



Powerful images: *The Sun* photo of children lying in the main street of Red Cliffs to represent the 1969 road toll; and (inset) trauma medicos at work.

PICTURES  
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In 1969, 1034 people were killed on Victoria's roads. In 2017, with almost double the population, there were 259 road deaths. A new book details how that grim statistic – 1034 fatalities – was a catalyst for sustained action

**B**ETWEEN 1960 and 1970, the number of road deaths in Australia was only 388 fewer than the total number of Australians killed during World War II.

Victoria's number of road deaths for 1969 — 1034 — became the clarion call for a campaign by *The Sun News Pictorial*, later applauded as "the most successful newspaper campaign of the 20th century". Spearheaded by editor Harry Gordon, the newspaper launched the campaign on November 13, 1970, with a blistering editorial:

*Declare War on 1034: Let's end this grim harvest of tragedy  
In the seven weeks between now and the end of 1970, 160 people are expected to die on Victorian roads. Most of these victims, the victims for whom there will be no New Year, are probably reading this newspaper this morning ... The Sun's Ten Thirty Four campaign is an attempt to jolt people, to set a personal challenge for every driver ... We can all do it, if we work hard at staying alive. After all, we don't have to behave like lemmings, intent on steady self-destruction. Or do we?*

The campaign ran daily until the end of the year. Graphic images and articles built upon the emotive theme of the editorial with in-depth descriptions of road trauma and passionate pleas regarding road safety. The newspaper was relentless. On Saturday, November 28, 1970, it predicted, challengingly:

*Some of Us Won't Live  
It will be a beautiful weekend  
... warm and sunny. Just the*



HARRY GORDON

*weekend to spend some time on the beach, to work on the garden, to take a picnic in the park. The most depressing feature about this weekend is that a number of us won't survive. Some people who are reading this probably will die on the roads before Monday morning. Last year during these last five weeks before December 31, there was a vintage harvest of death on Victoria's roads. In that time, 120 people died in car accidents. All of them thought, "It can't be me."*

Other features of the campaign included daily road toll updates comparing 1970 with the previous year; road safety tips, quizzes and warnings, including broadcast warnings after horse racing meetings; publication of readers' letters advancing suggestions for cutting the road toll; promotional posters distributed to 3500 members of the Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce, service stations, schools, shire councils, betting shops, public bars, and factories; medallions and cash awards given to drivers showing courtesy on the road and cash prizes for readers whose letters were published; and observed examples of bad driving, including not wearing seat belts.

Of all the arresting images in the 1034 campaign, the most emblematic was that of 1000 schoolchildren lying down in the main street of Red Cliffs, near Mildura, to represent the 1969 road toll.

The organisers had wanted 1034 to lie down, but ran out of children at 975.

Declare War on 1034 had its genesis three years earlier, in 1967, when the Victorian Parliamentary Road Safety Committee was established.

In 1969, the committee released its third report, an investigation into the desirability of the compulsory fitting and the compulsory

wearing of seat belts, which included a key recommendation: "The committee is convinced that no matter how much the public is exposed to education in the use of seat belts, apathy, lack of interest and lack of concern will mean that many people will not wear them. The committee therefore recommends that all occupants of motor vehicles should be required to wear seat belts within a maximum period of two years."

However, despite the committee being formed upon a foundation of political bipartisanship on road safety, and strong evidence from the US, Europe and the Snowy Scheme in Australia showing that wearing seatbelts would reduce road trauma casualties, the recommendation was initially met with political opposition, the main objection being that compulsory seatbelts infringed individual liberty.

Such opposition was met with sustained pressure from other politicians and the medical profession, who were intent on realising mandatory seat belt legislation.

The campaign had grown from the lone voice of a newspaper editor to a chorus of recognised community leaders. And it worked.

On December 2, 1970, the Legislative Assembly passed legislation making it compulsory for Victorians to use safety belts in cars in which they were fitted.

The law was to take effect from January 1 and the penalty for not wearing a seat belt was to be a \$20 fine. The Bill also made it compulsory for new and second-hand cars to be fitted with seat belts before they were sold.

On December 19, 1970, in a letter to *The Sun*, Brian Dixon, Liberal Member of Parliament and chair of the Road Safety Committee between 1969-70, reminded readers that wearing a seatbelt reduced the likelihood of injury by 50-80 per cent, depending on impact and speed.

The Motor Cars (Safety) Act 1970 passed through the Upper House on December 22.

On New Year's Day, 1971, Victoria became the first jurisdiction in the world to make wearing seat belts compulsory.

Declare War on 1034 was immediately successful in reducing the road toll. In November 1970, there were 67 road deaths, compared to 94 the previous November.

This was enough to bring down the national Australian road toll — even though November road deaths in New South Wales, Queensland,

Tasmania, South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory were higher than the previous year. The Victorian road toll for 1970 was 1077 — 56 less than the total projected by statisticians.

Surveys showed that following the introduction of the legislation and associated enforcement measures, the rate of seat belt wearing in Victoria rose from 25 per cent to 75 per cent by May 1971. Reductions in deaths, the severity of head, spinal, pelvic, chest, abdominal and other injuries from road traffic accidents, and the probability of being thrown from the vehicle in a road traffic accident, were reported in the ensuing years.

Notably, in 1979, through analysis of road accident fatalities and injury data from 1955-77, Frank McDermott and Douglas Hough showed that the 1970 compulsory seat belt legislation led to a significant reduction in driver and passenger fatality rates that was sustained for all seven post-legislation years.

Mandatory seat belt legislation was introduced in NSW in October 1971 and all other Australian states by January 1972. Data from other states following the introduction of mandatory seat belt laws were similar to Victoria's, demonstrating a 15-20 per cent reduction in occupant fatalities.

The success of the Victorian seat belt legislation had an international as well as national impact, with similar legislation adopted in many other countries. Victoria was noted in a United States report on the effectiveness of seat belt laws.

Even now, with airbags commonplace, the importance of the seat belt remains; airbags and seat belts both reduce the occupants' impact against objects within the car, but only the seat belt prevents ejection from the vehicle.

The Victorian Parliamentary Road Safety Committee ceased to exist on April 21, 2015,

when it merged with the Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee to become the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee. That it became redundant is perhaps most telling of what the committee achieved in its 48 years.

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