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30 March 2011

Communications Office  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Dear Communications Office

I understand one of your Committees is considering an Assembly Member's request to make it compulsory for cyclists to wear helmets.

I wish to submit the following evidence. Three incidents I have witnessed in which cyclists were capsized in collisions with others are:

- (1) South London. Motorist apparently not checking left mirror, and not signalling, turned left into a Brixton Hill firm's car park across the path of two cyclists coming up on the left causing them to come off their bikes, apparently not injured. They were wearing helmets but these were not applicable in this incident.
- (2) Worthing. Senior motorist wearing dark glasses driving in the opposite direction of the afternoon sun veered left to negotiate a mini-roundabout capsizing a lady cyclist already on the roundabout. She, not wearing a helmet which was not applicable in this case, was shaken but unhurt. This was a classic case of overtaking when it is not safe to do so but the motorist claimed he had not seen the cyclist. Eye test needed.
- (3) Pedestrians against a red pedestrian signal proceeded to cross Brixton Road, South London, into the path of a cyclist with the right of way causing the cyclist to be thrown some distance over the handlebars. Not wearing a helmet, he seemed however to know how to fall safely and when he got up and remonstrated with the pedestrians they claimed it was his own fault! I was the only person with sufficient sense to ask him if he was at all hurt and whether he had landed on his head and wanted an ambulance.

An incident I did not witness but read about in a news report a few years ago: most of a cycle club was wiped out one Sunday morning on the North Eastern A1 by a drunken motorist – a classic case of overtaking when it is not safe to do so. Their helmets did not save them. You just have to remember that if on your bike you are hit a 60-70 mph by half a ton of metal, the chances of your survival are zero and whether you are wearing a helmet or not would make no difference. Even motorists cannot effectively insure against this sort of menace.

Helmets are helpful if you are hit on, or land on you head. But most incidents leading to injury or death of cyclists take place at junctions and amount to the motor vehicle driver proceeding or overtaking when it is not safe to do so. Making cyclists wear helmets really amounts to blaming the victims of atrociously bad driving or pedestrian conduct, and that is what your Committee should concentrate on improving.

Cyclists can also overtake unsafely – for example on the left hand side of a juggernaut with mirror blind spots turning left at a roundabout bounded by railings. But such crushing and rolling injuries are not avoidable by wearing a helmet. The remedy here is better cyclist training, and improved heavy vehicle design.

It is worth noting that in Holland where effective, safe and continuous cycle lanes go on for hundreds of miles, cyclists have absolute priority over motor vehicles.

Here in Worthing the main problems are motorists' failure to signal and people complaining about cyclists on the pavement, without apparently any awareness of why they do this. The hazards are many, from the car door opened in front of you, to the motorist hooting at you to get out of the way when you have the right of way. I cycle on the road much as I drive – three feet from parked vehicles and giving all due signals, and I and the bike are insured. It is the only way. Mini roundabouts here are particularly hazardous on the north-south A2031 route because they are really disjointed east-west crossroads – unofficial M27s - which motorists hare out of as though they have an absolute right of way when they were told to give way, making motoring *with* the right of way as scary as cycling with the right of way.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Bunting', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Paul Bunting