Transcript for *influencers!* Episode 10: Stephen Hodge

Phil Latz: Inside Australia's Federal Parliament, our elected members decide how to spend an annual budget that now exceeds half a trillion dollars that also enact laws and make policy decisions that affect every aspect of our lives, including how we move around. There's only one professional lobbyist inside these corridors of power whose role is to advocate for cycling, but fortunately, what the cycling community lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality as that sole lobbyist is my next guest, Stephen Hodge.

Stephen Hodge, thanks for coming on influencers!

Stephen Hodge: Pleasure, Phil.

Phil: Right. Well, we'll start with three unusual things about you, and notice I said unusual and not weird, okay? Firstly, you live in Canberra. Okay, a few hundred thousand other people do that, but I believe you were actually born and bred there, correct?

Stephen: Wrong.

Phil: Wrong.

Stephen: I was born in Adelaide, Phil.

Phil: Oh.

Stephen: Like you, I believe and-

Phil: Wrong, I was born in Port Macquarie.

Stephen: You weren't, okay?

Phil: We're even? Okay.

Stephen: I did grow up here from the age of about mid-primary school, so from 9 or 10, I think, we moved here when I was 9 or 10. I basically been here ever since, apart from my stint in Europe, for 13 years.

Phil: Okay, so that we're talking late 60s then, it was a very small town back then. What was it like growing up in Canberra and how far do your family's Canberra roots go back? Why did you move

there? What was the story?

Stephen: Oh, parents' occupations. Father's occupation came to work for the department of health, but look, I presume it was pretty small back then. I remember walking up Hills and looking over the hill into farmland, which is now, of course, the Tougong Valley or something like that. Canberra was a lot smaller. The whole of Tougong Valley, the whole of Gungahlin, a lot of Belconnen has all been built since we moved here, so yes. No, it's been a while.

Phil: Indeed, and the second slightly unusual thing, once again, not weird, but very unusual really, you were a professional cyclist but you first completed a science degree at ANU and most professional cyclists left school young and started young. How did that come about?

Stephen: Yes, that's interesting in a way, I guess. At school, I used to ride in early high school, even quite long distances to school on a 10-speed, and I started cycle touring with a group when I was in my final two years of school at Phillip College in Woden, so I think I was probably already developing that endurance that I'd need later on in my cycling career, and it wasn't until I went to my first year of a science degree at ANU that I actually did my very first bike race.

I was first-year uni, one of my friends said, "Hey, Stephen, you should come along. It's really fun." I went along, probably in stubbies and shorts and sandshoes, and rode my first race and came second. They put me into a junior category, even though I was just over and I won my second race. I was hooked and that's how I started cycling competitively.

Phil: There you go. It was really a late start for a pro.

Stephen: Yes, I was 17 or 18.

Phil: The third unusual thing is you're a dinky-di Aussie, so to speak, as we can hear, but you speak six languages where most of us, like me, can only speak a bastardized form of English. Where did your love of language come from?

Stephen: I don't think we could honestly say I speak six languages, but at school, I learned some Japanese and that was actually even a little bit useful later in life. I learned French at school and then when I went overseas to live and cycle, I lived in a German-speaking part of Switzerland in the beginning, in my first year. I was working, doing half-day work, and cycling the other half days as an amateur. I had to speak German. They didn't speak any English, but that was a Swiss German dialect. It was actually quite different to German, but I used to babysit for a family in the village where I lived and the mother used to give me German lessons in return for babysitting

and so I learned some German enough to get by.

Then the next year, I moved to the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and so then all the French that I'd learned at school actually was quite useful, even though I couldn't speak it anymore, but I learned that very quickly. Then I turned pro three years later and I rode for Spanish teams. Then I had to learn Spanish if I wanted to be properly integrated into the team. We've got German, French, and Spanish, and a bit of Japanese, and then, of course, as a cyclist, you cycle in Italy and Holland and Belgium, so you learn all the bad words first, but yes, so a lot of fun with languages and I do love speaking other languages. I think French and Spanish is quite good.

German is pretty poor and a few words of Japanese that help avoid me getting lost when I went to the world championships in 1990 in Utsunomiya, 100 kilometers from Tokyo. There you have it. I think that's probably as much as we can claim [chuckles] on the language claim.

Phil: I think there might be a bit of Italian in there, too, from memory.

Stephen: Oh, sure. A few words, always, always.

Phil: [chuckles] Okay. You're best known now for your cycling advocacy work, which we'll get to in a minute, but a lot of people watching this might not realize just how successful you were as a professional cyclist. Could you please just give an overview of some of the best events you rode and experiences you had during that long career?

Stephen: All right, I guess we start at the top. I rode 10 world championships for Australia. I rode one Commonwealth Games in '86 and won Olympics in '96. Commonwealth Games road race, I was sixth. I was one of the favorites, but it sort of got messed up a bit, and I missed out on a better result, best result in the world championships, world professional titles in Stuttgart of eighth. In the amateur worlds, I think best result was 23rd in Italy.

I rode 14 Grand Tours, so tours of France, Spain, and Italy, best result, maybe 19th in Italy, 34th in the tour of France winning team in tour of Italy. I did six Tour de Frances, four tours of Italy, four tours of Spain, and I finished them all. I think, for me, that's something I'm mentally proud of that I actually did not pull out of any major tour that I rode. Since then, of course, we've had a lot of fantastic Australian riders do a lot more than I did. I won, I think, 21 races over my career, which is not many, but there are some that were really great, and I just had an unbelievably fantastic time.

Phil: There must have been one or two of those Grand Tours where you had a bad fall or sickness. You don't write all those Grand Tours, which are for those who aren't familiar generally 21 days of

racing +3,000 kilometers without having some mishap somewhere along the way. What was say the closest to thinking, "Gee, I just can't finish this"?

Stephen: Very quick story, but it requires me telling you about the last three stages of the Tour of Spain where we were battling for the lead with Alex Zülle, trying to win the Tour of Spain. I had a virus in the last week and I was really flat. I just could hardly get out of bed. I was exhausted. The third last stage was quite difficult and it had some flat, and then one big climb, and then rolling. It finished up a 6 or 8-kilometer climb. My team director knew I was pretty cactus, and he said, "Look, just try and get in the break. Just do what you can, see if you can represent the team."

I got in the breakaway and we had a minute lead at the foot of this big climb in the middle of the race. I immediately, of course, got pumped out the hoop, got dropped,-

Phil: [laughs].

Stephen: -and on this 15-kilometer climb by halfway up, I'd lost so much time that all the leading guns were steaming past me, and I was just trying to make it to the top. By the top, the very last riders in the tour, we call 'em the fat asses riders, the sprinters in the bus, they caught me, and I just managed to hang on to Jean-Paul van Poppel, who's a friend of mine, and some of the other sprinters who were on their own in little sprinter pack. I kept with them, we got to the last climb to the finish. Of course, I got dropped. The only time in my life I finished alone in front of the broom wagon, that's the one that collects all the riders who do pull out. I finished and I was just dead, totally dead. I said to my director, Manolo, "I really think for my own health, I shouldn't start."

He said, "Oh, just see how you go." The next day was the longest stage of the [unintelligible 00:10:57], so it was 230 or 250 kilometers. I yo-yoed all day. Thank goodness it was rolling and not too hard. I yo-yoed all day. All the other guys in the team, they knew how much I was struggling. The mere fact that I didn't pull out, I think really gave them something extra. They go, "If Hodge's struggling and just coming back, coming back, dropped, coming back, we can do what we need to do for, to try and get Alex Zülle up for the win." The last stage, it was the year of Santiago, so it was one of those holy years into of the Camino. We finished at Santiago de Compostela, the Saint James way. It was one of the holy years that they had.

Anyway, we finished there, and it was a time trial. Thank goodness, it was a time trial, and you can get through a time trial, even if you're not going too fast because you have a much larger margin that you're allowed to finish behind the winner of 25%. I finished that Tour of Spain, I was not in great shape. Each time you have to dig that deep just to get through, the next time you

get to that low point, you are that much stronger. Again, for the next time, so each time you have to dig deeper, you know you can go that deep, and so next time you get there, you can go even deeper. It's one of those weird things with elite sport or elite effort or whatever it is or personal circumstances where you get in a strength from getting through those things.

Phil: People probably don't realize how hard professional racing is and how much you have to suffer. Do you think that translates into your career now and other professional life that ex-professional athletes do, do you think it's of value or not?

Stephen: It's a relief not to have to try that hard, [unintelligible 00:12:59]. Oh, look, yes, it does give you an innate sense of confidence that you can get through difficult things, I guess. There is something about that endeavor and it comes from not only from sport, it comes from many different areas. I think it's something special that I'm very privileged in a way to have been able to do through my physiology, my physics, where I was in life at the time allowed me to go off to Europe, really, with no idea what I was going to do. I went to Europe as an amateur, came back as a pro, and suddenly, all these Australian riders who saw me leave in a round salad bowl, helmet and studies, and come back as a high performing pro cyclist, all thought, "Oh, if Hodge can do it, we can do it."

[unintelligible 00:14:02], I guess, they went over there not realizing how many years I struggled and got smashed on the cobbles or had to eat shit, dirt road, mud in my mouth, and had to do all these hard things. I've got friends who have been to the cobbles. They reach down and they kiss the cobbles, and say, "Hodge, we had no idea." There was a 13-year career there. Yes, you see the great bits on TV when I'm leading shallow bear into the foot of the Poggio in the final of the Milan-San Remo but you don't see everything else that goes on. This is the same whatever sector you're in, that all the hard work often isn't visible, but all the great stuff is, which is fine by me.

Phil: Let's talk about the transition, many cyclists find it hard to make the transition to normal life after their pro career ends. How was the transition for you?

Stephen: A couple of things, I think, are important. One, obviously, I had a completed science degree, so I'm actually Stephen Hodge, BSC, Bachelor of Science before I went cycling. Those skills and that training stood me an enormously good stead for being critical with information, putting together arguments, and so on. I came back, set up a consulting business with my wife who was the high flying executive when we got married.

I took her over to Europe and she worked, but we came back, we set up our own business. The thing that I did do that I think was really important is I decided to put a bit back. I got onto the

board of Cycling Australia. I was on there for many years. I think I contributed significantly over quite a few years, but I got very interested in that time in the bigger picture around people using bikes every day for transport, for health, and so on.

I'd been working in the sport governance area, but then I had this side interest that developed and developed, and I started doing some ad hoc work with the advocacy group, the Cycling Promotion Fund run by Rosemary [unintelligible 00:16:28] at the time, that you know very well because you're one of the foundation founders of the Cycling Promotion Fund from the industry. Then there was an opportunity where clearly there was a vacuum federally for advocacy for cycling. People were doing stuff in the states, but no one representing cycling from the very top. That's when the CPF said, "We're going to set up a federal government relations program," and I really wanted to be contracted to do that.

Phil: You've been in that role for 14 years now, as best I can remember.

Stephen: Is it 14?

Phil: It is. That's a long time in any role, especially one so challenging. What motivates you to keep going?

Stephen: What gets me up in the morning is this: I do other contracts outside, cycling through my consulting business. This is really what gets me up in the morning. We have a chance to make Australia a healthier place where children can walk and ride to school like they used to, most are driven now. We have a chance to really influence the transition to a low carbon future cycling nationally more than, or half of all trips for all purposes every day in the country are five Ks or less. Now, that's a distance that's quite easily done by cycling, shorter trips by walking and public transport. There's this enormous opportunity sitting right at our feet.

There are a lot of barriers to activate that opportunity. Currently, we have about 1% to 1.5% only of all trips are done by bike each day, those short trips. In places like Melbourne, 41% of all trips in greater Melbourne are only 3 kilometers or less. Now, this is a distance that takes you 10 minutes of easy cycling. What gets me up every day is an opportunity to change minds and hearts and influence policy, get more investment for infrastructure for programs for kids to ride to school for making cycling mainstream in our thinking about how we get around.

Phil: You just mentioned influencing policy and your workplace for a lot of the time is the federal parliament. I know that you have access and respect from federal MPs and senators that many other lobbyists even, dare I say, much more well-paid and in larger, more powerful industries will

only dream of. How have you gone about maintaining and building these relationships?

Stephen: Even before I started actually being paid to make a difference for cycling, I actually was running a parliamentary cycling group. I turn up once a week and I've done it for 15 or 16 years. I turn up once a week on a Wednesday, and any, or all of the people working in the house, whether they're MPs, senators, staffers, can come out for a bike ride. We go for one hour, we finish with a coffee, and then they go back to 10, 12, 16 hours in the house enclosed. It's a really privileged moment for the MPs that love cycling because it's something that gets them out of the house and allows them to do something in Canberra, which is a lovely place to ride.

Why I've been able to get to where I've got within with these relationships in parliament is partly because of that investment over many years and it builds relationships that are based on more than just simply lobbying interest. We're doing something that they enjoy and that's something that I've invested of my time, but it gives me a chance to then open doors that are often very hard to open. While Dave Sharma was instrumental in getting the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg to launch our Australian Cycling Economy Report in October last year which Osher Gunsberg on our board headlined. I actually just texted Josh, and I said, "Hey, Josh, we're launching this report right up your alley, and be great. I hope you can respond positively to Dave's invitation to launch it."

He came back and said, "Oh, Hodge, that sounds interesting." Right away then, I knew I had his attention, and he came out and he launched it for us in a live telecast from parliament when the whole place was locked down, we'd managed to get all our cameras in there be allowed to work in parliament under the strict quarantine conditions, but we got it done. That's just probably one of the best examples of all of these years of effort, how it pays off.

Phil: Is Dave Sharma and/or Josh Frydenberg regulars or occasionals on the Riders of the Hill, as you call it, group?

Stephen: Dave Sharma is the best cyclist in parliament, [crosstalk] by Angus Taylor. Josh has been on the Pollie Pedal, which is the weeklong charity fundraising ride that was organized by Tony Abbott, taken over by Angus Taylor. Josh has been on that. I actually spent the first day of one year's ride helping him, shall we say, up most of the big hills because he wasn't terribly fit, and then my wife, Adrian, came and picked me up because I just did the first day and then I went back later, but picked Josh up too. We drove him back to his accommodation in Canberra and he bought me a bottle of Moët to say, "Thanks for all the pushing up the hill."

These are the things that money can't buy. These are personal investments that have paid off. Susan Lee and Tony Abbott were both nobodies when I started the cycling group. Tony became

minister for health and then he was prime minister. Susan Lee was a backbencher and an early rider with us on the Riders on the Hill. She became minister for health. This is one of our key portfolios of interest. Now, she's energy minister.

You just never know. These investments in a very pleasant context pay off down the track, but it's the investment of more than a decade, thanks to, first, the Cycling Promotion Fund and now all the members that have come with us to We Ride Australia, which is an independent charitable governance structure. It's that investment that pays off but it takes years, sometimes. You just never know.

Phil: Okay. You've talked about payoff. Would you like to, and you've mentioned the Australian Cycling Economy Report, which has been very well received and very influential, but would you like to mention any other wins over the years that have been particularly sweet for you?

Stephen: Sometimes, it gets really hard to keep your spirits up because infrastructure and investment is delivered by state and local government. They're extremely important. Some of the wins are that we've taken senior bureaucrats overseas to look at how cycling infrastructure and policy is done in the Netherlands, but also in North America. We know for a fact that the senior bureaucrat from WA that we took told us that WA moved ahead by at least three years in outcomes for cycling and investment because of what he was able to bring back from that expert study tour. What else?

Phil: What about the time with the recovery, the GFC recovery funding you were able to help secure?

Stephen: Oh, thanks for reminding me. [chuckles] That should be the first thing I talk about, shouldn't it? That was really interesting. In the very early days of doing this role, I had been getting to know all the different key politicians and the greens had the balance of power in the Senate. After the global financial crisis, I'd got to know the deputy leader of the greens. She rang me and she said, "Hey, Stephen, can you get us a list of shovel-ready projects because be blowed if we're not going to get some money out of our Senate negotiations for active transport." I said, "Sure." With working with all the relationships that we had around the states with the groups and the bureaucrats, we put together a list, gave it to the greens.

Then I got a call from Bob Brown's office from the leader, who said, "Look, can you find us information about how many jobs that will create the projects?" We went to the government research agent, see the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport, and Regional Economics, got them a very robust defendable figure for 12 or 14 jobs per million dollars of project, whatever it was, gave

that to them. Next thing, I'm in a meeting, but I get a call. It's saying, "Hey, guess what? We've got a 40 million bike path fund for cycling." We tracked that as it was delivered and it delivered $100 million of infrastructure because it was a co-funded thing.

We had also in some of the other funding from the GFC sent letters to every council in Australia saying, "You know you can use your community infrastructure funding for bicycle and shared paths in your communities, which really get everyone moving and allow kids to get to school." We tracked that, and that resulted in more than a third of the funding nationally going into paths for bikes and walking. We can have a really big impact, but sometimes, it's hard to talk about it. There are a couple of really good examples where we can actually be explicit about our impact.

Phil: You have had those great wins, but it has been hard [unintelligible 00:28:15], let's face it, the federal government on both sides of politics have been pretty stubborn. What have been particular barriers that you think and have there been any cracks to this resistance starting to open of late?

Stephen: One of the really important parts of our job is to make it easy for decision-makers to say, "Yes." As you've alluded to, they face significant barriers in public opinion if they get ahead of the curve. If they go against public opinion, they're not going to do it because they're interested in keeping their jobs. Part of our job is to generate a narrative and an image and an acceptance of investment in cycling so that they have the confidence to stick their head up out of the trench for us, for our stuff.

It takes leadership, it takes courage on their part, but we can be super supportive, and that's what we are doing. We're generating materials that tell the good stories, we support through broad alliances, changes in policy that will make it easier to invest in cycling. We've been a foundation member of a national network of 15 Australian peak groups including the Property Council, [unintelligible 00:29:52] foundation, bus industry, rail industry, and so on, in a parliamentary friends of Better Cities Group for a number of years, and that is about putting cycling as part of the bigger agenda for better places, for people making Australia a better place to live and more productive, right?

Everything we do strategically is calculated to address the barriers so that politicians have a greater level of comfort and feel able to stand up and support investment policy and decisions in favor of active transport, which is walking, cycling, public transport. The public transport industry has changed its language since we've been working with them. They don't just say, "We want everyone to be able to catch busses and trains," they say, "Walking, cycling and public transport."

Everyone's language has changed. We've been investing in a broad set of relationships and most recently, we've worked, we're approached by the Australian Automobile Association to assist them get better outcomes from the new National Road Safety Strategy. We successfully lobbied to have the action plan of how that's delivered in the initial years of the 10-year strategy sent back to states because it didn't allocate responsibility for the outcome sufficiently directly to the states who need to do stuff to stop vulnerable road users, walkers, pedestrians, and cyclists being injured and killed on our roads.

Phil: Someone watching this, Stephen, who might find a bit daunting, all of this behind-the-scenes policy work, which is really quite complex. People, a lot of 'em don't realize the complexity and the networks of support you have to build. Overall, they're sympathetic with what you're talking about, and I would like to help you let the politicians put their head above the parapet and so on. They're supportive in general. They might be a bit daunted by the detail, but what do you think they should be doing to come alongside you and help or to help those politicians make those more brave decisions?

Stephen: As always, politicians respond to their constituents, all right? When there is something that's been done that's within the responsibilities of either the local member, your local member, or a minister that controls roads or funding or whatever, a letter to your MP is enormously influential, right? Their primary occupation is obviously being in government, getting the government elected, but they want to be elected too. This year has been in an election year, and that's obviously been a particularly important aspect of this year's politics if you like. It's supporting the groups that are local to you as well.

There are fantastic local bicycle user groups, there are state bicycle organizations that are doing a great job around Australia, and you just need to add your voice when you can to say, "This is great. More of this, please," whether it's to your council, your local member, your state or territory member, or to your bicycle user group if they ask for your support.

Phil: Excellent. You've been in the trenches for 14 years now in this role, and how many more kilometers have you got in you, Stephen? How many more mountains and what would you like to achieve in the time that you're going to continue in this role?

Stephen: Wow, that's a really good question. I'm now over the six decades, the thing about this job is sometimes it's really hard going, just like we're talking about at the beginning of this interview, in a bike race. Long as I feel that We Ride Australia is moving forward and that I can help it along, I will probably stay highly motivated for a period of time. I'm not the only one who can do this. It's not based on me, it's based on the work that we do as a foundation. There

are lots of brilliant people working in this area. It's a broad school, the people that are working towards the same aims that we are. I don't know how long, but if there was one thing, I don't know what it would be.

We've seen an enormous transformation in the state of New South Wales. There's an enormously courageous minister now for infrastructure, cities and active transport, Rob Stokes, who's just turned that state around from being a laggard into a leader in driving change to make streets for people or streets of shared spaces a reality. That is really exciting to see. I'd like to see a transition in investment in our transport system that recognizes the need to, as we said, also to begin transition to a low carbon future. Yes, electric vehicles are important, but so are micro-mobility modes, so what electric bikes and all the other modes because of how many trips are so short every day all across Australia.

I've just stepped out of a marvelous conference down in Melbourne, which is got a really good focus on walking, too, and the things that we need to do to make walking more attractive, we're shoulder to shoulder and walkers are often the poor cousins even though all of us walk every day. Everyone walks as part of their trips. Even if you get out of a car, you still got to walk from the car park to work or the car park to the shops. What's needed? I don't know. I don't know how long to keep going. [laughs] I'm still riding my bike and I still love riding my bike, but I do have a new bike about to be built, a handmade steel, beautiful gravel thing that will be built for me.

When I have that, who knows? I might just turn into Forest Gump and [crosstalk]-

[laughter]

-and ride around Australia or something. I probably won't do that, but I might just suddenly get a hankering to load up and go bike-packing or something stupid. It's not stupid, but something fun like that. Who knows?

Phil: Well, Stephen Forrest Gump Hodge, thank you very much for being an influencer.

Stephen: Thank you very much, Phil.