Bicycles and a rail revival

How to put the trains back on track

by ALAN PARKER

BICYCLE Federation of Australia President, Warren Salomon, is right: bicycles must be part of a rail revival in this country (**Cyclist**, August—September). This would not only enhance the mobility of cyclists, but make our ailing rail systems grow. Foreign rail systems that give priority to cyclists are making money and succeeding, while our rail systems slide further into debt.

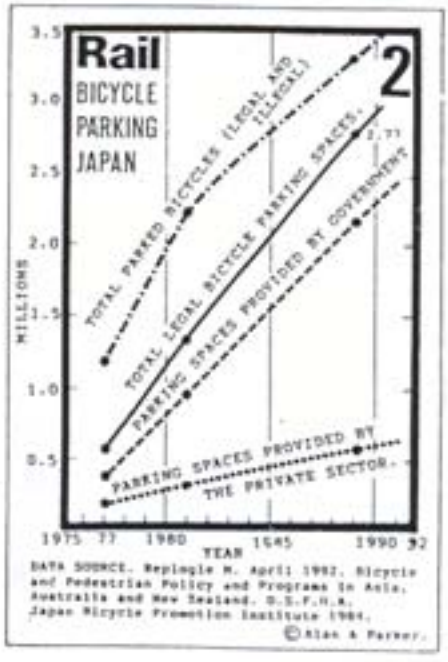
Encouraging bike/rail travel as a substitute for long urban car trips is recommended in the National Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Strategy, and the National Greenhouse Strategy which follows up Australia's international commitment at the Rio Earth Summit to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Yet the National Bicycle Strategy has not brought about a funding commitment to bike/rail travel. Meanwhile in the Netherlands and Japan, countries honouring their Rio commitment, the necessary funds are forthcoming and great progress is being made. Australian ESD policy and the National Bicycle Strategy are little more than hot air.

Clearly ESD is now on the back burner and we need arguments to sell bicycle transport to governments locked into an economic rationalist ideology. The following outlines bike/rail travel as a cost-effective form of microeconomic reform and part of much-needed rail infrastructure improvements.

To become more productive, Australia needs to strive to adopt "world best practice" — the '90s buzz word for transportation planning circles. Cycling advocacy should be couched in terms of adopting world best practice and thereby enabling urban rail systems to turn losses into profits. Bicycle advocates need to point out examples of "world best practice", show that it works and that it's the reason there are now 3 million bike/rail users on the Japanese rail system and 160,000 bike/rail users in the Netherlands.

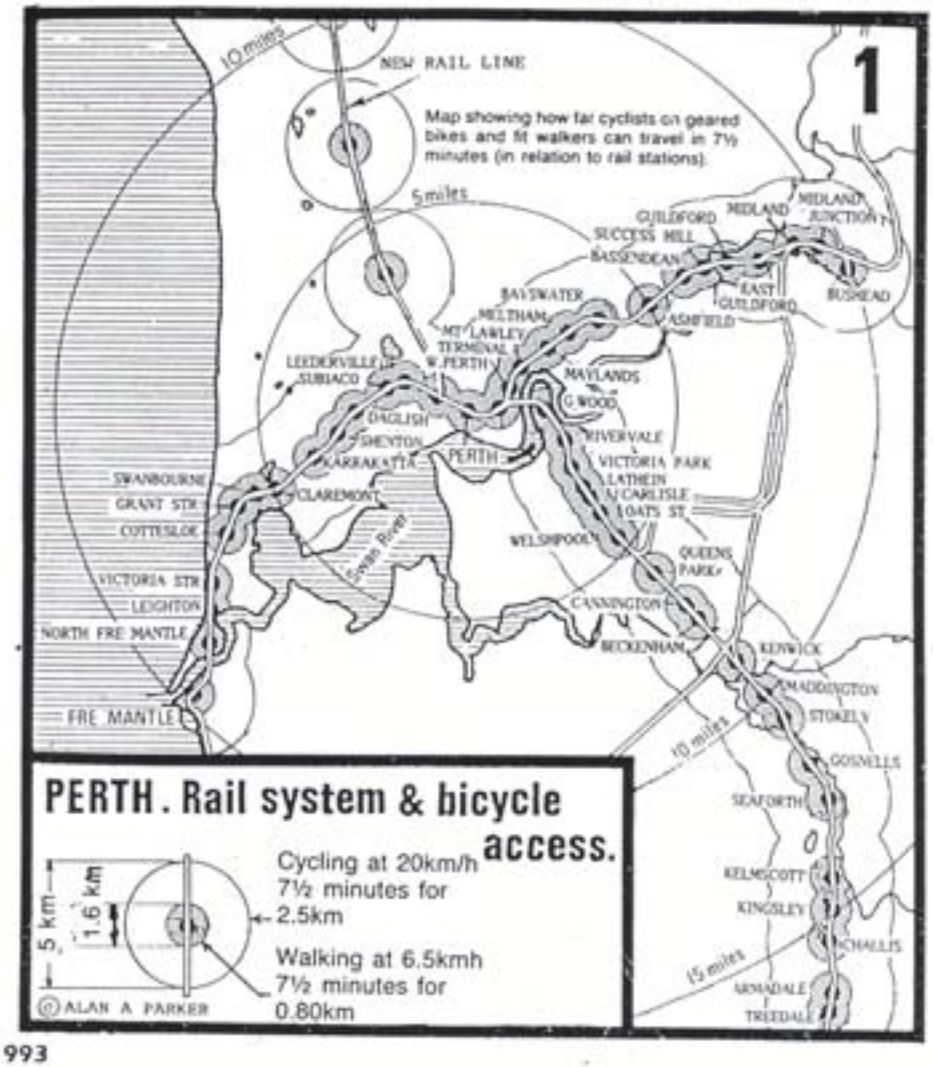
Following Industry Commission reports on Australian railways, it should be easy to demonstrate some of our rail authorities are examples of "world worst practice". Australian systems not only lose money but waste energy, being less than fully loaded in rush hour and nearly empty many hours of the day. In ten years it would be possible, through encouraging bike/rail travel, to make the trains much fuller and more energy efficient. Taking bicycles on trains in the rush hour is not practical, except against the peak hour flow, so secure bicycle storage facilities are needed at both ends of the trip. Secure overnight storage is essential for around 20% to 30% of potential bike/rail users.

The way is open for change. Much work has been done on bike/rail potential by the American, Michael Replogle, and, in all modesty, by me in Australia. My map of metropolitan Perth shows the enlarged catchments on the rail system that bicycle access opens up, as did my Melbourne bike/rail map (**Cyclist**, June-July 1992).



Creating a mass market for bike/rail travel

In the Netherlands and Japan, stations are accessible by bicycle and secure bicycle parking, including overnight storage, is available at both ends of rail journeys. This is the key to servicing Australian cities which have declin-



ing central business districts and emerging district employment centres. Enhanced by cycle access, railways serve not only the CBD but inner suburbs and much cross-suburban travel.

The world's most successful rail companies understand that, without secure parking at nearly all stations, the "necessity" to use a car remains. This is especially true for Australia's low density cities. Australian authorities offering to place a few racks or lockers at a few stations as a trial demonstrate their ignorance of world best practice. To reveal the existence of the potential mass market for bike/rail travel, in-depth family interviews by good behavioural scientists are needed. This has never been done in Australia, nor is likely unless a national bicycle committee commissions such a study.

For the present, we must look overseas to learn how to open up a mass market for bike/rail travel. Combatting rampant bicycle theft with thousands of secure parking spaces over the entire Sydney and Melbourne rail systems, backed by effective advertising campaigns, would be a start. More subtle marketing campaigns suggesting that the bike/rail option may enable families to avoid the purchase of a second or third car are likely to be effective. Also useful are measures to reduce car travel demand and restrict car parking (see **Cyclist**, February—March.) It is feasible but can only happen through the Federal government effecting a fundamental rail system reform.

World best practice in Japan

Not all rail systems run at a loss. Japan, where the bike's potential to expand rail corridors is fully exploited, has the world's most profitable railways. According to an *Asia Week* (Dec 18, 1992) survey of companies in the Asian region, three Japanese rail companies made a $A1.6 billion profit between them in 1992. They are expanding services and developing three unique high speed rail systems, as well as new commuter express systems.

Asia Week also reported that Victoria's PTC lost $150 million in 1992 and was one of the region's most unprofitable companies. In the 1980s, the PTC was listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's most unpunctual rail system. Since 1978, over 10,000 rail patrons have had their bicycles stolen or vandalised.

While the PTC was losing customers, Japanese rail companies opened up a mass market of over 2 million bike/rail travellers. The large increase in bicycle access to stations for the Tokyo region and Nagoya, similar in population to Melbourne, is shown on chart 3. The growth of bicycle parking at Japanese rail stations is shown on graph 2. Even the Japanese private sector provides over 500,000 secure bicycle parking spaces. Secure bicycle parking spaces will number over 5 million soon after 2000.

Japan's economic philosophy supports any energy saving, especially of oil. A key objective of its National Energy Security Policy is "reducing the energy used to produce goods and services". This embraces transport to and from factories and offices. Subsidised yearly rail tickets, bike parking and deterrents to car use help reduce oil imports and makes Japan more competitive. (By contrast, our naive economists merely try to reduce costs of moving freight across land and through ports, ignoring our inefficient travel-to-work practices and annual subsidies of $2 million plus to company car fleets.) As well as meeting economic targets, the Japanese are on track to realise their CO_2 emission reduction targets by 2005.

World best practice in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands the bicycle performs more than 35% of all journeys to stations. Nearly as many people live in urban areas in the Netherlands as in Australia. They have 100,000 securely guarded, bicycle parking spaces and many thousands of bicycle lockers, compared to our 1,500 secure parking spaces, including all our bicycle lockers on all our rail systems. An average guarded bicycle parking facility takes about 1,000 bicycles while 14 stations take over 2,000. Bicycle lockers are used for lower volume stations where 10 to 50 units are typical. Cyclists pay about $100 a year or a $1 per day casually to have bicycles stored in either lockers or the 84 guarded garages.

The Netherlands are willing to learn from world best practice and are testing imported automated Japanese bicycle parking systems. We can learn from them how to make best use of railway station facilities and enhance the rail station environment so that patrons feel safe and secure even when stations have no rail authority employees present. Guarded bicycle garages rent bicycles, repair, service and sell bicycles and provide transport information services for cyclists. Netherlands rail authorities do provide car parking but there are four guarded bicycle parking spaces for every car parking space. Land prices make it cheaper to build bicycle parking underground than provide car parks. (In Japan where urban land is even more expensive, there are 20 bicycle parking spaces for every car space.)

Given Australia's lower densities and land costs, perhaps our target should be two secure bicycle parking spaces for every car parking space. That is about 25,000 bicycle parking spaces on both the Sydney and Melbourne rail systems (a guesstimate based on car parking at Victorian stations). As 66% of all those who park cars on suburban stations come from within easy cycling distance of a station, current car parking wastes an expensive resource and deprives both longer-distance motorists and cyclists of secure parking.

The Netherlands made the same commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions as Australia, part of the reason they are providing another 200,000 guarded bicycle parking spaces by the year 2010. They are not alone — the German and Danish governments are also strongly committed to bike/rail travel. Their ESD and Greenhouse policies are real, achievable and being implemented. Ours are a con, designed to fool the public.

The Netherlands bicycle master plan (**Cyclist**, June—July) has a 20 year objective of a 30% increase in person-km travelled by bicycle, from 8% of person-km travelled to around 10% in 2010. Parking facilities are planned to increase by 15% person-km travel by train. Similar specific objectives are needed in our national bicycle strategy, with funding and negotiating mechanisms set up to ensure that state rail authorities get their acts together.

Bicycle lockers in the Netherlands are cheaper to build and install than those in Australia because they are made to a modular design and produced in large quantities.