

Attack of the

ROAD MONS

Victorian Minister for Roads, Geoff Craige, wants to issue licences for monster road trains, euphemistically called B-triples, up to 33.5 m long and weighing 77 tonnes. These would be 10 m longer than B-doubles, currently the biggest trucks on Victorian roads. Other States have similar ideas. Alan Parker examines the implications for cyclists.

Blatant disregard for cyclists' safety

Common sense tells us there has to be a limit on the size of vehicles that are part of everyday traffic on major roads. Within 100 km of Melbourne there are over a million people who ride or drive small vehicles and who have a legitimate right to feel safe on the road. Notwithstanding any cost savings of B-triples, high technical standards for braking and minimising road wear, or the higher standard of driver training, the only sensible place for 77 tonne loads in or near cities is on railways. Introduction of B-triples/road trains in or near cities is saying that the law of the economic rationalist jungle prevails; the biggest vehicles and those who profit from them can rule the road.

Our major cities and their regional hinterlands are very different from the almost empty outback where dire economic necessity requires road trains. The very few people who work with and directly benefit from road trains "choose" to put up with them since they are vital to the outback economy. We all know what legalised road trains have done in the Northern Territory – tales of scared tourists trailing behind a road train for 50 km or so are legion. The B-triple may make older road trains in the NT and outback Queensland obsolete; it is a better vehicle and may make life easier for the small numbers of NT motorists.

However, that is not the issue; the B-triple is still a road train. It cannot co-exist with large numbers of small vehicles, especially when they can't get off the road and out of the way, as often happens in the Top End.

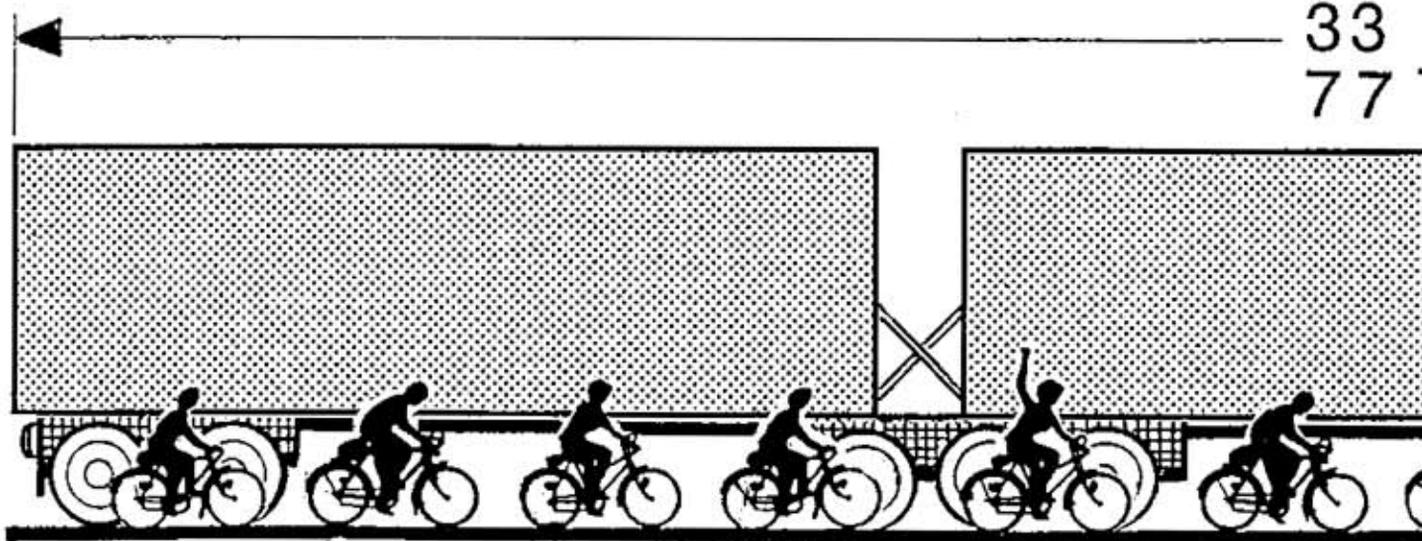
Needs of the hidden majority ignored

Vehicles should not be so big that they scare other road users; psychological impact should be taken seriously. In 1998, the majority



A B-triple. Photo courtesy Vicroads, Melbourne

A B-triple is as long as 20 bicycles end-to-end and would be difficult for motorists to pass. In cornering, the B-triples' swept path is wider than for other vehicles (Vicroads, 1997). If the driver were distracted, cyclists could easily escape notice and be swept under the wheels. Indeed, the rear trailer could mount kerbs and wipe out pedestrians. Bicyclists have always found trucks intimidating. A B-triple/road train is so huge it will literally terrorise cyclists.



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of road users are women, the young and the elderly – their needs as riders and drivers must be considered. Nearly all children today have access to bicycles; they must be able to cycle safely. Unfortunately, the State government makes only token gestures towards cycle safety.

The use of B-triples will be a major deterrent to bicycle use, particularly for girls. Barry Elliot, a social psychologist who has worked with young adult cyclists, describes the attitude girls have to trucks as follows: "...girls find bicycles a good form of transport when mum and dad can't take you. They ride a great deal on roads. They do not feel as safe as boys, are more timid on busy or cluttered roads than boys. They positively hate buses and trucks. While feeling confident in their skills as competent riders they do feel more vulnerable on the roads." (Elliot 1985)

The only roadways all cyclists can safely use, or will perceive as being safe with B-triples, are freeways with a wide safety lane accessible to cyclists or roads with a separate bike-way. On other roads, cyclists will need wide bikelanes, separate bike-paths or shared footways. Unfortunately, the rate of bikeway construction is now totally inadequate. Worse still, authorities choose to ignore the known intimidatory effect of B-triples and B-doubles on cyclists and other traffic. If the Minister for Roads issued B-triple licenses it would be a blatant disregard of cyclists' legal right to use the road – introducing B-doubles in the late 1980s was bad enough.

According to transport researcher Dr Jenny Morris (Morris et al 1997), women's transport needs have changed along with their role. This increased proportion of women drivers is now the dominant element in road transport (**Cyclist** April-May 1998 p 54). This has

important implications for road safety, since males are still more likely to be involved in fatal crashes (Procko 1997), and women's more cautious and courteous behaviour has reduced the road toll.

The threat to unprotected road users

A road train does not have to hit a cyclist to kill. Gusts and strong crosswinds cause the slipstream to angle sideways which can suck or blow a cyclist under the wheels of a following vehicle or into a roadside object. The larger and faster the vehicle, the greater the risk.

The Victorian Road Transport Association knows this – it stated in a letter: "air turbulence and wind shearing created by large vehicles moving at speeds of 100 km/h. in heavy crosswinds have been known

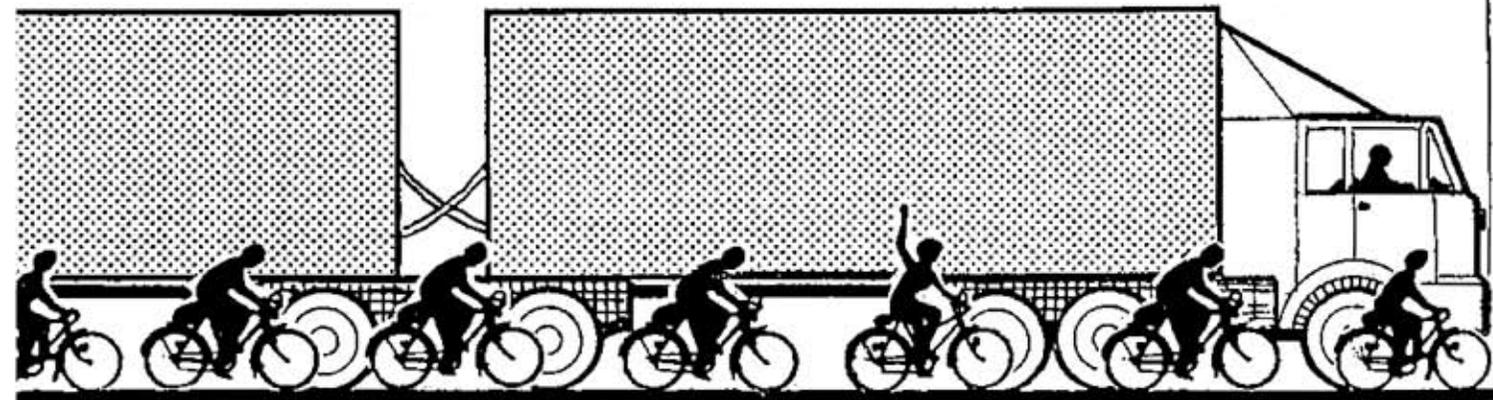


to destabilise cyclists resulting in injury or death." (VRTA, 1988)

Another safety issue is the tracking problem with B-triple trailers, which can result in cyclists being squeezed off the road or crushed under the wheels; rear wheels of trailers can cut across corners, mounting the footpath or verge and hitting pedestrians. Imagine main road roundabouts when the B-triples travel across them – the headlights will exit the roundabout at the same time the tail lights enter!

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metres
tonnes



Side guards on all trucks

We now have to share the roads with B-doubles; it is no longer a matter of choice. There is still a problem with cyclists going under the wheels of B-double trailers. Fortunately, there is a practical way to reduce the potential for injury and death – the fitting of side guards has been standard practice on all trucks in the UK and Scandinavia for around 20 years.

These side guards have saved many lives and should be fitted as standard between the wheels of all trucks to prevent cyclists being swept under the rear wheels. The Bicycle Federation of Australia in 1988 supported a submission (Bicycle NSW, 1988) which stated: "government has the responsibility to do the research needed to assess the potential dangers of B-double trucks and to investigate the use of protective side guards"

As usual, in 1988 the bureaucrats involved ignored this reasonable request and the Australian Design Rules were not modified to make this happen. When the National Road Transport Commission did a review of the safety issues again (in their 1996 review of vehicle mass limits) those involved did not consider the issue of sideguards. More exasperating still is that if side panels were fitted rather than simple bars, aerodynamic drag, fuel consumption and noise would all be

reduced. Some Esso and Shell B-double trucks have already been fitted with side panels, demonstrating that some companies in Australia recognise their benefits. The need for sideguards needs to be raised again; the design rules need to be changed.

What is to be done?

What road monster comes next? This has been seriously discussed – it is a 45-metre 100 tonne B-quadruple! One State government has already asked the Commonwealth for extra freeway-widening funds to enable it to be used... This absurd idea must never be acted upon. The place for big loads is on *real* trains. Cost savings will come from making rail freight more efficient, not from wiping out markets for rail freight by putting monster trucks on the roads. The capacity of rail to shift even the heaviest of loads is brought home by the illustration of a record-breaking Australian train pulling 8,400 tonnes of coal.

Bureaucrats dazzled by truck technology must not forget they have a legal duty of care to other road users, applying to their safety and legal rights of access. In the NRTC's 1996 study there is not one word regarding road trains being "road-user-unfriendly", nor is there recognition of the needs of women, older drivers or cyclists who will all feel unsafe and insecure sharing the roads with these monsters. A survey of woman drivers in the NT would no doubt prove beyond doubt that this study was another example of the

male sexism all too common in transport planning and research over the last 40 years.

Is it really necessary to wait until the body bags pile up before authorities do the sensible thing? This whole thing is a replay of the life-threatening government reaction to bullbars, yet to be resolved. Although Victorian Minister Craig and his counterparts may compel us to share the roads with B-triple road trains, very few people would choose to do so of their own free will. Unfortunately, most motorists will just endure this menace in silence (if it becomes reality); cyclists will choose not to share the kerb lane with road trains and may drive instead.

Now is the time for the bicycle movement, motorcyclist and motorist associations to say we won't tolerate road trains in or near cities.

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