

Zoe Williams

With British law so in thrall to the motorist, our regular columnist suggests we need urgent change to afford better protection to cyclists



By temperament I prefer the upbeat topic, but it's hard not to be affected by the death of Gary Mason. The 48-year-old former boxer was killed in a crash with a van in Wallington. He was the first London cyclist of 2011 to be killed, and even though fatalities are going down (10 last year, 13 the year before, 15 in each of the two years before that), this isn't because cyclists are any better protected. The police tend to be overly happy to buy the explanation "I didn't see him/her"; often, even in the case of a cyclist being killed, it doesn't come to court.

When it does, the punishments are derisory. One driver killed a woman and, it turned out later, should not have been driving because he failed the eye test. He was fined £200. Another rider was killed by a van, whose driver's defence – "I was blinded by the sun" – was considered so unimpeachable that he wasn't even taken to court. It seems clear to me (and I don't think I'm being particularly original or Marxist here) that cyclists aren't treated fairly by the courts.

So anyway, I was invited onto BBC *Breakfast*, to put that case. My points, I intended to be rousing: do we want to live as nutters in individual metal boxes, hating each other? Or do we want to live as brothers and sisters, united in pedal rhythm? (I'm ripping off Tony Benn slightly, but who the hell is going to remember that? He said so much, like a left-wing Churchill, it would almost be rude not to rip him off).

Moment in the spotlight

I was going to say that the rules of the road, indeed, of the country, were written by the motorists because we have an innate British tendency to confuse being wealthy with being upstanding and socially responsible. Car drivers, having cars and paying tax, must be wealthier than cyclists, ergo, they must be more civically minded, and civilisation has a greater duty to them. Double whammy, they also have insurance, they have roadside assistance, so they have, over time, major institutions sitting there, waiting to lobby on their behalf.

We need to rip up these stupid rules (I was intending to say). We need to point out, and absolutely insist, that having money and being responsible are not the same thing at all, indeed, that the more closely you observe wealth and civic duty, the more often they seem to be at odds. We need to insist that every cycling hour improves the life of that cyclist, of the people who share his life (it puts you in a good mood, after all), of the people who share his city, of the people who share his country, of the people who share his planet. You can say a lot about motoring, but you cannot say that. It doesn't improve anybody's life, except conceivably if

you need to go to Ikea. Arguably, a bigger improvement would be wrought by never going to Ikea. No offence, Ikea.

That's what I was going to say. But I didn't have a plan to head the conversation off when it went in this direction, which was stupid, because this is the direction it always takes: why do cyclists shoot red lights? Why do we go the

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wrong way down one-way streets? Why won't we have licence plates? You hear conversations about road safety in which the motorists who break the speed limit are never mentioned, even though it is almost always they who kill people. And then you hear conversations about cyclists in which their tendency to shoot lights is hammered home to the exclusion of everything else. I'm amazed they even manage to cover the Tour de France without banging on about traffic regulations.

Ripping up the rulebook

This is motorists' myopia, almost a phobia: you say 'cyclist', and unless they cycle themselves, all they ever say is "wow, how dangerous!" and "do you ever stop at a red light?!" The only thing that can civilise this conversation is if we all behave as if we're all law-abiding. It will stick in our throats a bit: drivers are much more likely to be breaking a regulation than we are, if only because they all speed, all the time. But we've got to insist upon it, because as it stands, constantly having to answer the idiotic charge of being 'kamikaze', this is not getting us anywhere.

Gary Mason, in his career as a professional boxer, fought 38 fights and won 37 of them. He was only ever beaten by Lennox Lewis. And then he was felled by a white van. The strongest cyclist is weaker than the smallest car. If the law can't reflect that, can't protect us, what's it there for?

Zoe Williams is a freelance journalist and columnist who contributes regularly to publications including *The Guardian* and *New Statesman*.