

Response to Westminster Lecture on Transport Safety

Response to Westminster Lecture on Transport Safety by Transport Minister Dr Stephen Ladyman. Delivered: 5 December 2006.

Thank you.

My job tonight is to reply to the 17th Westminster Lecture but the observant among you will have noticed we haven't heard it yet. So I'm grateful to Professor Goodwin for allowing me to see his lecture in advance and I promise not to give too much away.

Phil's theme is full of fascinating insights. And they are important insights.

Because we must always remember that road safety is driven by, above all else, human behaviour. And people respond to the risks of the road in many different ways.

We can't ignore this. Nor can we stop at condemning what we may see as irresponsible behaviour. Rather, we have to work out why people do what they do, and then address the causes.

For example, one of the largest risk groups is people driving for work - sales reps, lorry drivers and delivery vans.

They are some of the most experienced road users, and, in theory, should be some of the safest. But actually, they have a higher rate of accident involvement than other drivers, even after allowing for their higher annual mileage. So why?

Are they being pressured with unrealistic schedules? Do they have their minds on something else? Are they driving excessive hours? Are they expected by their employers to take calls on their mobile phones? Or do they simply become complacent?

It's a paradox.

And here are two more.

Firstly, everyone agrees that we must do all we can to reduce the dreadful toll of deaths and injuries on our roads. Yet, every specific action we take is criticised and opposed.

Secondly, cars, and the roads we drive on are getting safer, thanks to innovations like ABS, airbags, and, yes, the speed camera. But, the safer some drivers feel, the more likely they are to take risks.

Part of the problem, on both of these paradoxes, is that people don't realise the dangers. Or think that the risk is small, and, therefore, worth it.

For example, some people's reaction to the new rules on children's car seats was that they are an inconvenience.

But, then, the great majority of mums and dads haven't witnessed what can happen in a crash to a child wearing an ill-fitting adult seatbelt. So parents perceive it to be a low risk.

But, of course, across the country, significant numbers of children were being injured as a result of not being strapped in as well as they could be.

So, we had to educate people on the risks. And we did, helped by solid evidence on the numbers of injuries that should be prevented by the new measures.

Another example is those mobile phones. There is abundant evidence that using a mobile phone while driving is a serious distraction. In fact, it causes a degree of impairment cited as being similar to driving above the UK's drink-drive limit.

But, most people haven't experienced a crash caused by using a mobile phone. And mobile phones are, undoubtedly, convenient. So it is, perhaps, unsurprising that rather a lot of people use their phone while driving.

This is an issue on which we need to make a much bigger effort, and we are going to do so.

The new Road Safety Act increases the penalties for using a hand-held phone while driving, and, for the first time, makes it an endorsable offence. We hope to bring this provision in by late February.

That will be the cue for more police enforcement, and for a substantial publicity campaign under the THINK! umbrella.

But it's not just drivers we need to be concerned about. Pedestrians take risks as well. The iPod generation is a good example. Only a few weeks ago I saw a young girl cross the road while plugged in to her MP3 player.

She was within inches of ending up under the wheels of a black cab because, minus one of her senses, she didn't notice its approach. So a gadget like an iPod can result in us having to consider new road safety risks and communicate these to the public.

We have to make people understand that we cannot simply reduce casualties by waving a magic wand. However inconvenient individual rules may appear, they are essential if we are to meet our targets on cutting serious injuries and deaths.

Another paradox is the response of drivers to measures designed to reduce risk.

Car manufacturers are continually looking to improve not only performance, but safety as well. Every new model that hits the road has welcome modifications or additions.

At the same time, highway authorities have invested billions of pounds in making the road infrastructure safer - and that's set to continue at well over £100 million a year.

But, no matter how good the design and engineering of your car, or the road, you still need to concentrate when you drive.

Yet, ironically, because we feel better protected, some drivers feel they can take greater risks.

These men, and they are mostly men, come in, broadly, two guises:

- There are those who delude themselves into thinking they are in control of the risks. These drivers are typically male, middle-aged, and include many in the higher social classes.
- And there are those who don't care about the risks or even relish the risks - the boy racers.

To tackle this paradox, we need to continue to reinforce the message that improving road safety is a shared responsibility.

Yes, we must continue to improve vehicle safety.

Yes, we must continue to improve the safety of our highway infrastructure.

But, at the same time, all road users have a responsibility to improve their own safety - by concentrating on their own skills, by knowing and understanding the law, and by keeping a constant eye on what's around them.

And I emphasise the word improve. I don't mean avoiding deteriorating behaviour. Nor do I mean continuing as before. I mean positively and progressively improving the safety of our behaviour on the road.

Bad habits can develop from a lifetime spent behind the wheel. This is a huge agenda. And we won't achieve change overnight.

So I have asked the Driving Standards Agency to prepare a strategy for improving lifetime driving skills - Safe Driving for Life.

The UK has a proud record on road safety. We are one of the world leaders, whether measured on deaths per 100,000 population, or deaths per million kilometres travelled.

And this is despite the fact that we live in a crowded island, that our roads are very busy, and getting busier, and that on too many of them we still have both heavy traffic and large numbers of pedestrians and cyclists.

Phil is going to tell you that it is not by chance that the UK has such a good record and I entirely agree.

The UK's record has required consistent political will, over many decades. Assisted by having coherent national road safety strategies. And by having simple targets for the outcomes which everyone supports - namely fewer deaths and serious injuries. And by the strategy and the targets being coordinated, each supporting the other.

But our record still isn't good enough.

Nine people a day still die on our roads.

That's around 3,200 a year - just 11 per cent down on the 1994-98 average, the baseline for our targets.

For some types of road users, we are doing a lot better - child deaths have fallen by 46%, and pedestrian deaths by 33%.

But deaths of motorcyclists have gone up by 22%.

And deaths of car occupants have only gone down by 5%.

And, across all types of road user, there is a marked contrast by gender - the number of females killed has fallen by 24%, but the number of males killed has only fallen by 5%.

And the news is even worse for us over-40s. The number of middle-aged men killed has gone up by 16%.

So we need to do a lot better.

And this is the key focus in this year's review of the road safety strategy.

I am grateful for the assistance that many of you have already provided for this review.

A lot of interesting proposals have emerged, which we will be discussing at the Road Safety Advisory Panel tomorrow morning. I look forward to seeing some of you there.

My officials will be presenting me with a report before Christmas. We will then reach conclusions and we intend to publish it in the first quarter of 2007.

This our last opportunity to make big changes to our road safety strategy before 2010.

So it is vital that we get it right.

It is vital that we properly understand how human beings behave and how they calculate risk.

Because, as Phil will show you, it is not always obvious.

And only when we have a greater understanding of the irrational and predictable thing we call a human being, can we successfully get our messages across.

Thank you.

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(This speech represented existing departmental policy but the words may not have been the same as those used by the Minister).