

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into the Commercial Passenger Vehicle Industry Bill 2017

Melbourne — 23 May 2017

Members

Mr Bernie Finn — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Participating members

Mr Greg Barber

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Witnesses

Mr Graeme Newman, All Aboard; and

Ms Lauren Henley, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Blind Citizens Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the economy and infrastructure committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Thank you for coming in. I would ask you to start with 5 to 10 minutes of opening comments, and if you could begin by giving us your name, organisation and suburb for the record, that would be a marvellous thing. Thank you very much.

Ms HENLEY — Lauren Henley, appearing on behalf of Blind Citizens Australia, and I am based in the Melbourne CBD.

Mr NEWMAN — I am Graeme Newman, I am here today representing the All Aboard network. I live in Diamond Creek.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Who would like to go first?

Mr NEWMAN — I guess, as a representative of All Aboard, we are watching with interest as to what is happening with the deregulation of the taxi industry. We do have some concerns, and I guess if we look at the information that is in the first part of the bill, the thing that is of concern to us is the \$2 levy. The majority of people with disabilities who depend on wheelchair-accessible taxis are not usually particularly well off and therefore we feel that \$2 levy could be quite significant for them, especially considering that they often do very short trips, for example, from home to their local GP et cetera.

I have put together a bit of a presentation, which has been distributed. Some of those things that I have raised there that are of concern to the All Aboard network are perhaps not relevant quite yet but will become more so as more and more legislation is passed towards the deregulation of the industry. I think that is about all I would like to offer at this stage.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Ms Henley, would you like to say a few words?

Ms HENLEY — Yes. I think Blind Citizens Australia also has a few concerns around the \$2 levy in particular. Our members and the people whom we present are amongst the most frequent users of rideshare and taxi services in Victoria. The people we represent rely very heavily on those services and are often on very limited incomes, so again we would echo those concerns that it may actually be a cost barrier for people to be able to get around their community when they do not always have an alternative means of doing so. So that is my first comment.

I guess it is a space we have been looking at very closely in other states and territories as well. Obviously point-to-point transport in terms of taxi services, rideshare services — everything that falls under that category of point-to-point transport — has been evolving significantly over a number of years with the shift towards a sharing economy, so we are very keen to make sure that the regulatory framework that is put in place in response to those changes is actually adequately equipped to meet the needs of passengers with disability. Although regulations need to give people choice and control over the services they use, whether it be taxi services, rideshare services, community transport or hire cars, we do think that government has a role to play in actually regulating accessibility requirements for those services.

There are a number of things that we would like to see in future in terms of equal access to information, whether it be online booking services or access to vehicle registration numbers, so people are able to actually pursue complaints if they have problems with drivers, and access to metered fare information through the provision of talking taximeters, and that is technology that is readily available. While I understand that those things do not necessarily fall within the provisions of this bill, there are regulations that may be made under this bill in the future, and we would be keen to see some of those things discussed in relation to those regulations.

The CHAIR — Do you see this legislation and the ramifications of this legislation as a threat to cab services, or ridesharing services for that matter, for people with disabilities?

Ms HENLEY — I think the people who we represent certainly are embracing the shift towards a sharing economy. They are very keen to be able to have the flexibility to use rideshare services, so I think this bill is a

good first step in trying to set up a framework that can better regulate that sort of industry and provide choice and control but still protect consumers in terms of their safety and their rights.

One of the issues that the people we represent face at the moment is they get a half-price subsidy to cover the cost of taxi fares — taxi trips from point A to point B — but some people would prefer to use rideshare services because they have found personally that there is a higher level of service with one of those companies, whether it is Uber or some other company that has emerged, but their half-price subsidy at this point in time does not extend to those services. So the flexibility and the choice and control that this sharing environment is supposed to create is not necessarily there for people with disability at this point in time.

The CHAIR — So would you suggest that the legislation include the discount component for people with disabilities?

Ms HENLEY — Absolutely. We would be very keen to see that.

Mr MELHEM — You have already answered the question, because I was going to ask you about your concern in relation to the legislation, particularly the subsidy which you currently receive for using traditional taxis. I think you have answered that. But having said that, are there any other concerns you have in relation to your group? I think you talked about safety concerns and the subsidies. Are there any other concerns you have that you would like to share?

Ms HENLEY — Yes, sure. We have just completed a submission around point-to-point transport for the New South Wales government because they are looking at some changes around deregulation of the taxi industry in response to the changes that have emerged as a result of this shift towards a sharing economy, and we are very concerned about some of the things that have been put forward in New South Wales. Just as an example, deregulation — I know that people are trying to create a market-led approach to give people more choice and control, but for people with disability to ensure their rights are upheld in that sort of environment, you cannot just rely on the goodwill of companies like Uber to make sure all of their systems are accessible to people with disability. It is not going to happen. There need to be regulations to ensure that they comply with accessibility requirements. So as an example, registered taxi vehicles in New South Wales at the moment and in Victoria are required to include the vehicle registration number on the door of the vehicle in tactile raised print so that someone without sight has a means of accessing it. In New South Wales, with this deregulation agenda they have actually proposed that they remove that requirement, which means that the people we represent actually have no way of pursuing an issue if an issue does happen to arise, because they cannot access the vehicle registration number.

There are also other things that come into play. I mentioned talking taximeters. So without access to information about metered fares we do not know if we are actually being ripped off. We do not know if we are being overcharged, and it is really difficult to uphold our rights. To try and resolve those issues at the moment you have to go through the process of lodging a complaint with the human rights commission. That can take from three to 12 months to resolve; that is after it has actually been allocated to someone, which is currently taking four months just for that to happen. There is nothing to force the other party to actually come to the table and conciliate a matter, and if it does not conciliate, you have to take the matter to court, which a lot of people cannot afford to do.

So to rely on a market-led approach to accessibility, I think, is very dangerous, and it is going to result in a backward step in accessibility. So I would be very keen for any changes that are introduced to regulate rideshare services in the future to mandate some really strong accessibility requirements.

The CHAIR — Mr Bourman?

Mr BOURMAN — I have everything. It has been quite well covered off, actually, and in the submission.

Ms DUNN — Thank you both for your submissions today. I just wanted to explore the issue — and it has come up a bit today — around wheelchair-accessible taxis in that we have heard that there are significant difficulties in that market now. Graeme, you in your submission talk about the risk, I guess, to that service with deregulation. I was just interested in your views around what you see as the core issues at the moment in relation to wheelchair-accessible taxis. Is it around financial constraints or are there not enough vehicles? What

sort of factors are playing out at the moment that make it an issue now, because that will help in terms of what we need to do in the future?

Mr NEWMAN — I guess, firstly, in a more competitive marketplace the higher cost of putting a wheelchair-accessible-type vehicle on the road can be up to four times the price of putting a sedan on the road. I have forgotten the numbers now, but there are a significant number of wheelchair-accessible taxis already on the road. Some of those are very busy providing some excellent services, some of them perhaps not. Government has tried to put a lot of incentives in place: the multipurpose taxi program, which provides a half-fare discount for people who are judged to have that requirement; the lifting fee, which gives the drivers some incentive to do wheelchair work rather than high-capacity taxi work; and even some of the subsidies that are provided, especially in the country areas, to help people who want to enter into that market to purchase those vehicles.

It is difficult to understand why those incentives are not really working as well as they could. People with disabilities, people who require wheelchair-accessible taxis and do not have close networks, a lot of the people that I have worked with in the past form personal relationships with drivers of wheelchair-accessible taxis and do get excellent service. But if you call one of the major service providers and ask for a wheelchair-accessible taxi, sometimes people have been known to wait for 3 hours or more for a vehicle to turn up, and we are not really sure why that happens.

I have been involved a little bit with the department for transport, people who are looking at those incentives at the moment. I am pleased to be part of that consultation, and hopefully we can work out ways of improving the service.

Ms DUNN — Get to the core of it. Great. Thank you.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Just one question from me, Chair. Ms Henley, I guess I am just trying to get an understanding, because we have heard evidence earlier today in relation to some of the impacts that the \$2 levy will have and generally what some of the impacts will be on taxis, particularly in regional areas in terms of disability services provided there. On the other side of that ledger, if we look at ridesharing, whether it be Uber or any others that might come into the marketplace, what sort of facilities do they currently provide in that space, and in other states what sort of services do they provide; is it different to what it is here in Victoria?

Ms HENLEY — In terms of whether there is a higher frequency? Sorry, I am trying to understand the question.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Is there any capacity in terms of what Uber are doing now in the disability sector to cater for that market?

Ms HENLEY — It seems to be mostly focused around the customer service side of things, so for people who are blind, for example, two of our biggest issues include short fares — for example, I came here from Flinders Lane today, but I have not been to Parliament House before so I still had to get a taxi because walking would have stressed me out — I did not know where I was going — and sometimes to get a taxi to pick up a really short fare like that is quite difficult. So that is one of the issues.

The other issue is around getting assistance from the vehicle into the destination. We will often rely on taxis if we are going somewhere that is just a one-off destination, we are not familiar with the area, there is no point really investing the time and energy into learning how to get there, because you are not going to need to get there again. Therefore you might not know the location very well and you rely on the driver to be able to get you exactly to that point where you need to be. Taxidivers are sometimes a bit hesitant to do that — not all the time; it is not a one-size-fits-all, but some people in their own interactions have found that rideshare services actually provide a better level of service and for that reason they are going over to those sorts of services instead of taxis.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — I have used Uber at times in the past, and once you get to your destination and you hop out you still have got no idea how much it has actually cost you until you see on your credit card statement or on the app at some stage.

Ms HENLEY — Yes, that is right, and I think that is one of our major concerns with any sort of passenger transport service — just making sure that people who are blind or vision impaired have access to the information they need to be able to make sure their rights are upheld if they are overcharged. It is really critical.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon and for your contribution to our hearings. We very much appreciate it, and indeed it was very helpful, I must say, as well. You will receive a transcript within the next probably two to three weeks. If you would be kind enough to just proofread that and let us know if that is okay, one way or the other, we would appreciate that. I thank you once again very much for coming in this afternoon.

Ms HENLEY — Thank you very much.

Mr NEWMAN — Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — The hearing now stands adjourned.

Committee adjourned.