

Why we don't say "cyclist"

The below article appeared in the June/July 2010 issue of Pedal Power's magazine

At Pedal Power advocacy dinner meetings the word 'cyclist' is banned. That's seems an unusual stance for a group that some people view as a 'cyclist rights' group.

To explain why, it's worth quoting Barack Obama's 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, a speech that particularly set him up for the White House,

"Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes.

Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America — there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America."

The language is uplifting and uniting. It shows language that draws distinctions between groups fosters conflict. It implies a mutual exclusivity. You can you can either be one or the other but not both. This is particularly wonky thinking when it comes to transport where you can be cycling one minute, walking the next and driving after that. It leads to dumb conclusions ie "cyclists don't pay registration or need to be licensed" when probably 95% of adults who cycle in Canberra have a licence, own a car or live in a household with a car.

It also leads to sweeping generalisations. Cyclists are aggressive, cyclists are arrogant. If so, are they the same when they get in their car? Even though I believe that cycling is a magical thing, I don't believe that bicycles can instantaneously change your attitude from being a considerate driver to a hellish cyclist. If you are arrogant, you will be arrogant whatever mode of transport you are using. What is in your mind is much more important that what is underneath your bottom.

The words cyclist and motorist tend to pit one group against another. And cycling is likely to lose that war. Literally, because when you are cycling you don't have a ton of metal around you to protect you.

Figuratively, cycling loses because it sets the field for "might is right" arguments, ie bicycles only comprise 5% of the vehicles on the road therefore they should get 5% of the road space. The big dumb assumption in this argument is that it assumes the status quo is perfect and ignores the fact many people who cycle only on weekends on bike paths would like to cycle on weekdays if they felt things were safer. It ignores the question, what mode of transport do we as a community want to foster.

Even the word 'cyclist' objectifies, rather than humanises people and makes them easier targets of hatred. 'F#@kin cyclist' is easier to spit out of the mouth than 'F#\$kin person cycling'. Taken to the extreme, "cyclists" can become society's new kicking bag. You can say cyclists are ignorant and don't know the road rules, try saying that about Asian car drivers

To paraphrase Barack Obama, we believe there are no Canberra motorists, there are no Canberra cyclists, there are no Canberra pedestrians, there are no Canberra public transport users, only Canberrans who want to get somewhere. The question then is what mode do we encourage that

meets our community's needs for transport, ie quick, convenient, safe, cheap, flexible, comfortable, reliable, healthy, non-polluting, people friendly, doesn't require much space. The balance of those criteria varies from trip to trip but regardless cycling ranks highly on many of those criteria a lot of the time and can rank highly on all the criteria for shorter trips if appropriate facilities are provided.

Of course, we never will rid the language of the word 'cyclist' nor probably do we need to. However not using it at our meetings is a very simple trick to help ensure that when we are under more pressure (eg doing media interviews or talking to people who aren't supportive of cycling) we don't get sucked into 'us and them' arguments and instead our thinking and speech is as effective as possible for cycling and for the community.

So what do we say instead of 'cyclist'? A whole range of things (though some of our team still finds it hard to avoid the term) 'commuters cycling, kids riding, when you're cycling, if you're cycling, people riding, to encourage cycling etc'. And by the way, the penalty for using the 'c' word at an advocacy dinner meeting is to raise your hands in the air and say 'Forgive me brothers and sisters for I have sinned'. You're welcome to come to a dinner just don't use the 'c' word.

Tony Shields was the volunteer leader of Pedal Power's advocacy team and Pedal Power's media spokesperson.