Death Of A ‘Dinosaur:’ Anti-Cycleway Campaigner John Forester Dies, Aged 90

“Elitist high-speed aggressive snob!” Cartoon poking fun at vehicular cyclists in “Regional Workshops on Bicycle Safety,” Department of Transportation, 1978. The cyclist with the helmet—“That, sir, is useless . . .”—is almost certainly meant to be John Forester. DOT, 1978

Anti-cycleway campaigner John Forester has died at the age of 90 in his adopted home state of California. Forester, called a “dinosaur” by Streetsblog last year, was one of the leading lights of the “vehicular cycling” method of cycling and had been a vocal critic of Dutch-style cycleways since the early 1970s.

Forester was the son of English writer C. S. Forester, author of *The African Queen* and the Horatio Hornblower novels, and without whom there might never have been any Gremlins or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Cecil Scott Forester encouraged British air ace and later intelligence officer Roald Dahl to become an author). Forester Jr. was born in England in 1929 and became an American citizen in 1951.

Famously abrasive, inflexible, and supercilious, Forester Jnr couldn't "argue without being rude," his father wrote of his then-nineteen-year-old son.

Forester was a keen reader of G. H. Stancer, the obstreperous secretary of Britain's Cyclists' Touring Club, who had opposed mandatory use of Dutch-style "cycle tracks" built by the Ministry of Transport in the 1930s, some of which were of poor quality.

Opposition to the supposedly mandatory aspect of an early 1970s cycleway system in Palo Alto, California, led Forester to deliberately ride on the road in front of a police officer, seeking to be fined for not riding on the shared-use path. This sanction catapulted Forester into the world of bicycle advocacy. A month after his one-man protest on Middlefield Road he started his long, self-appointed career as savior of cyclists' road rights by penning a February 1973 article for a Californian bicycle magazine.

Despite never having ridden on any cycleways in the Netherlands, Forester was heavily critical of Dutch cycleways, stating them to be dangerous for cyclists.

In the early 1970s, Californian cities such as Palo Alto and Davis started building Dutch-style kerb-protected cycleways, and Forester—a resident of Palo Alto—was an early and lifelong opponent of the concept. He, and other cycle enthusiasts of the time, feared that the provision of cycleways (Forester called them "bikeways") would mean compulsion to use such amenities, slowing cyclists, and thereby killing off transportation cycling, which, in the U.S. at the time, was the reserve of mostly young men for whom riding among cars carried little fear.

Forester advocated for what became known as "vehicular cycling," a method of riding with motor traffic. From 1974 onwards he promoted and sold a vehicular-cycling teaching course . (*Effective Cycling*, as it became known, is still in print, published by MIT and is now in its seventh edition.)

Forester did not invent vehicular cycling: it had been the idea of CalTrans traffic engineer Harold Munn who argued that those people attracted to cycling thanks to the American bicycle boom of the early 1970s should ride assertively in the street rather than in the gutter.

Vehicular cyclists—or, as they are sometimes known, usually disparagingly, "VCers"—believe in "claiming the lane." That is, the best way to be noticed by a motorist is to ride in the center of a lane, blocking it like a motor vehicle.

Forester believed motorists thought they had a divine right to the whole road, which he called the Motorists' Superiority Phobia. Those infused with this disorder didn't want cyclists on the road at all, but rather to be siphoned off on to sidewalks or cycleways.

“These people wouldn’t succeed if they said openly that they wanted cyclists cleared off the roads,” wrote Forester.

“They have got as far as they have only because they are able to use arguments that mislead the public into thinking they are pro-cyclist.”

Non-proficient cyclists were afflicted with the opposite, believed Forester: the Cyclists’ Inferiority Phobia.

1970s-era cycleway in Oxnard, California. See: https://goo.gl/maps/sSJzgXCuuAL2 GOOGLE STREET VIEW

Cycleways were no solution because the majority of crashes happened at junctions, not on “straight-on” roads, he believed, arguing that he had “completely demolished the logical foundations for the bikeway propaganda.”

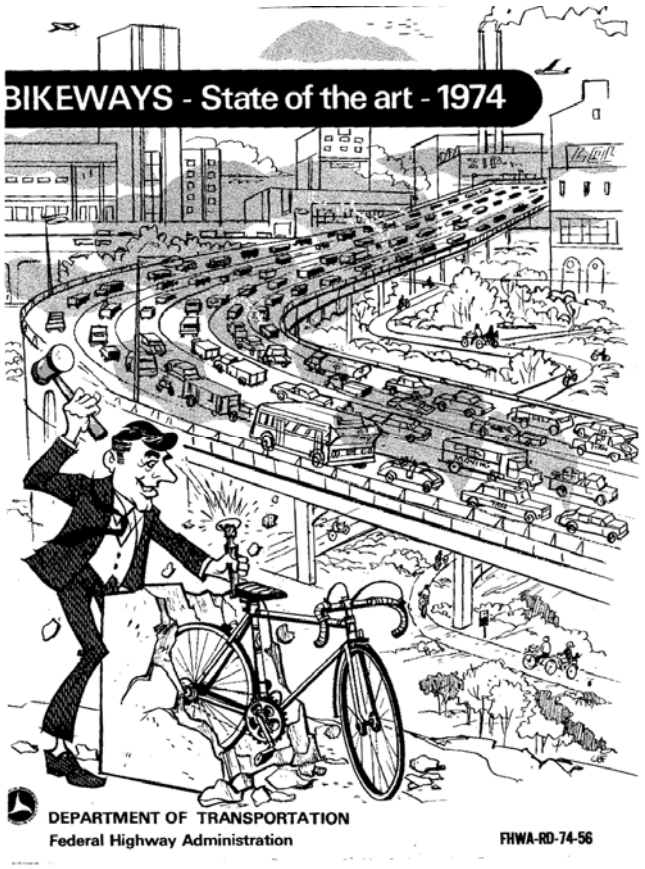
He argued that “there is no argument for bikeways that has not been refuted ... because effective cycling is so right, and cycling in the bikeway manner is so wrong.”

Schismatic Cycling

Forester was a suburbanite, with no interest in getting more people on bikes. For him, cycling was a “minority activity and I didn’t expect it to be any more than that because I knew the difficulty. It was real fun, but on the other hand it had its costs, time and social opprobrium and such.”

This elitism put Forester, and some of the other hardcore VCers, at loggerheads with those who wanted to see more “bums on saddles,” such as the bicycle industry and most bicycle advocates.

Former transportation planner and bicycle historian Bruce Epperson calls this parting of the ways “the Great Schism,” and it’s still very much alive, with cycleways proponents saying the only way to grow cycling is to provide separated cycleways, and some right-to-the-roaders being opposed to any and all supposedly sidelining cycle infrastructure.



U.S. Department of Transportation study, "Bikeways: State of the Art," 1974. DOT

Many modern cycle advocates claim that Forester and the other VCers were highly influential, that they stopped the progression of the U.S. “bikeways” movement, and even that they “have blood on their hands” because they gave officials the excuse they needed not to spend on cycling infrastructure.

According to U.S. academic John Pucher, “the most far-reaching impact of Forester’s philosophy was getting an effective ban on separated paths written into the *AASHTO Guide for the Development of Bicycling Facilities* [which] was changed to denounce separated path treatments.”

Forester didn’t believe he had the impact others claim for him. In a 2015 Skype interview, I asked him whether he stopped the building of any cycleways? “Not really,” he replied.

But did he at least put a stick in their spokes?

“Yes.”

He added: “People assert that vehicular cycling is why local government didn’t install bike paths. That’s not true. Every election cycle since then there has been more money put into bikeways. They’ve been built, at a slow rate, but they’ve been built. You can’t stop ’em.”

Cyclists on a cycleway in Nijmegan, Netherlands. CARLTON REID

Despite the copious evidence that the separation of transport modes can and does improve safety for cyclists, and encourages more people to cycle, Forester remained adamant that providing cycleways was a retrograde step for the health of cycling. He remained dismissive of what the Netherlands might be able to teach other countries.

“I have read so much damn propaganda about bikeways of one kind or another, [but] it’s no basis for knowledge,” he told me.

“The fact is, in America, fear obscures all real knowledge about bicycle and traffic engineering.”

He wrote that the “Dutch produced a very dangerous bikeway system, compared to cycling on the road, but they overcompensated for those dangers by installing protective measures that make it extremely inconvenient compared to cycling on the road.”

As Pucher and many others have asked, “If the measures used to make Dutch bikeways safe are so inconvenient, why do so many people use them?” (Cycle use in the Netherlands is famously high.)

Forester had no answer for that, other than to assert that Dutch cycleways often take the long way around, and so they are, he claimed, an inconvenience for cyclists and not, as most people see them, a boon.

(In fact, convenience is now baked into Dutch cycling infrastructure design standards—for instance, Utrecht’s transport plan sets out a *minimum* average speed target for cyclists.)

In one of his final interviews, Forester told U.S. journalist Peter Flax last year that he believed it had been his “task is to keep alive the right, legally and socially, to obey the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles. That’s our fight; it’s been our fight for a long time.”

Flax wrote that there was “probably no individual in American history [who] has had a greater impact on how US cyclists experience riding on the road” than Forester. Though he disagreed with his views on

cycleways, Flax added that he “came away with some respect for how [Forester has] spent decades fighting for the rights of cyclists based on his own life experiences.”

Forester believed cycleway provision to be an evil: “If you don’t fight the government, you’re going to lose your right to ride on the roads,” he argued.

“You got to keep defending that right against the impulses of both the environmentalists—bike advocates—and, of course, motordom. But it takes courage to oppose society when you know what you’re doing is right.”

John Forester, born in Dulwich, England, October 7, 1929; died in San Diego, California, April 14, 2020.