

# Opinion & Analysis

## Cyclists unite – you have nothing to lose but your chains



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The seemingly irreversible long-term decline of the bicycle may at last have been arrested

**‘W**HEN I see an adult on a bicycle”, wrote HG Wells, “I no longer despair for the human race.” When asked to choose the world’s most important inventions since 1800, three in five respondents to a BBC radio poll picked the bicycle.

Although a product of the Victorian era, it has a timeless quality. The humble bike is arguably the most efficient machine ever invented.

What other device allows a person to move three or four times more quickly than walking, for the same modest effort?

In an age of energy profligacy, the bicycle is a bewitchingly efficient device. Learning to ride a bike is one of life’s great rites of passage. The expression of unbridled delight and pride on my five-year-old’s face last summer when she first learned how to master her bike was priceless. As adults, most of us can still vividly recall our own two-wheeled independence day.

In 1986, some 23,600 children cycled to primary school. Just 20 years later, that number had plummeted by 83 per cent to just 4,000. The decline in bike usage among children transfers directly into adult life. Today, fewer than one in 50 Irish adults

commute by bike. Two wheels good, four wheels better?

Rising prosperity led to huge increases in car ownership and usage; this in turn made the roads feel more threatening for those who still chose to cycle. Many parents began to insist on driving their children to school, even for very short journeys. This means yet more cars on the road, and even less room for bikes – a vicious cycle, if you will.

And let’s be honest: since cars are often as much about displaying wealth and status as a means of transportation, cycling is on the lowest rung of the pecking order. For years, the argument has been that if you have the money, buy a car. If you’re an adult on a bike, out in all weather, you must either be broke or a bit eccentric.

Even public transport seems part of the problem; there is no provision whatever on Iarnród Éireann’s new intercity trains or urban rail systems for bicycles. Little thought has gone into integrating cyclists with public transport. Clearly, few planners and even fewer politicians actually cycle. Bicycles actually increase the catchment area for public transport nine-fold, so the gains from joined-up thinking are truly dramatic.

The wheel may, however, be now turning.

**“Half a million people cycle to schools and work in Copenhagen, which 40 years ago was as car-choked as Dublin**

In the last five years, the number of cyclists in Dublin city grew by 30 per cent; the seemingly irreversible long-term decline of the bicycle may at last have been arrested.

Minister for Transport Noel Dempsey clearly thinks so. His department published the first ever National Cycle Framework Policy (NCFP) earlier this year. Dempsey aims to have 10 per cent of all commuting done by bike in 2020. What’s equally clear is that a multiplicity of factors killed off the bike, and only what the NCFP calls “strong interventions” can reverse these.

A major roadblock is the persistent notion that cycling is dangerous. The British Medical Association calculates that its health benefits far outweigh any hazards cyclists face on the road.

A Danish study found 40 per cent lower premature mortality rates among adult cyclists than their car-bound counterparts.

Lifestyles dominated by the car are not just a health risk to car users; traffic is the number one cause of air pollution in urban areas, while over a fifth of Ireland’s total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are from transport. Then there’s the traffic noise, danger and congestion that are an unfortunate feature of urban living.

As more and more people are feeling the financial pinch, switching even some of your journeys to a bike will save a packet. Regular cycling also provides all the exercise needed to stay fit and keep the flab at bay. Cyclists also shine at work, with lower absenteeism, better timekeeping and improved mental alertness.

Probably the biggest obstacle towards cycling is the attitude of some other road users. Impatience and lack of awareness on the part of drivers (including so-called professionals such as bus and taxi drivers) greatly adds to the sense of hazard for cyclists.

In Scandinavia and Germany, a “hierarchy of care” places the onus on motorists to drive cautiously around vulnerable road users. After all, cyclists don’t kill truckers, so the legal duty of care must reflect this inequality of risk.

The other great enemy of road safety is speed. In order for cyclists to use roads safely (many, including Road Safety Authority chairman Gay Byrne, object to cycle lanes, which are often badly designed and maintained) we need to reduce the urban speed limit to 30km/h.

It will require serious political cojones to take on the car lobby, yet it can be done. Every day, half a million people cycle to schools and work in Copenhagen, a city that 40 years ago was as car-choked as Dublin. Cycling is now seen as chic and cars are just not that cool.

Cycling is also innately sociable. I recently found myself striking up a conversation on the street with a fellow cyclist – Dr Mike McKillen of the Dublin Cycling Campaign, as it transpired. That simply doesn’t happen when you’re in a car.

In the words of author Iris Murdoch: “Other forms of transport grow daily more nightmarish. Only the bicycle remains pure in heart.”