Cycling

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes,  Conservative) (Click Here to watch Sarah live)

Some 30 years ago, I fell in love on a tandem. I have to share the tragedy with hon. Members that last week I turned 50. On my last day of being 49, my husband turned up on the front half of my tandem like a knight in shining lycra and whisked me off for 28 miles on Dartmoor and a 3,000-foot climb. Frankly, I could not care less about being 50—it was a wonderful evening.

It would be a shame if we did not add the joy of cycling to this debate. Cycling makes us feel glad to be alive, improves our mood and quality of life. That is important, because we need to get more people cycling. There is safety in numbers, but we do not want to frighten people away from cycling—we need to send that crucial message. I cycle to work most days in Westminster. When I first started cycling in London 30 years ago, I felt a bit of an oddity, but now whole pelotons sweep past me. Maybe that is because I am getting slower, but it certainly feels a lot safer when there are more cyclists around.

I welcome the campaign from The Times, but I would like it to be broadened to include rural cycling. I represent a rural constituency. Some 36 people were killed on rural A roads, and 26 on urban roads. It is between five and 10 times more dangerous to cycle per mile on a rural A road than it is in the city. I would particularly like to remember the 11 people from my constituency who were killed or seriously injured cycling between 2005 and 2010. In pressing for change, may I also urge the Minister to consider a change to the language and stop calling them accidents? I suggest that driving and overtaking at 60 mph on a rural lane and hitting a cyclist is not an accident—that is a crash. It minimises, and makes it worse for the victims’ families if we call them accidents. Let us abandon the language of denial and neglect.

I am grateful to my many constituents who have written to me today to give me their ideas, one of which was on speed limits. I know that other hon. Members have referred to this, but the Netherlands is rolling out changing to 60 kph on rural networks. That is the equivalent of 40 mph, as Nia Griffith said. Will the Minister consider that change? It is disappointing to hear that perhaps that is not something the Department will press forward with. On behalf of all hon. Members, I press him to reconsider. I would also like to reconsider, as many hon. Members have, the issue of a safe passing distance of at least one metre. That should made very clear, be part of the driving test and in The Highway Code.

Cycle training is improving. This weekend, I will visit a Steiner school with a wonderful organisation called Always Be Cycling. Not only does it give excellent training to both children and adults, but it teaches people how to repair their bikes. Most people own a bike, but not everybody uses it. Part of the reason for that may be that they lack the confidence to repair it. I urge the Minister to continue to give more support to such excellent cycling training schemes. I would like to see safer manhole covers—non-slip manhole covers would be an excellent development—and more training for lorry drivers. Finally, I want the Minister to focus on how we separate vehicles from cyclists in rural areas.

I pay tribute to the parents at the Steiner school in my constituency who got together and
formed the sustainable transport action group, and actively considered how many children were cycling to school—a miserable 2.8%. By working closely in co-operation with local landowners, the parents have increased that figure to 9.1% in just two years by introducing a safe off-road route. This demonstrates that we really do see effective change.

In contrast, in another part of my constituency, at Littlehempston, with regard to which the Minister has already been helpful, it is a scandal that at the home of the transition movement—"Transition Town Totnes"—we have possibly the only bridge in the country that keeps communities apart. The final link in National Cycling Network 2, the route running all the way from Kent to Cornwall, could be joined up if there were a safe route through Totnes to Littlehempston. At the moment, if I were a parent in Littlehempston I would not want my children to cycle to school. The road between Totnes and Paignton is hideously dangerous. I have cycled it myself many times.

If only the bridge were open and there was co-operation with landowners and, crucially, the co-operation of a sustainable steam railway—the South Devon Railway—which had the bridge built. The real scandal is that £87,000 of public money went towards the £173,000 cost of building that bridge.

We have all heard the bogus arguments about cycling, including the dangers of vandalism and all that stuff—the resistance that is sometimes seen from communities and landowners who do not understand the real benefits that cycling can bring their communities.

Ben Bradshaw (Exeter, Labour)

I should like to highlight another example, which is the failure so far to complete the cycle route from Exeter to Dawlish, a wonderful route along the Exe estuary, because of the failure of the landowner—the Earl of Devon—to agree to a new bridge over the railway. That bridge would be publicly funded, but he just does not like the look of it.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that.

Let us sweep away some of these bogus arguments and have real involvement and drive. I should like Devon County Council, for example, not to be put off from issuing compulsory purchase orders where there are short gaps, so that the local community can really benefit. In this Olympic year, I should like to think that a child living in Littlehempston might be able to start their future Olympic cycling career by cycling from Littlehempston to Totnes.

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