

FACTS letter: to Tim Collins MP regarding Speed Management Policy

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Tim Collins Esq. CBE MP

House of Commons

Westminster

London SW1A 0AA

2nd July 2003

Dear Mr Collins

I read with concern comments ascribed to you today suggesting that the motorway speed limit should be raised and traffic calming and camera enforcement reduced.

The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (FACTS) is a registered charity and associate Parliamentary group. Our charitable objective is "To promote transport safety legislation to protect human life". Our aim is to provide impartial research-based evidence to MPs and Peers on road, rail and air safety issues.

Speed, whether excess (breaking the posted limit) or inappropriate (driving too fast for the conditions), is a contributory factor in one in three road deaths. That amounts to about 1100 deaths per year. Many of these deaths would have been avoided if drivers had remained within the speed limit. There is a strong link between the likelihood of an accident occurring and the speed at which drivers travel. Evidence has shown that reducing the speeds of the fastest drivers would yield the greatest benefits in reducing death and injury on the roads.

Raising the motorway speed limit to 80 mph

The Government's Road Safety Strategy *Tomorrow's Roads - Safer for Everyone*, stated a policy of keeping speed limits at 70 miles/h for cars on motorways, and improving compliance. This decision was based on the fact that more vehicle occupants would be killed and seriously injured if the limit were raised to 80 miles/h. The decision to retain the 70 miles/h limit was supported by the Police, by the AA and by the Transport Research Laboratory, during the Transport Select Committee's inquiry into Road Traffic Speed, published last year.

Casualties on the motorways would be expected to increase between 5-10% if the speed limit were to be raised to 80 miles/h. In the United States increases in the national speed limit have been shown clearly to be associated with increases in fatalities (Garber & Graham, 1990).

It is not clear that raising the speed limit on the motorway would reduce journey times. Research into Intelligent Speed Adaptation at Leeds University found that obeying the current speed limit led to little change in average journey times. The Select Committee report concluded that on England's motorways an 80 miles/h speed limit might well increase journey times because it would create an uneven flow.

Traffic Calming

Hit by a vehicle travelling at 35 miles/h a pedestrian is twice as likely to be killed than if they were hit by a vehicle travelling at 30 miles/h. Research by the Transport Research Laboratory has concluded that the most effective measures for controlling speeds in urban areas - and therefore reducing road casualties - are physical traffic calming measures. 20 miles/h zones with traffic calming measures have seen average reductions of 70% in child pedestrian accidents and 60% in accidents overall. Local Safety Schemes offer significant value for money with average expenditure per accident saved of £20726, providing a rate of return in the first year of 372%. Traffic calming, including road humps and cushions, is a vital element of urban road safety management, which deserves support.

Speed cameras

Figures from the report evaluating the first two years of the speed camera partnerships published in February 2003 concluded that deaths and serious injuries had fallen by 35% on roads where speed cameras had been in operation, equating to about 280 people. In addition, pedestrian deaths and serious injuries had fallen by 56%, an important benefit if walking is to be encouraged and the quality of life in towns to be improved. The report also demonstrates that according to public attitude surveys, the majority of the public support targeted camera enforcement. The report is available at:

<http://www.roads.dft.gov.uk/roadsafety/cameras/redlight/pdf/cameras.pdf>

Higher speed limits at night on dual carriageways

Impairing factors such as fatigue, drink and drugs are likely to be more of a problem during the night, and the hours of darkness. In 2001, 53% of the 203 deaths on motorways occurred during the hours of darkness.

Our level of alertness is lowest in the early hours of the morning when one is normally asleep, and in the afternoon as a consequence of the circadian rhythm. The peaks for fatigue related crashes are 2-6 a.m. and 2-4 p.m. Death or serious injury is more likely to result from fatigue-related crashes, which have a higher impact speed, because there tends to be no braking prior to accidents.

Oxfordshire County Council estimate that up to 30% of accidents on high speed roads are probably caused by drivers falling asleep at the wheel. The visual input at night is far less stimulating and there is usually less traffic. Drivers are more vulnerable to fatigue related crashes if they drive faster, have an over-confident image of driving and are reluctant to take breaks when tired (Horne and Reyner 2000).

Alcohol is twice as potent at the likely fatigue times. The legal blood alcohol concentration is therefore unsafe in these periods. In addition, around half of the drivers killed between 10 pm and 4 am were found to be over the legally permitted 80 milligrammes of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood.

Such inflated risks of impairment at night call into question the logic and safety of raising the 70 miles/h speed limit for cars on dual carriageways, at night.

Enclosed is a recent publication from PACTS on tackling the speeding problem. Managing the danger of speeding traffic requires a dual aim of (1) reducing the average speed, since the faster the traffic moves on average the more crashes there are; and (2) reducing the spread of speeds around the average, since the accident frequency increases exponentially as the spread of speed increases. Speed limits, traffic calming infrastructure, and safety cameras are all important measures in ensuring the safety of the road environment for all road users, including motorists.

Please feel free to contact me for further information.

Yours sincerely

Robert Gifford

Executive Director

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