

To the Editor,

I write to you from GoBike, the cycle campaign for the Greater Glasgow area. We work and fight for safer conditions for people of all ages and abilities to be able to choose cycling and walking as a safe form of active travel. As I would hope you are aware, Scotland is reaching crisis point with its health, its congestion on the roads, and as so recently reported, its pollution, with climate change fast approaching an irreversible point. We strongly and vehemently believe that active travel is something that can be a solution to all of these problems, and this opinion is widely held and reflected in government and council policy, and has been acted upon for years in our more forward thinking friends in Europe.

I am sure that you will be aware by now, having undoubtedly already received many other communications about this, that I am writing with reference to your decision to publish two opinion articles over the last few weeks from Rab McNeil (28th Oct / 11th Nov), inciting hatred against people on bikes. We do not accept that the tone of either article was tongue in cheek, nor just provocative. Both articles were full of ignorance, prejudice and bile. You would not publish such vile attacks on any other minority group, so why would the Sunday Herald suddenly move from its long standing apparent code of ethical journalism, and begin to target people on bikes with such prejudiced and dangerous rhetoric (although perhaps with Rab's hint at homophobia leaking out, this lack of ethics runs even deeper)?

Having received enough letters to publish four in response to Rab's first article, we would have imagined that the poignant statements that incitements to hatred like this lead to putting lives at risk on the roads, might have left you thinking again about printing more for at least a few weeks. But no, shamelessly making no bones about the fact that this is a deliberate attempt to goad, just one week later you allowed the "hilarious" Rab to strike again.

We all know that there are certain groups of people that the media can use to sell papers. Cyclists have always been one of those vilified groups used by other newspapers who choose to peddle lies and hatred. Fortunately we have recently started to see this wane, as so many more intelligent and recognisable voices have started to speak sensibly about the desperate need for active travel provision in our country. Many of our campaigners have long believed that the Sunday Herald does not belong in the category of newspaper that would vilify easy targets, let alone adopt the practise so late to the party. By media standards you have a responsibility to the consequences of the content you print, and you should be aware that taking up a stance that singles out easy targets has consequences. You will undoubtedly be aware of the terrible Charlie Alliston case widely and disproportionately reported in the media, involving a man on a bike who was jailed for causing the death of a woman crossing the road on foot. The instances of this happening are so rare (99% of pedestrians are killed by people in motor vehicles) and yet the fact that the media covered it with more aplome than a royal wedding, has now led to a promised governmental review on road safety being delayed, to make way for a review targeting only cycling law. People killed by motor vehicles rarely make the newspapers, never mind the front page, and prosecutions rarely go beyond three penalty points. As one of your letter writers pointed out, for every thing written or spoken in the media that suggests that people on bikes somehow have no right to be on the road, there will be many people in cars who hear it and will drive with less care around that person on the bike, and endanger their life. As editor, that is on you. You have a responsibility for the fact that what you publish has consequences.

As the cycle campaign for the area you cover, we would first like to ask that you consider your approach when writing about active travel. You should really do some research – a good place to start would be to read some of Peter Walkers articles, and maybe even his book, Cycle Nation. Chris Boardman also explains the current situation intelligently and succinctly. Think about the effect that what you publish has on every single person getting up in the morning and attempting to use a healthy form of transport that has no impact on the world around them, in a city that has little to no actual safe space for them to cycle in, in the face of other people who have read other less principled publications than yours, who shout abuse, and drive without care around them, because the media says it's OK to hate the cyclists.

Secondly we would like the Sunday Herald to publicly apologise for the incitement to hate you have published from Rab McNeil, that you ensure that Rab McNeil never writes in spite about cycling again, and that to balance out the harm done, you publish a monthly column, perhaps written by GoBike, about the perspective of life upon two wheels. Until those things happen, these GoBike former Sunday Herald readers will be getting their news elsewhere.

We have published this letter to our members and on our website and look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Iona – co-convenor of the GoBike Cycle Campaign