

Topic: MINISTERIAL REPORTS
Subject: Ministerial Report - Road Trauma and Health
Date: 30/11/2006
Member: Dr BURNS
Other Speakers: Dr LIM; Mr WOOD
Status: Health

Dr BURNS (Health): Madam Speaker, road accidents take a terrible human toll every year in the Northern Territory. A few statistics tell the story. For many years now, we have been averaging about 50 deaths per year, or one a week, due to road trauma. This is about 40% of all deaths due to injury, and about 5% of all deaths each year in the Northern Territory. It is also about three times the national average on a *per capita* basis. Aside from the tragic deaths, many people are injured and admitted to hospital for varying lengths of stay and procedures, as well as requiring follow-up treatment. This is a problem that affects all Territorians.

Road fatalities affect Aboriginal people disproportionately, with approximately 45% of people killed on our roads being Aboriginal. However, when we look at people admitted to hospital for road crashes, then Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are affected equally; that is, the proportion of admissions reflects closely the proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the population. In recent times, there have been about 700 hospital admissions per year related to road trauma. Within the hospital system, our emergency departments are at the front line and deal every day with road trauma. For example, the Royal Darwin Hospital Emergency Department in the last week of June this year managed 20 people injured in crashes on our public roads, 10 of whom had multiple injuries. Many of these people end up in intensive care.

The Intensive Care Unit in Royal Darwin Hospital manages about 100 cases of major trauma per year, half of which are the result of road trauma. That is about one every week. In Alice Springs, the Intensive Care Unit had 26 such patients in 2005. Lest we forget that these are real people, we have recently heard Dr Di Stephens, the Director of ICU at Royal Darwin Hospital, speak with great passion and concern about the tragedy that she sees unfolding for those unfortunate people and their families. Aside from the human tragedy, these figures represent substantial financial costs to our community.

For example, the direct costs of the hospital emergency and inpatient care plus interstate transfers due to road crashes amount to some \$4m each year. Of course, there are many other direct and indirect costs, both inside and outside the health sector: police; ambulance services; long-term rehabilitation such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and limb prostheses; not to mention time off work, long-term disabilities and lost productivity due to bereavement.

A recent study from the University of Queensland estimated that the total cost to the Northern Territory economy due to road crashes in 2003 was \$330m, or the equivalent of 3.6% of the Territory's gross domestic product. This compares nationally to only 2.3% of the Australian GDP and is the highest percentage of any state or territory. Clearly, the human and financial cost of road crashes in the Northern Territory is too high and fully justifies and, indeed, requires the comprehensive and bold approach this government has taken in addressing the problem.

There has been much public discussion about some of the recommendations this government is now implementing. One person is killed and nine are seriously injured every week on Territory roads. That is why this government has acted decisively. This is about saving lives. To those who argue that speed limits are not important, will not work, or are not necessary, I remind them that when limits were introduced on the Lasseter Highway, the incidence of deaths, serious injuries and crashes dropped by one-third. In fact, it is actually more than one-third. If the measures we have introduced only reduce road crashes by 10%, then that will mean every year there are five fewer people killed on our roads. That will mean five families and their friends who do not have to go through the grief and pain of losing a loved one.

Madam Speaker, I challenge any member of this Assembly to tell Territorians that these lives and these families are not worth it.

Dr LIM (Greatorox): Madam Speaker, this really puzzles me. The Health Minister raved on about trauma on the roads and trying to save lives in hospitals.

No one disputes the fact that we all want to reduce the number of motor vehicle accidents across the Territory. Of course, the cost in human lives and to the Northern Territory economy is something of which we all have to be very aware. However, the minister raved on for five minutes trying to tell us that it is the accidents on the open Stuart Highway that is the cause of this extra load on the health system. The reality is that accidents are within the built-up areas. That is what it is. The minister shakes his head, but that is what it is. Here is a cynical, political exercise over five minutes to try to tell us that by reducing the open highway speed limit, we will prevent all these admissions to the ICU at the Royal Darwin Hospital because we can avoid road crashes. That is stupid logic.

I used to live on the Princess Highway out in the country. I used to be the doctor who went and retrieved patients from motor vehicle accidents. I am fully aware of what motor vehicle accidents can do. This report said nothing about crashes in built-up areas. The speed limit cap is about limiting speed on the open Stuart Highway. Minister, do not come in here politicising this issue. If you want to do it as the Health Minister, talk about what you can do to ensure that the health system is well looked after.

Your police have failed to take care of our Territory roads, especially in built-up areas. That is your problem. Admit to it.

Mr WOOD (Nelson): Madam Speaker, it is a pity that when one criticises a report which was not made available to the public for scrutiny, one is then accused of supporting increasing death and injuries on our roads. It is sad that we are given a document by the government and it is presumed that we accept it without any analysis or criticism. That is poor.

The government is totally inconsistent. You were saying that 110 km/h on the Lasseter Highway has been demonstrated to have reduced the number of fatalities. Minister, you gave us a piece of paper to support that. Fair enough.

There is only reason why you made 130 km/h on the Stuart, Barkly, Arnhem and Victoria Highways: you knew people would not like 110 km/h. Your principles were: 'We did it on Lasseter's, which was an open highway, we reduced it to 110 km/h; we reduced the fatalities and injuries'. The evidence base of your report said: 'Make it 110 km/h'. You went out and did your own little community consultation and you realised that people do not travel at that speed; so you said: 'Well, let us forget the evidence base; forget the Lasseter Highway. We will make it 130 km/h'. Arbitrary, not evidence-based. That has made this whole issue of speed limits hypocritical. You might as well have left it open. People will see through it. If you really believed you were doing the right thing, you would have made all roads 110 km/h, and then taken the hard decision. You have not and people will see through it as totally hypocritical.

You also said evidence-based. If you look under Table 9 of the document, it says: '19 people killed on unlimited speed roads in the Northern Territory over the last six years'. Nowhere does it say in the document where those people were killed and, to this day, I have not seen anything. I have looked for the evidence. It is up to the government to tell me where those fatalities occurred on open roads. There is nothing in this document to say where; just a bland statement to say that they have occurred.

Dr BURNS (Health): Madam Speaker, my message to the member for Nelson who wants to send it off to a committee is that delay equals death. If you want to delay it ...

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Order!

Dr BURNS: I have already pointed to the people who potentially might die. The Lasseter Highway is a different standard from the other highways.

Members interjecting.

Dr BURNS: Just listen for a change! You might learn something. The Lasseter Highway is a different standard from the other highways. We arrived at 130 km/h for a number of reasons, including the need to pass road trains. Categorisation of speed on our highways has been addressed within the report.

In answer to the member for Greatorex, 60% of fatalities occur within the urban areas and 40% in the non-urban areas. They do not all occur within the urban area.

Finally, member for Greatorex, you are out of step with your professional body. The AMA has come out strongly on this issue. Where are you? You are out of step ethically and with the position of the AMA and the Royal College of Surgeons on this issue. As someone in a senior position said, you are politically grandstanding.

Madam SPEAKER: Minister, your time has expired; resume your seat.

Mr WOOD (Nelson): Madam Speaker, I move that –

1. the Northern Territory government leaves the present open speed limit on the Stuart, Victoria, Arnhem and Barkly Highways;
2. the government be condemned for not allowing the public a say in changes to the speed limits;
3. the government be condemned for not including the public in the development of the Northern Territory Road Safety Taskforce Report; and
4. the government delay the implementation of the report until it establishes a Road Safety Taskforce Committee which travels throughout the Territory facilitating public forums to allow community input.

Madam Speaker, I know we have covered some of this. There has been quite a bit of discussion here today and people might ask: 'What is the member for Nelson on about?' Does he not know speed kills? All signs on the roadsides say that, and also the ads on television. What is he doing saying that the speed limit on the Stuart, Barkly, Arnhem and Victoria highways should stay open? Well, it is like this. Presently, the speed limits on all Northern Territory roads outside the municipalities are open and they are signposted. The four main highways have an open speed limit. But the government now says no more. The right of Territorians to travel at an open speed will finish. As from next year, these four highways will have a top speed of 130 km/h, although it should be noted that the government went against their own task force which recommended 110 km/h.

How was that determined? In January this year, the government set up a task force to examine strategies to reduce fatalities and serious injuries in the Northern Territory. That is a proper thing for government to do and should be supported. This task force then wrote a report that was completed in 2006. I have a copy here. However, it was not made available to the public. For the next few months, there was a lot of speculation in the newspapers about what changes the government was going to introduce. This created copious letter writing and text messages in the *Northern Territory News*, which obviously helped sales. We heard about the speed limit going from 110 km/h, to 100 km/h and then to 130 km/h. We heard about there being no demerit points and then there was. I would like to show members: 'demerit points, backdown'. 'Government going cold on the penalty system'. Oh, 130 km/h or bust. Well, 110 km/h on open roads speed limit already ruled out. Hang on, these have not been announced by the government. How did these leaks get out? Not sure what is happening here. No belts, booze, our road killers, that is fair enough. And then there was a big 130 km/h – look at that, the day the Territory changed forever.

I know the minister said community consultation, but let us get real. This is not community consultation. This is just letter writing to reports that were somehow leaked. Do not forget, the road safety report had not been

released. Yet, amazingly, all these leaks come out. Even the parliamentarians said: 'We did not know about it'. So can one really believe that that is public consultation? That is about selling papers. Consultation is something different. While all that was going on, the public still did not have access to this document.

In the last sittings of parliament, four months after the report was completed, the Chief Minister, in an answer to a question from the Leader of the Opposition, said the following, referring to this report:

It is a most comprehensive report and it has been done in an evidence-based way. It is not a case of this might be a good idea, or that might be a good idea, or what I did I think up overnight. It is evidence-based and government will be working with that evidence-based report and will be releasing it, as I said, shortly to the community.

I actually gave a little cheer, thinking the public was actually going to have a say. But, alas, this did not happen. The next week, a pile of booklets turns up. This book turns up about a week after we sat in parliament. It is sort of an executive summary. Before a week was up, by the way, the government announced its response to the recommendations in the full report.

The community had roughly one week to look at these findings before the Chief Minister announced that she was going to make a decision on this report. This report was not asking for public comment. There was no address or e-mail to send comments to, nor a closing date for submissions. This document was a *fait accompli*. Again, I refer to the answer the Chief Minister gave to the Leader of the Opposition: that she was going to put out a report to the community. Most people would think that was good; the community is going to be able to have a look at this report and respond. That certainly was not the case. That is the report.

After listening to the Chief Minister's answer in parliament, and believing that an evidence-based document was going to be put before the public for comment, one could be forgiven for thinking there was going to be public input and public consultation. The facts are that the government had absolutely no intention of allowing the public to have any input into the task force report; it was all decided beforehand. Just look how quickly the road safety advertising hit the airwaves after the Chief Minister made her announcement. Television ads are not put together overnight. The evidence-based report released to the community was nothing but an expensive sales pitch; it had nothing to do with asking for comments from the people.

I was caught out myself, thinking that the key finding document would be around for a while for public comment. I downloaded the full report and rang the 1800 number to ask for a definition of unlimited speed roads. I was told that this was all roads outside municipalities. I then asked how I could find out on which unlimited speed roads the 19 fatalities had occurred from 2000 to 2005 - page 85, Table 9 of the report. I should make a comment that the minister gave us this: Stuart Highway nil speed limit fatalities. I was under the impression from what the minister said that the total of 354 people who were either killed or injured on our roads was in relation to speed. Yet, if you look at the only figures that were released until today - these figures here - you certainly get a different impression. Table 9 says: 'On unlimited speed roads 19 people total killed, injuries 113', over those six years. I wanted to know where the fatalities occurred to see if the speed-related fatalities had been on the four major highways. The response was that they - that is, the Road Safety people, I presume, behind this document - were trying to get a map on the web page to show where the fatalities happened but were having some difficulties doing it. Here I am, trying to go through the evidence through the document, as I should, but before the map was eventually posted on the web, the Chief Minister made her decision.

One of those decisions was that the speed limit was to be 130 km/h on the four major highways, not 110 km/h as recommended by the task force. I have been wasting my time going through the report as the government had already made up its mind - and no correspondence would be entered into. Isn't it strange that we have now heard that the evidence-based decision of 110 km/h upper speed limit was replaced by the 130 km/h speed limit, based on traffic road measurement on our highways? Where was that in the report? It was not. Was the government looking for its own evidence to stop the voter backlash? Fine to use this report. If you are to use the logic behind that, let us, say, stick it on Bagot Road and then say: 'The average speed there is 85 km/h to 90 km/h. People never bother about the 80 km/h, we will make it that'. That is not the evidence base we are talking about in this document.

Another interesting feature of the process is that to get a copy of the full report you had to go to the website shown on the inside front cover of the key finding booklet. The full report could only be downloaded if you had Adobe, which not everyone has. The report was only available from www.saferroaduse.nt.gov.au. It was

not available from the standard government home page or road safety site. If you did not know the web address, you certainly had trouble finding it by other means. The maps were not part of the full report; they were attached later. The maps do not give you much information either. There is the map that came off the web page. It gives you lots of dots, but it certainly does not allow a person to have proper analysis of deaths and fatalities.

I need to comment on the evidence-based argument the Chief Minister has used as her reason for changing the speed limit on our major highways. The reason for the reduction is that according to the statistics 19 people were killed by speed over six years on our open speed limit roads. As I said before, the statistics do not show where the fatalities occurred. Were the fatalities on the Daly River Road, the Buchanan Highway, the Plenty Highway, or the Tablelands Highway? We do not know from the report.

We do not have a definition of speed. From page 8 of the report it states police investigators had difficulties working out whether an accident was speed-related. Was the speed that caused the accident related to the open speed limit, or was it related to driving too fast according to the conditions? For example, was it raining on a very dark night, fog, driving into the sun, a sharp bend in the road? The speed under those conditions may have been simply inappropriate speed for the conditions and nothing to do with the open speed limit.

Again the evidence is difficult or impossible to prove one way or the other from the report. The government has said that based on the evidence the open speed limit will go. The government uses generalised evidence based on the dangers of high speed and it mentions other roads where speed limits have been reduced. I have no objection to that. But it does not show accurate figures or deaths and fatalities on our main open speed roads. Some people may say I am wrong, but I cannot find the evidence in the report. So how do you expect the public to do that?

If the evidence is there why did the government not accept it and bump the speed up to 130 km/h? The government has shot itself in the foot. When the Chief Minister says she has to make hard evidence-backed decisions and then bumps up the speed from 110 km/h to 130 km/h not based on the evidence, as in the task force report, but on road speed counters on our highway, then who is the populist in this debate?

The government has tried to be popular by not sticking with the evidence-based recommendations in the report but is happy to accuse others of populism when they challenge the government on this issue. The government certainly has not listened or talked to the people. This can be clearly seen from a survey I recently put out in various locations in the rural area, the 11 Mile, and at one place in Berrimah. I will read out the results of this survey; this was only out for two weeks and it was at 13 sites: the total number of surveys signed was 2979 - close enough to 3000 people. I have to tell you that these were left on counters or on tables in various places throughout the rural and 11 Mile area. People were asked to tick a box. They were not asked to just say yes or no. There was no one stuffing this down their throat. They could tick 110 km/h, 130 km/h, or an open speed limit for the Stuart, Barkly, Arnhem and Victoria Highway. With the Stuart Highway, 2979 people ticked off; 2782 people said they wanted the open speed limit to stay; 145 wanted the 130 km/h; and 46 wanted the 110 km/h. In the case of the Barkly, 2730 wanted the speed limit left open; 190 for 130 km/h; and 50 at the 110 km/h. In the case of the Arnhem, 2562 wanted it open; 320 wanted 130 km/h; and 85 wanted 110 km/h. In the case of Victoria Highway, 2670 people wanted it to be open; 247 people wanted 130 km/h; and 49 people wanted it at 110 km/h.

That in percentage terms for the open speed limit means that 93.4% of those people surveyed wanted the Stuart Highway to stay open; 91.6% wanted it to stay open on the Barkly Highway; 86% wanted the Arnhem Highway left open; and 89.6% wanted the Victoria Highway left as open.

Madam Speaker, I ask to table these surveys.

Madam SPEAKER: Seek leave to table, member for Nelson.

Mr WOOD: Madam Speaker, I seek leave to table these surveys.

Leave granted.

Mr WOOD: Madam Speaker, if the government believes they are on the right track in changing the open

speed limit, and that is what they are arguing to date, they certainly have not brought the people along with them. If they believe Territorians need to have a change of culture when it comes to speeding then they have done a lousy job trying to convince them. That is the truth. They have an argument that is based on evidence. If they believe the community should drive at a lower speed, they have not convinced the public. The Chief Minister said, in this glossy brochure:

After listening to Territorians, I feel confident the higher limit on our main highways recognises our circumstances.

I will deviate from my written speech and say that on two accounts, this is not right. If 'after listening to Territorians' means 'I have removed the open speed limit and brought it down to 130 km/h', that survey shows the government has not. If the Chief Minister says after listening to Territorians she is happy to raise it from 110 km/h to 130 km/h and that is due to community input, I say: 'Bunkum'.

The 'community input' were these surveys done after the report was finished. These reports are marked 6 July 2006. This document is dated June 2006, the month before. This is not part of the evidence. If the evidence, as the government says, is that speed kills, the slower you go the safer it is, and as the task force is agreeing with you and came up with a figure of 110 km/h on the main highways, surely you cannot bump up the speed to 130 km/h, but you have. You have found out that 85% of the people travel at around about that speed. Why have you changed it? Not because of the evidence because otherwise you are refuting your own task force evidence, but you know there will be public backlash. You have gone with the popular move.

A member interjecting.

Mr WOOD: Yes, you have. You have gone to the popular move. This document is not part of the task force. This is not part of the evidence base that I have to look at to come here and debate. This document has only been released in parliament today. I only found out when the member for Wanguri mentioned it in a television interview. It was not part of this report.

Minister, these figures you gave us for the Stuart Highway speed limit were not part of the report. I am expected to debate on this document and you pull out other documents. How do you expect the community to come along with you when you treat their local members this way?

Dr Burns: Where do you stand on the recommendations?

Mr WOOD: I will get to that. The reality is that except for the members of the task force and whoever on the fifth floor put this brochure together, and looking at this survey, I am not sure which Territorians you were listening to. What this shows is that the government has imposed those changes on the community without public input and public ownership of the report. You were a bit worried about public backlash so you bumped the speed limit up to 130 km/h. Many people see the report as being like Big Brother: no chance to have a say on the report, no one offering the opportunity to be listened to. The changes will happen, and that is it.

There is no doubt that one of the differences in the Territory from the rest of Australia has been the open speed limits. They have been around for a long time and are a bit of a Territory icon. People naturally get a bit upset when something that has been around a long time is changed without consultation or discussion. That is why there is large opposition to the change.

Have you noticed that the government did not even bring this report to parliament so that we as parliamentarians could debate the report? If the government wanted to bring both sides of parliament along with them, or allow a little healthy debate and analysis in this Chamber, it should have brought the report before parliament, but nothing was done except by the Independents and the opposition.

I do not believe the government has listened to Territorians and it has not consulted Territorians. The minister said they talked to the Chamber of Commerce and various groups. You have not taken it out to the public. Most members of the public are motorists. That is the public. They are the ones who signed that survey. The motorists, the cyclists, have signed it and it is obvious by the response, which is a huge response; nearly a full electorate of people, nearly 3000 people have signed this survey. If you have 90% voting for you, you would say that you are a very popular person. You have 90% of the people saying that this decision is wrong. If this government really believes that this decision is right, then go out and tell the people and prove it. It has not done that.

We will now need a highway patrol, I mentioned this before, at \$1.5m per year. Why? I know I will be asking some questions about the waste of police resources if I get picked up for doing 140 km/h on the Victoria Highway, 100 km east of the Victoria River Roadhouse, in November by a lonely police officer from the highway patrol sitting behind a herd of grazing cattle waiting for an unsuspecting motorist. I will be asking, politely, of course, 'Don't you have anything better to do?' People in the rural area who are continually having problems with hooning will, I am sure, like to see more effort put into controlling this antisocial behaviour than pouring money into a highway patrol.

I believe the government has shown few brains and little commonsense in this matter. Most people would agree on many of the recommendations in this report. So do I - and I make that clear. However, the government surely must have known that the change to the open speed limit was going to be opposed by many. Even though I might support most of what is in here, why did this not go out to the public? Surely that would not be too much. It is easy to say that these people will forget about the issue before the next election. I doubt it, especially when every time they go past 130 km/h sign, the only ones in Australia by the way, they will think of the Chief Minister. The 130 km/h signs will be a reminder wherever they are installed along the highway.

Some people I have spoken to said they never drive over 130 km/h, either because their car is too old or at that speed the car burns too much fuel, or they do not like driving any faster, but they still would like to be able to pass a road train a bit quicker, or put the foot down a bit where the road is straight from time to time. To have the ability to do that without getting pulled over by a policeman in the middle of nowhere is why so many people like living in the Northern Territory. I know there are also many motorcyclists who say that the Northern Territory is the only place you can let the bike out and are very much opposed to the changes to the open speed limit.

I can understand the Chief Minister's concern about reducing the death and injury toll, but one feels that the evidence for the speed change has not been definitively shown. The lack of public involvement in the making of this report has been practically non-existent. If the government had thought this through a bit better, perhaps it could have said that it would implement all the recommendations of the report except changes to the four major highways. It could then have announced that the open speed limit would be reviewed in five years, giving time to see if the other recommendations put in place had created the desired drop in fatalities and injuries. This would have allowed time to look at other things if the evidence showed that to be appropriate. That is where the task force could still have a role.

As you might have heard, the Cattlemen's Association is not pleased with some of the other roads coming off the open speed limit. With consultation, maybe some sort of compromises could have been brought into place. This is just an imposition. Bang! Something that has been part of the Territory for a long time – bang! This is what is going to happen. The government should delay the recommendations for three or four months. After all, it has taken since January to put it together, it came out in June, and about another four months later it was eventually announced that it was going to happen.

The government should delay the recommendations for three to four months while the task force heads off with the report, travels around the Northern Territory and listens to what people are saying, as well as giving the task force reasoning behind the recommendations. If you believe in this report, sell it, not through the television, not through ads. Go and sell it, because you have pushed it as an evidence-based report, and allow people to put forward their points of view. It seems it is okay for the government to consult with the public on such things as cane toads, or gamba grass, or substance abuse, but when it comes to road safety, father knows best – or mother knows best - and community involvement is non-existent.

This report has many good things in it that I would support. Other things need more debate, and there are some which are not needed, at least for the moment. If the government wants to change the culture of poor driving, wielding a big stick is not the only way. Has the government looked at rewarding good drivers, for example, five years without a traffic infringement means a 10% reduction in registration fees? A big stick should be matched with a bit of carrot.

The government has not come up to standard on this issue. It has failed the inclusive test and made people very angry, and that anger will be reinforced for many years to come as motorists see the signs just south of Noonamah. I am sure at the next election they will become cheap election placards for the opposition. It is all

a great pity. This report has many good things in it, but the sales people on the fifth floor have lost touch and the government has lost the hearts and minds of many people.

I will show you that survey. No one has gone out and told people to tick it off and sign it. That is a pretty instantaneous feeling for many people. The Chief Minister says in her brochure that she has listened to Territorians. I do not know any people who had a say, so she must have good hearing or believes listening to the rubber speed counters on the roads is listening to the people. The community will not accept speed monitoring devices as another pseudonym for consultation. They will see it for what it is: this government speaks with forked tongue. It says that it supports all the recommendations of the report based on the evidence. The report says the upper speed limit should be 110 km/h for all Territory roads. The government says that 130 km/h will be the top speed limit. In other words, it is not supporting the evidence given by its own task force. The government criticises those who support the retention of the open speed limit as populist and not looking at the evidence. The government, by moving the speed limit up to 130 km/h, is doing exactly what it accuses people like me of doing - being populist and not looking at the evidence.

I note that the minister said if you go up to 160 km/h, you only gain this much in time travelled. Fair argument. You were taking up the argument from the opposition, that you do not gain much by going from 130 km/h to 160 km/h in time travelled. However, if I was playing the devil's advocate here and you were being criticised for bringing the speed up from 110 km/h to 130 km/h, I might say: 'Minister, you know the time taken to go from A to B, if you travel at a 110 km/h compared to 130 km/h, is only 10 minutes'. Why have we not left the speed at 110 km/h using the same argument you have put the opposition down for. You have not listened to this evidence.

The government has not convinced the community. They have not attempted to bring the community along with this decision, and that will be to their detriment in the future. That is the real key to my argument. I do not drive fast; 130 km/h is quite all right for me. I might go up to 140 km/h. I do not go racing down the highway like a maniac. As you can see from that document you have, most people do not. What you have not proved - why don't you leave it as it was?

I know that speed kills, but I also know that the Chief Minister said it was evidence-based. I have not seen the evidence and you have not convinced me there is the evidence on those particular roads. If you really believe in this document and everything you have in here is worthy of public support, you should defer the process three or four months, establish a task force committee, travel around the Territory to tell people what is in the report, and listen to what people have to say. Then, the government should make a decision.

I just have to put a quote at the end. Here is a media release from 27 September 2004:

NT government rejects call for highway speed limits.

'This sort of interference from Canberra is exactly why Territorians need federal representatives who stand up for the Territory', Dr Burns said.

'Unfortunately the current member for Solomon seems hell-bent on being Canberra's representative in the Territory, rather than the other way around. First he invites Canberra to send nuclear waste to the Territory, now he sits by while Mr Anderson meddles with our speed limits. Mr Tollner's failure to put the Territory first means we continue to be treated as second-class citizens by the Coalition'.

Dr Burns: That was before the report.

Mr WOOD: Ah ha. On Wednesday, 2 April 2003, TopFM, Mr Daryl Manzie asked the Chief Minister: 'Should we have speed limits on all Territory highways?' The answer was: 'No'.

I understand that government can change its mind, but why were people saying such things then? I understand that times change, but if you are to convince people that times change and, therefore, regulations should change and we should lose our open speed limit, then you have to go out and sell it. It is not my job to go out and sell it; it is your job. You said this. You said on the evidence the speed limit needs to be put down to a 110 km/h, and then you have obtained so-called evidence, that is not in the report, and said it should go up to 130 km/h. Explain that to the people. There is an inconsistency that is a real weak spot in your argument. If it is okay to take all these recommendations and to agree with them that it should be 110

km/h, why did you change it to 130 km/h? It is simply because you realised there would be a public backlash.

I say there will be a bigger public backlash unless you go out and sell this. There are people out there who say: 'No, no, no, we would like our speed limit left as it is'.

Madam Speaker, I put it to the government to delay the implementation of at least that part of the report. There would be no harm, I believe, in giving it time to see if you put your recommendations out for the next five years, and put the majority of these recommendations into place ...

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Nelson, your time has expired.

Mrs BRAHAM: Madam Speaker, I move that the member be granted an extension of time, pursuant to Standing Order 77.

Motion agreed to.

Mr WOOD: Madam Speaker, I believe there is a good reason for leaving those speed limits as they are for say the next five years. Put all your other recommendations into place and review whether the majority of your recommendations as you have in here have been effected, and see if we need to revisit whether the speed limit should not be open anymore. That is a sensible suggestion.

There are two reasons why people have said no to what the government is doing: (1) they believe this is being imposed on them without consultation; and (2) they believe they are losing a bit of what they call the Territory's freedom. It is just another little piece of the Territory's flavour disappearing. I do not want people killed on the road, and I do not want injuries on the road. If I thought that the evidence was really pushing that this was the case on the Victoria, Stuart, Barkly and Arnhem Highways, I would be asking some questions myself.

There is room to move for some other compromises. A reasonable number of people are saying that we should be careful with the Arnhem Highway because there are many minibuses; some parts of that highway are not particularly great, other parts are quite good. Maybe there is a difference in speed limits there. There is a lot of traffic between Darwin and Katherine and maybe people would accept the speed limit there. But I think ...

A member interjecting.

Mr WOOD: That's right, that's right. What I am saying is that there has not been any of this debate. No one has been allowed to talk about this.

Ms Lawrie: What a load of rot.

Mrs Miller: Well, we haven't.

Madam SPEAKER: Order!

Mr WOOD: Sorry, sorry. It says here 'Nigel Adlam' and the last time I saw him he was a newspaper journalist. That is not consultation about this report. This is the report, minister. This report should have gone out to the public. What do have here? That is the classic – demerit points. The great backdown. The government's going to backdown on demerit points. What came out in the review: we are going to have demerit points. What was the point in arguing the case? That was a waste of time. What people need to see is the final document, a task force committee to travel around the Territory, allow people to have a look at it and have their say, and allow the task force to put its arguments out there.

Be inclusive and you might have had a chance with the community. If you do not want to be inclusive then it will be on your head. I tell you that many people will oppose this. They do not want to lose that open speed limit. You have to convince them otherwise; I cannot help you.

Summing up

Mr WOOD (Nelson): Mr Deputy Speaker, before I comment on the minister's reply to my original motion, I want to say something about demerit points. I have had a few rural people see me about demerit points. They have said: 'If the government is going to enforce it, are they going to increase the amount of public transport in the rural area?' They would probably laugh at that, but the point is that we do not have a lot of public transport and if people do lose their licences they are going to have a lot of walking to do. People have said to me that it is all very well to lose your licence in the city, but if you lose it in the rural area - and you could probably say you should not lose your licence - there are some difficulties in getting to work. I mentioned that because I believe our rural public transport is still well below par.

I listened to the comments of the minister, and I know statistics – there are lies and damn lies and then there is statistics, and for me to try to analyse all these statistics would be a waste of time, I believe. Obviously, there are people who are experts in this area and could do a better job of this than me. The minister says that this is not about selling something. Well, I am not sure why not. You are selling it by putting advertisements on television. You can also sell it by going out to the community and putting your point of view so that people have an understanding of where you are coming from.

If you are saying that speed reduces the number of fatalities and injuries on the road, which is a known fact, you could actually keep reducing the speed, as has been done in many cities, down to 50 km/h and 40 km/h. We know that as you reduce speed, normally speaking, the number of fatalities and accidents decrease. The question is then, what is the upper limit? One of the problems when you read statistics - for instance, the statistics on the Lasseter Highway - I have the numbers to show that as the speed limit has been reduced to 110 km/h, the number of fatalities has decreased from 16 to 10. The number of people admitted to hospital with injuries has been reduced from 50 to 28. The number of people who have overturned their vehicles has decreased from 45 to 28. The number of people who have run off the road has decreased from 22 to 16. So you can say there is a reduction in those accidents since the introduction of the 110 km/h speed limit. The problem is that you do not know at what speed these people were travelling when they had an accident. I am not saying that those figures do not make it look like there is a reduction in fatalities and injuries, but I am not sure at what speed some of these incidents occurred.

If you accept it as it is, that 110 km/h has reduced the speed limit on the Lasseter Highway, why has the government allowed 130 km/h on the Stuart Highway? If you argue passionately that this has caused a reduction in the number of people killed on the Lasseter Highway, and your evidence-based recommendation from your own task force has said it should be 110 km/h on all the roads, including the Stuart, Barkly, Arnhem and Victoria, why have you gone up to 130 km/h?

A member: It is political.

Mr WOOD: That can be the only thing. You know that people will not accept it, even though your report says that if you do it you will reduce the number of fatalities. The table the minister gave us today is very interesting. There has been talk that it says that 85% of people travel basically under 135 km/h on some of these documents, 129 km/h, and obviously the government has said: 'Looking at these particular figures, roughly 85% of the people travel from 130 km/h down to low speeds, therefore we will pick that speed as the speed we will put on the Stuart Highway, the Barkly Highway, the Arnhem Highway and the Victoria Highway'. You could also say that only 15% of people travel above that speed. Is that the 15% who cause the problem? We do not know. You can have a crash at 130 km/h and you will do an awful lot of damage. That is the speed limit you picked. In this case, are the 15% of people who travel over the 130 km/h speed limit the cause of the problem? Are they the ones who are dying? I do not know; I cannot tell from here. You have arbitrarily picked a spot on these speed histograms and said 85% of the people travel at 135 km/h or less, therefore, we will pick 130 km/h.

I am not sure what the science is there, but it certainly does not give me a lot of comfort that the government has done this on evidence. It is saying, if you take the Lasseter Highway example, they have promoted the idea that you will reduce fatalities and injuries by bringing the speed limit down to 110 km/h - and their own task force said bring it down to 110 km/h. Why have they put it up to 130 km/h? If you are going to have it at 130 km/h, why don't you leave it open, because only 15% of people travel over that speed. That is what is confusing. You have set the parameters and told us the principles on which you are developing the

recommendations of the task force and, then, when it comes to our major highways, you appear to have changed your mind. That, from my point of view, appears to be a political decision.

Be that as it may, I will reiterate that the government should sell what it believes in. If it needs to take one of the experts who is good at analysing statistics or knows a lot about the cause of death, that person should go out as part of that committee. It should be sold if you really believe in it. If you do not believe in it and just rely on advertisements on television, that will not change that survey; it will continue as it is.

I personally do not have a problem with driving at 130 km/h. I go up to 140 km/h and vary my speed according to the conditions. That has been one of the advantages of having the open speed limit. I do not race along like a maniac. If you have a look at these statistics, it clearly states that there are a few people who might drive up to 190 km/h, but not many. We are talking about maybe one or two. The majority of people on an unlimited speed road travel at a reasonable speed ...

Mr Kiely: Is 190 km/h safe, is it?

Mr WOOD: No, I did not say that. I am saying the majority of people ...

Mr Henderson: Should it be legal?

Mr WOOD: The majority of people ...

Mr Kiely: Is 180 km/h safe?

Mr WOOD: You have ...

Mr Henderson: Should 180 km/h be legal?

Mr WOOD: Well, 130 km/h is safe according to your government, 110 km/h ...

Mr Kiely: You pick a speed limit then. You pick a speed. You tell us what is safe.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mr WOOD: 110 km/h is what was recommended; you made an arbitrary decision to put it to 130 km/h. It could have been 140 km/h, it could have been 150 km/h. What I am saying is ...

Mr Kiely: What would you do?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mr WOOD: Member for Sanderson, I am trying to explain so, if you put a sock in it, I will tell you what I would do. I am saying that this graph is as it is under an open speed limit. Was there a problem with that, because you have now picked 85% of that graph and said: 'We will make it 130 km/h'? For the extra 15%, was there a real problem? Was there a real problem? That is all I am asking.

If you were sticking to your guns about speed limits being reduced to reduce fatalities, this would be 110 km/h. You have made an arbitrary decision for 130 km/h. Why not leave it as it is then? If 130 km/h is going to kill people, you are not going to stop them from doing 140 km/h. I just believe that there are inconsistencies in how you have come to that. That is the problem I have. That is why it is going to be more difficult to sell this. You do need to sell it. Some of the people who filled in that form could say they did not know what the argument against an open speed limit was and, possibly, they did not. They are ordinary people reflecting their thoughts about what they believed was a right they had to occasionally travel at a higher speed.

I know there are people who say that is dangerous. Many things we do are dangerous in this world. We have to draw lines about what is allowable in danger. How much does the government wrap us in cotton balls

when it comes to risk? We have to make that balance. Of course, governments do have to make decisions about the safety of ourselves and other people. In this case, they have not convinced many people. They should go out and sell this. They should bring in most of those recommendations, and also look at some of the recommendations the opposition has put forward. I do not have a problem with people's cars being confiscated if, for instance, they have been drink driving a number of times, or they have been driving without a licence a number of times. That is pretty reasonable: you are taking people off the road who are a danger to the community.

Put in those recommendations and then come back in five years' time and analyse the effect of those recommendations. There is a real need to look at the major factors that are mentioned in here: youth, Aboriginal people, and tourists. They are the ones mentioned in this document that are major target of fatalities and injuries. Then come back and say: 'These things have not changed. Now we want to have look at the speed', and talk to people about it. Until you bring people along in the decision-making process, especially about something that I think people - it might be a corny word – love. They feel it is one good reason for living in the Territory; they can occasionally let the car go a bit. If you are going to change people's culture, if you are going to change people's feelings about why they are in the Territory, you are going to have to do a lot better.

I recommend that you have meetings. It is not for me to have meetings on behalf of the government. I occasionally have meetings in my area, but on this issue it is up to you people as a government to show why you have made these changes. You can include the whole report, have a meeting on the whole report; it should not just be sticking with the speed limit. There are quite good items in here for discussion.

I feel that you have missed the boat. Before you announced these changes you should have had the public meetings. You have now announced the changes and it is going to be very hard for you to step back and say you have changed your mind. The public sees that, and they are very disappointed.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank the members for Katherine, Greatorex and Braitling for their support. This could have been done a lot better. I hope the government has taken up some of the points I have raised. I have a feeling that there are some members of government who do not agree with this. Perhaps that is something that the government members are going to have to discuss because I believe it will not go away. It is one of these issues that will stick. It will be a bit like TIO. If the government ever tried to sell TIO, that famous TIO which just produced record profits in banking and insurance, because of community support. You will have the same depth of feeling when it comes to this. If you had done it right, you might have had a chance. This way, there is no hope. I will leave it up to the government to sort out how it gets out of this mess.

Motion negatived.