

How did we revise the compulsory helmet law in Israel?

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31 August 2011 -- Adults bicycling on urban roads in Israel do not have to wear helmets anymore. The Israel Bicycle Association (IBA), an ECF member, battled to change the helmet law. Their persistence and innovative tactics led to victory.

The compulsory helmet law was legislated in 2007. Despite efforts to prevent the law from passing, its powerful initiator, MK (Member of Knesset, the Israeli Parliament) Gilad Erdan, overcame the opposition. IBA's activities included an "[underwear ride](#)", writing persuasive papers, creating a Facebook page and a dedicated [web site](#) against it. Although we failed to prevent the legislation, we immediately started a campaign for its cancellation.

In August 2011, after a long campaign, the law was revised. According to the revision, everybody has to wear a helmet excluding adults bicycling on urban roads. As a main target of IBA is to lower barriers to cycling, and since helmet laws can be a potential barrier for cyclists, this was a great success. *How did we achieve this success?*

Two Separate Battle Fields: The Political Arena and The Logic/Research/Statistics Arena

The decision makers for such a revision are the Members of Knesset . Although we were armed with good arguments for revising the compulsory helmet law, MK's rules of decision are complex and their interests affect their decisions, regardless of their true attitude towards public safety, public health and the compulsory helmet law.

The opposite could be said about our main "opponents". These were road safety NGOs who claim to be dedicated and interested in public road safety. We hoped that showing them updated academic research and empirical results from around the world, would persuade them to change their state of mind and help us in our efforts, or at least lesson their opposition. These NGOs, especially Or Yarok ("Green Light") and Beterem ("In advance"), are wealthy, powerful organizations and continued fighting the idea of revising the helmet law until the final hearing.

The Political Partners

Before going to battle, we tried to make friends within the establishment. The Ministry of Transportation and The National Road Safety Authority opposed changing the law. We talked them into supporting us. It took some time and effort (including organizing the first [soccer game](#) played with helmets, publishing pictures of celebrities riding with no helmets, writing comments on related news stories, etc.) to make them pay attention, but once convinced they became crucial and strategic supporters.

We had the good fortune that our cause drew the attention of two of the best legislators in the Knesset. MK Shelly Yekhimovich, who brought the revision to the Knesset on our behalf, is an enthusiastic urban bicyclist with a strong social-democratic agenda. MK Dov Khanin from the Khadash party is fighting for social justice. They both deeply understood the importance of revising the compulsory helmet law.

The Municipal Partner with Political Power

With our encouragement, Mr Huldai, Mayor of Tel Aviv city, made a strategic decision two years ago that *bicycles are a part of the solution, not a part of the problem*. One of his pro-bicycling projects was a bike-sharing scheme. The helmet law interfered with the project but nonetheless Mr Huldai was determined enough to launch the bike-share scheme a few months ago. Still, he felt that the law had to be revised so it will not become an obstacle to success, [as it has been in Melbourne, Australia](#).

The Logic/Research/Statistics Arena

Various activities were organised and academic papers written against the helmet law by several IBA volunteers. The first step I took myself was writing an email message with detailed arguments against a compulsory helmet law. It was addressed to our toughest opponents - the NGO "Or Yarok" and several neurologists who gave Or Yarok their "medical establishment" backup. Several long conversations with the neurologists were unsuccessful (Or Yarok officials refused to provide contact details for their CEO). This email message evolved to become an orderly, reasoned article: "[Reports: the helmet law might endanger bicyclists](#)," using arguments, numbers and graphs. This is the result of a global effort. We asked for and got support from many sources. The people and organizations that made the difference were: from Israel (Dr Daniel Mishori, Dr Shaul Katzir, Noam Sever, Prof Mayer Brezis, Yotam Avizohar and myself), from the European Cyclists' Federation (Dr Randy Rzewnicki, Dr Bernhard Ensink), from Denmark (Mikael Colville-Andersen of Copenhagenize), Francis Papon from National Transport Research, INRETS France, and from Australia (Prof Dorothy Robinson, Prof Chris Rissel and Chris Gillham).

Letters from those mentioned above were addressed to the Members of Knesset, which became an integral part of the data-backed article. Prior to the last meeting of the economics committee which was supposed to decide whether to pass the law to second and third (final) hearing, I wrote a shorter article titled "[Towards the hearing in the Knesset: a revision in the helmet law](#)" and a [list of arguments](#). The political advisors recommended not to make too much noise, so I refrained from sending the mentioned articles and letters in a wide distribution and did so only to a select number of MKs.

In addition to these main "battle fields", there is a third group of players - road and mountain cyclists who we communicated with. Many of them opposed our attitude as they always wear helmets during their cycling activities. Although they were not decision makers, we feel they are "a part of the family",

so it is important for us to convince this group that we are not against wearing a helmet but that we are against making it compulsory. We convinced many of them with our arguments, but many others are convinced that changing the law is a mistake and that wearing a helmet should be compulsory.

The Real Game - The Political Game

The political efforts were made by MK Shelly Yekhimovich, MK Dov Khanin, Mayor Ron Huldai, his personal assistant Amit Weinberg and the political advisor Moshe Bibi. On the day of the second and third hearing we came to Knesset to for a final lobbying effort to ensure a victory. Yotam Avizohar and I knocked on the doors of supporting MKs to make sure their attendance at the final hearing, and had several "cafeteria talks" with opponents.

We lost some supporters due to the late hour of the final hearing (3:00 AM) but at the last count we had 17 "Yes" votes and 2 "No". The revision in the compulsory helmet law was finally accepted. *Adults bicycling on urban roads do not have to wear helmets anymore.*

Final notes - Follow Our Steps

For those few countries with a compulsory helmet law (Australia, New Zealand) or with a risk of enactment of such law (U.K), we suggest you follow our steps - do not try to cancel the helmet law. Our advice to you is to change it so that adults bicycling on urban roads would not be enforced to wear helmets. This is the main obstacle as sports bicyclists and mountain bicyclists usually wear helmets regardless of a compulsory law.

Epilog

The long battle consumed many work hours from our volunteers. Yet during the process IBA received countrywide exposure and many decision makers from all levels were exposed to our activities. We created and strengthened our work relations with MKs, various Ministries and with the Mayor of Tel Aviv city. Israel Bicycle Association is positioned today in a much better place than before the battle began, and our views are respected. As a consequence we initiate policies and our voice is better heard. The law for cycling encouragement will hopefully be legislated in the next few months, *taking Israel to another level of promoting cycling culture.*

Note from the editor, Randy Rzewnicki, responsible for ECF Helmet Policy:

The sole responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the author. It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the European Cyclists' Federation.

The author has described their work as a series of battles. The use of this metaphor may interfere with preparations or considerations for the kind of work that the ECF does, which is advocacy and lobbying.