

Opinion

THE PRESS

Silence!

Christchurch Central MP Tim Barnett has landed a timely hurry-up on the dilatory backside of the Christchurch City Council. After years of unkept promises to halt the plague of boy racers, he has told the council to act decisively. Thousands of citizens will agree.

They are fed up with the explosive exhausts, roaring engines and dangerous driving that pollute the tranquillity of their suburbs and make the central city almost a no-go zone. They must also be fed up with a Government slow to legislate against the hoons and a city council unwilling to use its full powers to lessen their right of way.

The council's transfixed-in-the-headlights stand is typified by its unwillingness to make Cathedral Square off limits to hoons' modified cars. For at least six years, Mayor Garry Moore has been told that the Square is severely affected — pedestrians are threatened and tourists are disturbed by speeding cars — yet in that time the mayor has been unable to get a ban through the council and thereby has failed to tackle one of the city heart's worst problems. This from a council that has spent millions of dollars on redeveloping the Square and that has the central city's revitalisation as one of the main topics on its agenda.

A Square ban would not end the reign of hoons elsewhere in Christchurch — a point the mayor uses in his defence. But it would not necessarily worsen the plight of the suburbs already affected, and might lessen it.

A ban would set a standard, would send a message to the hoons that their community deplored their behaviour. The experience of civic standard-setting overseas is that the antisocials are pressured to improve their behaviour, but here little such pressure exists, other than from an overstretched police force doing its best to mount spot controls. The council's endless committee meetings are no more effective than a pin prick in a low-profile cruiser's tyre.

The council does have a stronger defence for its inaction in its assertion that street bans and tougher spot policing are not the answer. Truly the answer does lie with the Government

because the problem of boy racers is nationwide, and only nationwide restrictions on noise levels and registration and harsher penalties, such as the prolonged loss of driver's licence, will end it.

The Government, in the form of petrol-head Harry Dynhoven, Minister of Transport Safety, has been slow to act. After years of public concern, he is only now establishing a system of objective noise tests for exhausts, and Parliament has only recently given the police greater powers to impound vehicles and impose heavier penalties.

The probability is that these measures will be only partially effective. The police do not have the resources for the saturation supervision of boy racers' favourite drags or to effectively monitor chronic offenders. Neither will the objective noise testing of car exhausts work, because it is in fact largely unobjective; warranting stations will have the power to require a car to be tested by a noise-measuring device if they think it exceeds permissible levels; this will lead to wide discrepancies between warranting shops, and leave many noisy cars on the road.

That is a crucial fault, because it does not effectively tackle the main complaint against boy racers — noise. Their speeding kills sometimes and it is terrifying to be caught up in, but the noise of their exhausts is a constant accompaniment to their presence and invariably disturbing to everyone within earshot. Substantially cut that hubbub, and you substantially cut the impact of boy racers. In the process, you cut one of their main motivations — the desire to draw attention to themselves.

That New Zealand still has not got effective controls on car exhausts is not entirely the fault of the Government. The fact is that, unlike most developed countries, we are lax about noise pollution of all sorts, and show patchy enthusiasm for doing better. Just try to get your council to close down a noisy party, hush a barking dog, or agree that 9pm is after hours for the neighbourhood chainsaw. But perhaps New Zealanders' growing objection to roaring cars will lead to a new age of quiet.

Put a cork in it

Motoring editor PETER GILL farewelled us at Christmas having declared himself the Christmas grinch. But the holidays have not improved his mood

The people of New Zealand should not be required to go another year suffering one of the worst environmental sins to afflict this nation and one of the most unrecognised and ignored by the government. It invades the lives of the good burghers of our towns, cities, villages, hamlets and resorts. It appeared to peak over the holiday break this summer, and affected the holiday enjoyment of hundreds of thousands of Kiwis.

I have not seen it manifested to such a degree before. But for several years now, it has split the air and the environmental ambient peace of New Zealand.

It is the phenomenon of the massive and noisy exhaust pipe. To have one fitted is the first rite of passage of a genre that has come to be called "boy racers." I prefer the term child racers, because the female gender is represented among them and they are generally very young.

It starts like this. Teenager acquires a small to medium-sized Japanese car, usually a used import. The car is immediately taken to an exhaust shop, where the standard muffler and tailpipe are replaced. Because what is wanted is noise.

The new tailpipe will have the diameter of a railway tunnel. And it will produce noise levels that can be heard across three suburbs - five if it's 2am and the weather conditions are calm.

The noise level is up to 20 times more than is needed for a four-cylinder engine to function. The noise is the drug. Like a party upper, it induces the need to drive at unconscionable speeds and the desire to out-noise everyone else.

For many the noise is enough. But for some, the noise produces the need to go further. To fit blowoff valves to the engine that facilitate scorching take-offs. And to lower the car's suspension to the point where it is dangerous. Some are happy with just the noise bit and do not go on to make further modifications. But many do.

With the noise acting as a narcotic, there comes the urge to race. The results of such racing have proven tragic time and again in the past two years. It is not a clandestine pursuit either. I am a frequent user of Auckland's Northwestern Motorway, where racers now desport themselves with impunity.

It sticks in my craw that I am constantly being stopped at WOF and rego checkpoints staffed by up to eight police officers, yet child racers appear to have been handed my motorway as a race-track.

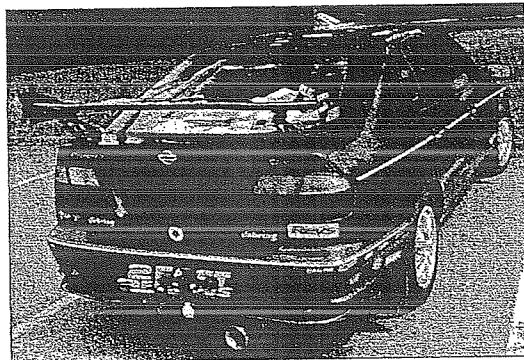
Even the constable in Coromandel township, where Anne and I were holidaying, strolled out of his little Noddy station on to the road outside for a couple of hours on Christmas Eve and languidly waved down vehicles entering the town,

looked at their rego and WOF and, if all was tickety-boo, waved them on, including us. That goes down on the tally of "driver contacts" and is thus a credit towards the pay cheque that the police get from Land Transport New Zealand.

But when a cochlea-splitting child racer vehicle came through, so low to the road that when it went over a bump it created sparks, what could he do? Because the vehicle was ambling through the town in a traffic crawl, it was no more than burbling.

If the driver was properly licensed and the vehicle was registered and warranted, the constable could do nothing but let the vehicle through.

For to prove the car was unsafely modified, he would have needed highly specialist police who were qualified and experienced to determine whether the vehicle was safe. His chances of getting such a team to support him in Coromandel on Christmas Eve were zip.



THE PIPES ARE APPALLING: New Zealand has no standard for determining whether a car is too loud

And the car's loudness? Well that didn't manifest itself until later, far off down the road, where and when the traffic was clear enough for the car to be revved.

There is no standard the officer could reasonably apply even if he did get to hear the car in full throat, for there is no maximum number of decibels prescribed that the vehicle may produce.

Even if there was, the officer would need a piece of equipment to do the measuring.

Later, when the traffic cleared a bit, the noise began. And went on all night.

In amendments to traffic legislation passed last year that came into force this week, there was a lame duck concession to the exhaust pipe problem. The \$200 fine for creating excessive noise with a vehicle went up by \$50. And 10 demerit points can be issued.

But the police have their hands tied on this. If everyone defends these actions, how can the police prove to the judge that the noise emission was excessive when there is no standard to define how much noise is too much?

"Weren't you young once?" I hear you ask. Yes. And I loved cars then as I still do today. I enjoy seeing people of all ages

enjoying cars and driving.

But today, the enjoyment of one child driver and his or her passengers equates to the invasion of the peace and comfort of thousands.

Apart from the occasional cackling V8, that sort of stuff did not happen in my salad days in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Most of our cars were properly and decently muffled. Racing on public roads was rare. We did it in paddocks and at hill climb venues - usually with standard exhausts.

A sterling start towards addressing the problem would be a noise limit on exhaust systems, carried out at the WOF check. Currently, there is no requirement for WOF inspection facilities to have a machine that listens to the exhaust noise and makes a decision based on prescribed standards in terms of decibels produced at certain rpm levels. There should be.

Yes, it might cost the WOF station money to buy one. So be it. It could put up the inspection charge from the standard \$35 to \$40 to finance it. The extra \$5 would be a small investment for me to expunge the problem of excessively noisy exhausts.

At Whangamata, during our swing through Coromandel, we saw a Mazda B2000 ute, of about 1990 vintage, that had been lowered so much that as it drove through town, it grounded on every bump, sending up a shower of sparks that no welder could better. It was one of what seemed like a thousand threatening vehicles amassing for New Year.

Some of these vehicles were very creative and there was the thread of a certain art form to be seen. There was even humour. A child racer vehicle had been decked up like a police cruiser, complete with mock flashing lights. A huge sign on it beamed "Muff Patrol."

But none of this excuses the noise and the unsafe vehicles with which we must share our roads.

We cannot simply take all this away from the child racers in one fell swoop. It has not been illegal for them to install these racing pipes and so they have invested much of their teenage earnings into it. It would be unjust to take all that from them at the stroke of midnight.

And, yes, it has become a form of expression for them. It would be more acceptable and just if the government imposed a descending scale of decibel rates over a period of two years or four warrant inspections.

But something must be initiated soon. For this phenomenon is ruining the lives of mature New Zealanders and could and should become the next major election issue. Another year of inaction on the introduction of a decibel test will be too much.