for Roads put to me, as General Manager, Road Safety at the RTA, was, "Lori, don't you think that every child should have a map to tell him or her the safest way to get to school?" From his perspective, it seemed a logical, reasonable thing to provide to families.

He was under some pressure at the time to come up with something new to improve safety for children. A child had recently been killed crossing the road after being dropped off by a bus.

Prior to my assuming the role as General Manager, a pilot project called Safer Routes to School, modeled on a British road treatment program, had been undertaken. On closer examination of this program I discovered that if the "every child" principle was applied to the initiative, the program in the original form would cost approximately $60 million per year over several years, this figure decreasingly somewhat over time. This initially would represent a very sizeable chunk of the New South Wales road safety budget.

What to do? To make a long story short, the program was transformed from a $60 million engineering program to a $10 million per annum behavioural program. With the every child principle the program presented negotiation challenges with road safety stakeholders (especially the Department of Education), and was still disproportionately expensive against expected road safety benefits. But at least it didn't decimate the road safety program.

Nobody at the time, apart from the technocrats, challenged the efficacy of this initiative.

So to relate this experience back to the questions of *road safety for whom and how much*, we can see that from a political perspective, it didn't matter how big the problem was compared with the investment. The public perception was that this was a good initiative. It was about focusing the safety program on the innocent and vulnerable. Some of the technocrats were appalled at the diversion of funds into this and away from other programs.

The bureaucratic hierarchy just wanted to see the program implemented efficiently, satisfying the Minister's objectives.

Let's not be cynical about this initiative. Indeed it has taught us many lessons about how policies are made as well as enabled an effective and positive innovation in community development. This initiative captured the community spirit. After all what better way to secure support for road safety than to focus community stakeholders on ways for children to travel to and from school safely. While the effect of this program has not

been measured in terms of an increase in public support for road safety, the RTA and the Government received positive acknowledgement from both sides of politics, the media, key stakeholders and from the schools and communities involved.

Double Demerits – *Getting Courageous?*

The increased demerit penalty initiative in New South Wales arose as an attempt by the Minister for Roads to do something a bit dramatic to curb the road toll over the 1997 Easter public holiday period. The prior (Christmas) holiday period had featured a higher than usual road toll, so there was a perceived imperative to act. The Minister for Roads sought advice regarding what would get the most impact in road safety terms.

To cut a long story short increasing penalties for speeding was seen as the best short term option, within the parametres of the Minister's willingness to act at the time. So a draft regulation to double the demerit points that would apply over the Easter, 1997 period was prepared. The road toll was lower than average for that period provoking the opportunity to extend this initiative for the purpose of evaluating the new penalty. The combination of initial community support and demonstrated road safety benefits lead to the new penalty being brought in on a regular basis.

The best argument cautioning against the initiative was from the driver licensing area. The bureaucratic criticism was that we needed to be careful that if too many people lost their licences due to this initiative, people might increasingly lose respect for the licence and drive unlicensed. As unlicensed driving is associated with greater risk, this could also be a technocratic concern.

But so far, there is no evidence that the occasional demerit increases imposed result in increased unlicensed driving. So it turned out to be a good initiative that involved political, technocratic and bureaucratic inputs.

Evaluation of RTA Road Safety Programs – *A Matter of Perspective*

Depending on what perspective you take the RTA has done exceedingly well or lost the plot in its effort to curb the road toll in NSW. In the middle, the bureaucratic assessment is that the RTA appears to be doing what it's meant to do – and doing it efficiently.

The Australian Road Research Board advised recently that the NSW strategy developed and led by the RTA "has been a leading factor in the substantial improvements in the road toll in New South Wales during the 1990s and in the development of strategies throughout Australia." They further found that many of the principles of the NSW strategy have been embraced by international organisations and that its approach to road safety campaigns "serves as an outstanding model for other jurisdictions." This review looked at the model of practice adopted and from a technocratic perspective, found that the program was 'scientifically' sound and strategically speaking, a trend setter.

By contrast, in its most recent assessment of the RTA's road safety approach the STAYSAFE Parliamentary Committee said (of the 'millions of tax-payer dollars spent' on road safety), that they are unable to conclude that this expenditure has been justifiable…" They also said that "there is a need to 'wake up and shake up' the road safety administration in New South Wales in order to get better policy and program development."

Much of the criticism of the RTA has been about the lack of communication in the policy and program development process. The RTA has been increasingly restricted in its ability to discuss policy matters with stakeholders including the STAYSAFE Committee prior to policies and initiatives being announced by the Minister for Roads. While a more open and consultative approach to government may be preferable, it is the prerogative of an accountable Government representative to withhold information about policies until they are finalised.

Once a road safety policy or initiative is announced by the Minister for Roads the media make assessment of the initiative. This is often expressed in a subtle way. Either approval is shown by giving the initiative and Minister good or neutral exposure, or presenting it with negative comment or with the use of cynical terms (for example, 'revenue raising' referring to increases in fines). If the initiative is regarded as uninteresting or not new, it may not get reported at all.

The NSW Premier's Department has also recently reviewed the RTA's road safety program. It concluded that "the Program and its components are aligned to Government policy…appropriately delivered…[its] outputs and outcomes generally match the objectives of the Program…and, Program delivery is efficient."

We can see then the bureaucratic assessment looks at the performance of executive agencies for consistencies with the will of the elected government and management efficiencies in the delivery of government policies and programs. The technocratic assessment looks for best comparative practices and outcomes. The political assessment looks for transparency and the ability of government policy to meet the will of the people and to be seen to meet the will of the people.

Conclusions – *Applying the Lessons*

In conclusion, road safety researchers and practitioners can be more effective when they understand and utilise the politics involved in road safety policy making. To researchers I say don't think that the methodologically sound findings of your research are the only truths that are important. They are value laden no matter how objective your methods are. And to practitioners beware. You will need more than scientific evidence to convince policy makers to change their thinking. You need to consider political and administrative factors and you need to manage these aspects well.

We need to get better at aligning community and government will with agency programs and program delivery. To do this we must be aware of our own principles and values. We need to be able to appreciate that community views and political priorities don't necessary align with the objectives of road safety. Understanding this and being able to persuade people to increasingly support road safety objectives will result in our ability to be more effective in the achievement of our goals.

And finally, to our elected officials of government, please try to see the bigger picture. Look for contradictions. There may be a difference in what people ask for and what people want. We must clearly communicate the likely implications of community choices. There should be more openness and broader consultations on road safety policy. Only in this way can we ensure that democratic choices are made and that we can deliver serves that satisfy the will of the people.

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