



interview

with Andrew Forsyth

Talking the walk

Brighton campaigner puts best foot forward

Touted as Australia's first "walking consultant", Dr John Grant is the man behind numerous campaigns and projects to improve the walkability of our communities.

His current pet project is organising a month of events promoting walking. "Walktober" has been developed by Kinect Australia in collaboration with Vic Health, with the aim of spreading the message: "Walking changes your world."

The Brighton resident is very driven about making our communities more walkable. He is a serious campaigner who comes across as astute and charismatic and is rarely seen at the bowser. "I think I fill the car up once every six to eight weeks," he says with pride.

His secret is keeping things local. He shakes his head about society's reliance on cars when most trips could be tackled on foot.

"It's been thought of before," Grant says. "You can go back to 400AD when Saint Augustine coined the phrase *solvitur ambulando*: it is solved through walking."

He says that once people are asked to think about walking "it probably takes you three to five minutes to convince them it's a wonderful thing to do."

"There is no downside to walking. That's what's nice about it," he says with a smile.

Grant sees politicians as speed humps to making communities more walkable.

"When you look at the policy documents they say walking is important, but when you look at the spending they are loath to put money in," he says. "Even John Howard walks for fitness, but if you asked him to put money into walking he would look at you sideways because he'd rather spend it on the roads."

Grant is used to dealing with politicians. He has been a public servant and a consultant for numerous governmental projects over the

last 20 years. And he makes for a good politician, with his well-versed public speaking and ability to reel off facts.

Grant was raised in Portsmouth, England and completed university in Manchester in the 1960s. He ended up in Canada for some years and was lured to Australia by a government position. Arriving on Melbourne Cup Day in 1975, sipping champagne with his new colleagues he thought he was in a good place. Within two weeks he lost his job, but found there were plenty of others in consulting for Melbourne councils and organisations.

Grant has been instrumental in making Bayside's streets safer for pedestrians. Many zebra crossings are the result of his canvassing. Another of his targets was the vehicles taking children to school. "They would roll up in the four-wheel-drives and then rush off to go the gymnasium," he says.

Grant is incensed at some councils' approach to pedestrians. On seeing "Give Way to Vehicles" stencilled on the footpath he advised people to "get a chisel and get rid of it". He is also baffled by beautiful parks cordoned off from the public by dangerous intersections and roundabouts.

He reflects on a few more obstacles to a good walk: "Inadequate toilet facilities, park benches without arm rests that make it hard for the elderly to push up from, and the lack of shading trees in parks. It's not astrophysics, it is attention to detail."

Grant believes politicians should be less afraid. He suggests they divert energy to improving walking facilities. "For the price of about three to four kilometres of Eastlink you could make the whole of Melbourne so much more walkable," he says.

There are a range of activities happening next month as part of Walktober. For more details, visit: www.walktober.com.au. **mwb**



Name Dr John Grant
Lives Brighton
Family Wife Helen, two daughters and Jack Russell terrier
Favourite scenic walk Brighton foreshore
Favourite city for walking Zurich
Most inspirational person Ian Kiernan for his "Clean up Australia" campaign
Current project Conference organiser of "Melbourne Walk 21"

