

PROOF VERSION ONLY

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Melbourne—Monday, 10 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESSES

Mr David Anderson, and

Mr Eric Howard.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. I wish to welcome any members of the public watching via our live broadcast. My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am the Chair of the committee. Mr Bernie Finn is our deputy. We also have fellow committee colleagues Mr Andy Meddick, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Tim Quilty and Mrs Bev McArthur online with us at the committee hearing.

Before I begin I wish also to read out a short statement. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. May I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise any interference. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, David and Eric.

Mr ANDERSON: My name is David Thomas Anderson.

Mr HOWARD: Eric William Howard.

Mr ANDERSON: Firstly, Chair and members of the committee, thanks very much for the opportunity to have discussions with you about your inquiry and to make a submission, which we hope is of value to you and to the outcome of the inquiry. The submission is in four parts. In our written submission there is a summary—summarising, I guess. There is appendix 1, which is a short biography about Eric and me. We just felt we would put it in there in case you thought we were complete ratbags. We have both been very keen to, I guess, get involved where we feel as though we should and that improvements can be made.

Appendix 2 contains a summary of what is called internationally the Victorian model, which we will talk about a fair bit. It is about road safety management. It was set up in the early 90s when the road toll was about 888, if I remember—80-something in that October. The government of the day was desperate to get something done, and we set up a model which, among other things, drove the road toll down into the 200s. Eric spends a lot of time overseas. The model is being put in place in many countries around the world, but we feel it is no longer as effective in Victoria as it should be. So that is appendix 2. Appendix 3 is detail—graphs, opinions again and data that addresses each of your terms of reference.

Eric and I have got over 45 years of experience directly in road safety. I am not talking about times when we had other roles with local government or with VicRoads or its predecessors, but when we were actually involved. Eric is still involved; I am still doing some work within Australia but not in Victoria.

Road safety management, we think, is a really key part. This is something governments can manage down. We know it is a tough time at the moment for government to focus on this, but the world will go on. Our feelings are that the management structures, while they may be in place, just on the feedback that we are getting from some of the participants do not appear to be as dynamic, as operational, as hands-on, as sleeves rolled up as we think they should be from the very highest level. Clearly the relevant ministers have to work together. We would love to see a bipartisan approach. I do not think that is feasible anymore, but it was. Even when we were involved directly behind the scenes it was very much a bipartisan approach—in public maybe not quite—but you would be able to knock this road toll down to almost single figures if we had a very effective management structure. I was in Sweden recently. They are talking about a road toll of 30 for a 9 million population. We

cannot emphasise that enough. It has got to involve the key partners; they have got to be operational people, not people who are just very good at writing briefing notes, to be blunt.

Other comments in the summary: road user compliance—that is sort of the enforcement and compliance stuff—Victoria has always been a leader in that. There are only two areas we are concerned about. In the early 90s random breath testing had no effect until we got to nearly a million tests per annum. People then realised that they had actually been tested, that friends had been tested and they knew people who had been fined accordingly. Up until then there was not much happening. These days research shows that you have really got to test every driver about once per year. For Victoria it is about 4 million tests. We think that at the moment we are at about 30 per cent less than that.

Drugs and driving: testing was introduced when the coroner and VicRoads worked together to determine that drugs other than alcohol were a bigger problem from about the late 1990s onwards. Again, we do not think drug testing is having a great effect on the community. Yes, the extreme cases are talked about on the news, but since it has been operating I have certainly not been tested; I have been random breath tested many times. We understand that the target for testing is about 150 000; it needs to be in the millions. That is very expensive. There need to be better tests. It is something government ought to give priority to.

Driver distraction: we are very pleased to see that Victoria is now entering a trial similar to New South Wales—we will not say much more about that. Learner novice driver programs, by OECD standards, are pretty good in Victoria. The hazard perception test was a Victorian first and was tested by independent education authorities and also directly through road safety data. We have got graduated licensing; many countries are still struggling with that. Eric is doing his best with others to spread the word around the world.

Vehicle safety standards: we do not make passenger vehicles in Australia anymore—maybe buses are an exception—but we do still make trucks. Our vehicle safety standards are virtually set by Japan, the US and Europe, and they are not too bad. However, we are concerned that there are still 2- and 3-star vehicles getting into Australia. I think that is a matter for the federal government, maybe prompted by state governments, but it is something that could be looked at. We may never get 5-star ANCAP-rated vehicles completely, but we should be eliminating some of the old-fashioned safety rubbish.

Infrastructure safety level: we are very concerned about infrastructure in rural Victoria—our rural pavement technology, sprayed seals on natural materials and crushed rocks, needs resurfacing every 10 years. We have known that for decades. That means 10 per cent replacement of the surface across the network—currently running at somewhere between 2 and 4 per cent. That is pitiful. And you will see, unless that changes, continued deterioration of the surface of our rural roads and the roads on the fringes of Melbourne. I have nearly finished.

There is a strong link between speed limits and road infrastructure safety. We do not particularly want to make much comment on the barrier program. We started it off; we were very supportive of it. My personal view might be that it could be focused a little bit better, but I guess it has saved many lives and we do not want to debate whether the Auditor-General got it right or wrong or what happened there. There is a link between infrastructure standards and condition, and speed limits. We have got higher speed limits than most OECD countries that are equivalent. We are not saying at this stage that speed limits should be reduced, but if we cannot improve the safety features and quality of roads and you want to reduce the road toll, then that has got to be considered.

I will pass over to Eric for just a very brief summary of our recommendations, and we look forward to a discussion with you. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, David. Eric, please feel free.

Mr HOWARD: Thank you. It is great to have the opportunity to speak with you. We hope what we have to say, as David has said, is useful. I will quickly summarise our recommendations. I want to say that you folk are in a very strong position to provide leadership to the Victorian community and to reduce the road toll. I mean, you are hearing all this evidence and what could be done to make a difference, how to move towards zero using a Safe System approach, and Victoria is going down that path. The rate of death per 100 000 has dropped substantially over the last 30 years, even though the population has increased. So as community leaders we believe you have got an important opportunity to bring about change.

I want to move to the final recommendation—and I will come back in reverse order, if that is okay with you, Chair—on infrastructure safety. Our lower volume, lower quality rural roads are usually 1- or 2-star standard. This will be a bit tricky, Chair, but could I ask people to go to the sixth page of appendix 3, if you have got the copy of the submission there?

The CHAIR: Sixth page?

Mr HOWARD: There are not numbers there, for which I apologise, but if you go to the sixth page, you will see figure 4A, which has got a series of little coloured boxes on it—little bar charts.

Mrs McARTHUR: Chair, it is Bev here. Could the secretary put that up on the screen, by chance?

The CHAIR: Yes, I think that is more practical instead of all of us flicking through paper. Secretary, is that a possibility, please, to get the graph or table? Eric, what was the number of the table from the submission?

Mr HOWARD: Figure 4A, Chair, on the sixth page of appendix 3.

The CHAIR: If the secretary is able to do that—if not just speak to it anyway.

Mr HOWARD: Sure. Basically, it says that you have 1-, 2-, 3-, 4-, 5-star roads. This is a universal basis for assessing the risk on roads in Victoria and other states. Everywhere around the world is using this—1-star is bad, 2-star is a little better, and so on. If you want to go from 1-star to 2-star, and a lot of our rural, low-volume roads are 1- or 2-star safety standard, if you want to go from 1 to 2 or 2 to 3 you have got to spend a fair bit of money, probably \$10 million a kilometre, to make them safe and to go to that next level of safety—1 to 2, 2 to 3. You can get the same improvement in safety if you reduce the travel speed by 10 kilometres an hour—a 50 per cent reduction in deaths and serious injuries. You can invest a lot of money to do it, or you can look at reducing the speed limit on these unsafe, low-volume roads that currently have a speed limit the same as the state highways. That is not logical. It does not make sense, and it could be done as soon as community consultation and discussion would permit it. And I would just make the observation that in my experience, when I talk to people about this issue, I have not met anyone—when they have had a chance for a one-on-one briefing about this—who has resisted the notion of doing something about travel speeds on highly unsafe roads. I am not talking about the state highways or the high-volume routes. We must invest in those and that should continue—that is going on—but for these other roads, we are just putting our community at risk in allowing 100-kilometre-an-hour travel speeds on many of them.

Thank you, there it is: there is the little graphic I am talking about. So if you want to get a 50 per cent reduction in deaths and serious injuries, you would go from the 1-star to the 2-star road—the black to the red—and the rate of death comes down and then so on to the orange and that proceeds. You can get the same effect on death and serious injury by lowering your travel speeds by 10 kilometres an hour—an unbelievably impactful step that is available to us today across these very, very unsafe roads. We would encourage you to look at that issue and to see what can be done to move ahead.

On those roads I should add, Mr Chairman, there would be some simple things you could do as well—tactile edge lining and perhaps put some treatments in at intersections, and so on. But you all know these roads. They are sitting out there in your electorates, and they are traps. People are dying on them, unfortunate as it is. We could do something about that.

I want to just go back to David's comment about road safety management. Road safety management is the foundation of good road safety. It is the force that drives it. It is the underpinning of all the things that you do, and yet it does not get a lot of attention. It is critical, and as David has said, we think there should be a greater focus on strengthening this in Victoria. It has worked well in the past. The people there now, I am sure, are doing very good things, but how can we strengthen their capacity to make strong recommendations to ministers and to Parliament and get some changes?

Drink driving: David has mentioned the fact that we think there should be one test per driver per annum which is good practice. And for drugs, we think the number of tests should be increased substantially, albeit that it is expensive. Victoria needs to do more here because ice and other drugs are a major issue.

We think that the conversation about drinking and driving, about separating drinking and driving, needs to start. If we are going to get to zero by, say, 2050, and that is feasible, we will have to look at separating drinking and driving—looking at a .02 BAC limit. The suggestion there is you would get perhaps 20 or 25 lives a year saved in Victoria. The measures I have talked about with speeds on the least safe rural roads would probably save 20 or 25 lives. You soon start to make inroads into the 230 deaths a year, and we have not talked about the work going on on the major highways, the benefits that would come from extra drug testing or the benefits that would come from better treatments on the outer metropolitan roads, in terms of travel speed and infrastructure. We can do this, and we are well on track to make that progress.

Just commenting again on the camera technology, David has covered that. But we would strengthen again our recommendation about drink driving. We think there should be a .02 limit for all repeat drink drivers now. If you are a repeat drink-driver, you should be on a zero limit for the rest of your driving. If they can afford it or if we have to pay for it, we should insist they have interlocks installed in their vehicles for the rest of their lives. That will save our families' lives.

The other comment I would make is that alcoholics need case management. In Victoria we have had a tradition of just putting up with drink drivers, penalising them and putting them on interlocks and hoping that when they came back they would be reformed. They will not be; they are still alcoholics. Many countries overseas, even the US but certainly Switzerland and others, have very sophisticated case management public health programs for these alcoholics to help them get over their addiction. We should be doing more in that space. You only need to talk to the families of those who have lost loved ones to drink drivers. That is all I have, Mr Chairman. We would be happy to answer questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Eric, and thank you, David, for your presentation. I will now pass over to my fellow committee members to ask questions. I will start with Mr Bernie Finn, the deputy. He would like to go first.

Mr FINN: Eric and David, you have given us enough material there. I could speak to you for some hours, if not days, on some of the areas that you have touched on this morning. I just want to mention one thing that you spoke of, David, and that is the inability, your view was, for us to work in a bipartisan manner. You said that you did not think that was possible anymore. Why is that the case?

Mr ANDERSON: How many days do you want? This is very much a personal view. My view is that the media has taken charge of the governance, and this has happened for years and years and years. Ministers are being forced into having to take responsibility for what I call operational things. I think governments and ministers are elected in our democracy to make policies, to pass legislation, to encourage good behaviour and all those sorts of things. But the problem is that the media seems to want it to be a competition all the time, leading to the grand final each four years in Victoria in November. My personal view is that there are a lot of things that could be done. The community that we all mix with probably does not want a competition. I think safety is one of those. I think with COVID we have nearly achieved it, but there are occasional breakouts of adversarial comment, and that is perhaps the nature of the beast. So my view is that I am not sure we can ever go back to where we were in perhaps the 1990s, when this subject at least was not really debated between parties—

Mr FINN: Well, David, can I tell you that—and I am sure my colleagues will agree—the overwhelming majority of our time in Parliament is spent boring each other stupid because we are in furious agreement on most things. So it is possible and it can be done, and I am quietly confident that, as I have said on this committee with a whole range of people from a vast array across the political spectrum, we can do this today.

Now, there is one thing I wanted to ask you. You will of course recall the 'Drink, drive, bloody idiot' campaign. That was a major drive for social change. Do you think that sort of thing would work today, or have people sort of gone past it? Is it sort of accepted as something that just would not work anymore?

Mr ANDERSON: We often talk about 'the community'. I do not think we should talk about 'the community' because everyone is very different. And, again, in our current lockdown we are seeing how different some of the people are. If I can use the term, which I probably would not normally have done in a committee, but if there are bloody idiots out there, then I think 'Drink, drive, bloody idiot' might work for them. Most of us are not like that, and maybe other things work. I think there has got to be horses for courses. I

know governments in the past have been a bit nervous about some of the very hard-hitting ads. They are very expensive to make. The TAC argued strongly for them, and MUARC backed it up with research. I cannot see that we have got rid of all the idiots, Mr Finn. To that extent there ought to be some 'Drink, drive, bloody idiot'—

Mr FINN: Do not tempt me to answer that, please.

Mr HOWARD: Could I just add to that? I think the best form of education, research shows, is enforcement—deterrence. And as we have seen with COVID, some people will resist—they are just impervious to any message you throw at them. So it will work for the vast bulk of the community, perhaps 80, 85 per cent, but you need that strong deterrence—as we have said, one test per driver per year. The general deterrence, properly applied, is the only thing that gets through to some of these people. And even then there are still some, as you know, who do not respond. So throw everything at them. Families lives are shattered when this happens to them.

Mr FINN: Thank you for that. There are more questions, but I know that others wish to dive in, so I will not hog the time. Mr Chair, I will hand it back to you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Finn. I will go Mr Gepp, then Mr Meddick, then Mr Quilty, then Mr Barton, and I will leave Bev and myself for last, if we have time.

Mr GEPP: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Eric, and thanks, David, for joining us today. I will not go into some of the areas that Mr Finn covered, but suffice to say that I will just make a general comment that I agree with Mr Finn. I think there are many, many, many areas of public policy where there is furious agreement between the parties across the two chambers, and I am confident that when you talk about matters of public health—and I think this is a public health issue—that we work very, very well together to try and get the best outcome for the community.

I wonder if you could comment on a couple of areas though. It has been said to us previously, and it would be said if we went out there and lowered the speed limit to whatever—you know, whether it was 30 kilometres an hour or 80 kilometres an hour—that you can legislate and put any number you like on a road sign, but it is not going to stop people travelling above the speed limit. And for some of those roads that Eric spoke about, the 1-star versus 2-star graded roads, speed is an issue regardless of what it says on the sign. So I wonder if you could comment on that.

The second area that I am particularly interested in—and it goes to your submission, particularly where you went around technology: we know that the oldest cars on our roads are often driven by our most inexperienced drivers. It comes down to affordability et cetera. So how much do you think car safety, availability of technology for our younger drivers, the most inexperienced people driving ostensibly what are vehicles that are probably not as up to scratch as the latest version of the vehicle—I wonder if you might perhaps—

Mr ANDERSON: Eric, perhaps one each. Which one do you want?

Mr HOWARD: I will take the speed one, David, if I can. Would you handle the vehicle one? We can chime in anyway with either. I think the speed thing—you are right, Mr Gepp, that there will be some people who will not comply, but the clear experience over time is that you need a bit of enforcement to pick up poor behaviours, but that is not really too feasible on rural roads way out of the way. But the social norm starts to kick in over a generation, and the sooner we start that process the sooner you see the compliance levels going up. When we brought in the 50-kilometre-an-hour default limit in metropolitan Melbourne we had the same reaction, and now people are very compliant, they are very good. We are seeing lower levels of course. But people over time adapt to what they are being told by their community—we all know that. So I would be optimistic about: you would not get immediate compliance tomorrow but you would get steady improvement over the next 10 to 15, 20 years, and that is what we are looking at. So I think that sort of lens of timing is important. Good, strong messages supporting good behaviours works in families and elsewhere.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mr ANDERSON: Can I just make a comment on the vehicle issue that was raised?

The CHAIR: Go for it, Mr Anderson.

Mr ANDERSON: Yes, sorry. When we think back, technology has really been the best way of reducing the road toll, going right back to seatbelts and better braking and better steering and better handling, and that is why it is important to encourage somehow the best safety in vehicles.

I do not think we will ever see driverless vehicles in our grandchildren's lifetime. One of the people at Pittsburgh University who developed the first one, the first-ever one that went into the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster—he is still developing Cadillacs, actually, that are self-driving—said to me when I was there a couple of years ago, 'We'll never see it, because we just won't have any computer programmers that have been in every possible situation for the future'.

Technology is really important; we have got to encourage it. The manufacturers will provide it if they can make a quid out of it. And it is really worth pursuing.

Mr HOWARD: Can I just add to that? I think in Victoria we have seen about a 20 per cent increase in population over the last 10 years—you would be more aware of that than I—and that has put a lot of pressure on road safety levels. I think one of the reasons that has managed to help the trend to be a little down, but not increase certainly, is the fact that vehicle safety levels have improved. It is a massive contributor to levels of safety. I think at some point when we have really done well with promoting safer vehicles through parents to young people we might well get to the point where we start, without distorting the market, to encourage with some financial incentives young people to get safer vehicles. It is a very important issue.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Gepp. I might pass on to Mr Meddick because he had a question.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, David and Eric. Your submission is absolutely extraordinary. It is so in-depth. It is incredible the amount of detail you have gone into, particularly with your recommendations, and that is really where I want to cover a couple of things off if I can. I am particularly interested in what the numbers you think driving the blood alcohol limit down to .02 will be, if you have any numbers, because I was just listening to what you were saying before about the projections of how many lives you might be able to save in other areas. So going to .02, how many do you think that might have an effect on?

There is a tremendous debate at the moment around residual amounts of, say, cannabinoids in people's systems after they might have smoked marijuana or whatever it might be a couple of days beforehand or 24 hours beforehand. There are a number of people that might claim that then the next day or the day after they are not affected, but it still shows up in their systems. Have you got any thoughts around whether you think that it does still affect them? I understand that you are not medical experts, but if you have got an opinion on that, and if you would look at or have any ideas on whatever limits on a positive drug test there might be to say that that person is impaired or not impaired?

Mr HOWARD: David, could you handle the drug question? David was actually behind the work that led to the current drug driving impairment arrangements in Victoria. He knows them well. Can I just comment on the drink driving, because with another colleague Austroads asked me to look at the effectiveness of drink-driving countermeasures right across Australia earlier this year and we produced our report, so we have got some information on that issue, Mr Meddick, that you asked about.

There is some work that has been done but it has never been allowed to be published. I was not involved with it. I think it should be out in the public domain for discussion. We need a conversation about this. You cannot just expect governments to implement this tomorrow; we need a conversation. The best evidence we could lay our hands on would suggest there would be about a 25-lives saving in Victoria if you had the .02 limit, so about 10 per cent of our road toll would be reduced. It may be more than that, I do not know, but there is some good Australian research that has been done. It should be ventilated and out to the public so they can see what it says.

Mr MEDDICK: Why is that? Why has it not been allowed to be disseminated, and who by?

Mr HOWARD: I do not know the reason, but there were reports for Austroads, and it was decided that they were not going to publish it—some years ago. I do not know the reason; they never published it. But we need to have a debate about this. You know, we are grown-ups; the public needs to know. I have always believed that if you let the public know the facts, they come to the same conclusion that so-called experts would run to as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Meddick, do you have another question?

Mr MEDDICK: I believe David was going to answer my drug driving question.

Mr ANDERSON: Look, there was a big debate amongst the so-called road safety experts as to whether drugs of any sort were a real problem other than alcohol. When I was, I think it was, chief executive or director of road safety or something at VicRoads, we moved one of our key staff, Dr Philip Swann, who was very well known and had written the book of the year to deal with drugs in horseracing and stuff, into the coroner's office so that he could then examine some of the cases where drugs had been detected. The coroner of the day, Graeme Johnstone, who was a school mate of mine—sadly, no longer with us—developed a culpability rating. There were 16 points to that. So we looked at every case, and if someone had gone through a red light, for instance, that was a culpability issue and they got one point and whatever. And what we showed was with any presence of the drugs that could be tested for at the time there was a culpability rating of over 12, and we figured therefore that there was a link between what happened to cause the crash and the drug. That is how it was done, and in that case the coroner then supported governments introducing some sort of drug testing. We did not have equipment, we did not have test procedures. The same Philip Swann went on holiday to the USA and came back with \$1.2 million worth of research funds for nothing, which Victoria was able to use. Manufacturers eventually developed devices. They are, I guess, still expensive, but we need to pursue that somehow. So that is how it happened. That is why there is a link.

With cannabis—again I am no expert; I am an engineer and a few other bits and pieces but no chemist—some of the cannabinoids were found to affect the culpability, some were not, and therefore you could probably win the argument either way. You could say cannabis is a problem if you are thinking about parts of it or it is not a problem if you want to smoke. So that is as good as I can do for you at this stage.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, both. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Andy. Thank you, David and Eric. I will pass over to Mr Quilty, then Mr Barton.

Mr QUILTY: Thank you. Having read your submission—there were parts of it that I did not like especially—can I just ask you first of all: where does the target, the goal, to get to zero road deaths come from? Given the concept of diminishing returns or increasing marginal costs, at some point you are going to be spending a whole lot of money and a whole lot of other things, not just money but other things, to get a very small return. At what point do the costs exceed the benefit?

Mr HOWARD: Mr Quilty, can I respond to that just in two ways? We do not take that attitude with aviation safety, we do not take that attitude towards workplace safety. We are like the frog in the pot; we have grown up with people being killed on the roads. When I was young in country Victoria many of my friends were killed in car crashes. We have grown up with this; we think it is the way things could always be. They need not be like this, and the reality is if you take an ethical view of life and the fact that we can no longer trade off life to get from A to B more quickly or get to where we should not be getting in that period, then there is only one conclusion you can reach. Who can make a judgement about which lives are saved and which are not? That is the only way in which you can respond.

Mr QUILTY: So no economics whatsoever?

Mr HOWARD: Yes. Oh, yes, absolutely. In terms of what you do, you have to make sure the scarce resources are put into the things that will give you the greatest benefit, but your goal must always be to find the innovative and cost-effective ways to do that, and they exist. There are many levers; it is just that we are not always aware of them. I go into countries where they have got no idea what to do, and you tell them what is possible and they say, 'But that'll cost too much'; 'No, no. Just do this. You'll counter that problem'. So it is about finding innovative ways to get those risks down, and you must spend your scarce dollars where you get the most cost-effective outcome.

Mr QUILTY: If you lower speed limits by 20 per cent, for little rural communities you are going to add to their tight travel times by 20 per cent. You are basically talking about destroying those little towns, effectively. Every time you ratchet down the speed limit you are increasing the cost of living in those areas dramatically. Do you think that is a cost worth paying?

Mr HOWARD: Just one quick point there: I am not talking about all the roads in country Victoria; we are talking about the unsafe roads. The main arterials have to be upgraded. They really do. They are the lifeblood of those communities. So we are not talking about massively long travel times to get to a road where you can travel at higher speed. If you want to travel at higher speed on the poorer roads, they have got to be upgraded. Where do we find the funds for that?

Mr ANDERSON: Without mentioning names, in the Kennett government period there were two ministers over that whole period, but one of them asked if we, VicRoads, could do the analysis—the economic analysis—of raising the speed limits to 110 north of Horsham and east of Bendigo, I think. It was a fair chunk of Victoria. We did the sums, and in that time the cost in road safety—you know, hospitals, health care, funerals et cetera—equalled the economic savings. We put it to him. We said, ‘Well, you could do either. If you want to put the speed limit up, it’s okay. There’d be a few more fatalities, but the economics will balance that out’. After about a week he came back, and he said, ‘Improved economics does never appear on the front of the *Herald Sun*, but safety does in a picture’. So he said, ‘We’re not increasing the speed limits’.

I think someone needs to do the sums. I think that is where I am coming to. Someone needs to look at the economy and look at the time it takes to get stock to market, product to market et cetera. I remember talking to the chief executive of SPC at one stage, and he said that there was a particular rough section of road that when they carried pears over that road down to the port of Melbourne—and do not quote the figures, but you will; it will be in the Hansard, I suppose—it was something like, ‘They’re worth \$9 a tonne when we get them down there over certain rough roads, and they’re worth four times that amount if we go down smooth roads’. So there is obviously a strong connection with either speed or road condition, and I would like to think that someone independent, not Eric, not me, was asked to do a contemporary analysis.

Mr QUILTY: Can I just ask you then about your blood alcohol recommendations? You are talking about having a zero level for 25-year-olds and under. How many 25-year-olds do you think will support that? Given that there is a very small number of people and there is a very small number of lives that are going to be saved, how many 25-year-olds do you think would support that idea that they need to be protected from themselves because of a handful of idiots?

Mr HOWARD: I do not know the answer to that, but what I do know is that when we were preparing the new graduated licensing system in 2005 that we now enjoy—and that has been a big plus for young people up to 22 years of age—the rate of alcohol involved, and illegal alcohol, for drivers between 21 and 26 meant that 50 per cent of the deaths involved blood alcohol contents over .05 for that age group. Now, that is not known. We were keen to have that looked at, but the government of the day was not keen for that to be pursued. But that is a very serious situation, and I do not know what you do about that; that is a matter for people such as yourselves. When half of the people being killed in an age bracket are over the legal blood alcohol content limit and have culpability for the crash, surely you have to look at doing something.

Mr QUILTY: It depends how many are dying. There is a problem in everything, and liberty has its own value. But car interlocks—have either of you installed an interlock on your car?

Mr HOWARD: Yes, I did. When we introduced them back in 2003, I had one in my car for about 12 months, and I was amazed. I would park the car in the city, and the attendants would come out and they would move the car. I said, ‘How did you do that with the interlock?’; ‘Oh, we saw the interlock. We blew into it’. So intuitively they sort of did it. Look, they are a very important weapon in the fight against drink driving, and I am sure there are examples where there has been an issue, but Victoria has brought them out now for all drink driving, which is a very interesting approach. I think it is a good thing.

I think it is in the community’s interest that these devices are in place. Who pays for them, I am not sure. Maybe in the future, again, the community says—and this is particularly true in Indigenous communities in other states—you are better off, it is safer for the community, as long as they have got an interlock rather than relying on their capacity to fit one. I am a great supporter, Mr Quilty, of the interlocks, and I think they have been a great step forward. I know magistrates in many country Victorian towns welcome the fact that they can say to the family, ‘Make sure Dad fits one of these, because he is less likely to kill himself and others’.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Eric. Thank you, Mr Quilty. I know Mr Barton and Mrs Bev McArthur have questions. We will come back to you soon. I am pretty sure we will have time. Mr Barton and then Bev.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, David and Eric. I am really interested in your move to .02. I come from an industry where we have had .00 requirements, and it has never affected our lives by doing that. We could never understand why people could have this ability to go out and work and drive cars, whether you are a courier or whatever. We all know the reason behind all that, and that is people get that dreaded taste. They start off with one beer, two beers, then they get that dreaded taste and then they keep on going. I am of the view that if I thought I could get the numbers, I would have it .00 for the community. But having said that—and correct me if I am wrong—I understand now that where people are being killed in car accidents and doing serious harm, drugs are now overtaking drink driving. Is that correct?

Mr HOWARD: That is our understanding, yes. I have not seen the figures, Mr Barton, but that is what we have been told by the police and others.

Mr BARTON: I would think that we should now be applying that same pressure that we have done for drink drivers—we now apply that to drug drivers. I do know a member of the police force from the traffic operations group out in the more rural areas, and drug-taking in interstate truck driving is incredibly—

Mr HOWARD: Rife.

Mr BARTON: There is an incredible amount going on there and to a scary point. I do not think the public really appreciates how serious it is.

Mr HOWARD: Well, you are probably more aware of the problem than I am, but I agree with you. I think it is very important that you put a zero tolerance on drugs that are clearly proven to have a devastating effect. There is an issue around cannabis the day after, for example, compared to ice at the time. So there is a little bit of finesse needed in how that is applied. Drink driving, we know, is a massive problem. I congratulate you on your views. I think we can do much more in both areas.

Mr BARTON: Can I just ask one quick question? I understand New South Wales tests for cocaine—

Mr HOWARD: Yes.

Mr BARTON: but we do not test for cocaine in Victoria. What is going on?

Mr ANDERSON: I think the answer there is probably until recently we have not had the ability to detect it. That does not mean that the Victorian government could not move to pick up cocaine as well. I do not think it is a matter of guilt on anyone's part. We started off with what we could test. I do not know whether that has been expanded. Maybe it has with one more drug.

Mr HOWARD: David, you have frozen there.

Mr ANDERSON: The balance between speed limits and economic benefits, between freedom and killing people—these are things that we will probably grapple with forever. The only point I wanted to make was in Victoria every year there are about 80 000 learner drivers. That means that there are about 80 000 17-year-olds or 16-year-olds, so no matter what we do today or next year or in five years time, every year there will be about that number—80 000 to 100 000 new people jumping behind the wheel of a car. So anyone that says we can solve it this year and it will all be sweetness and light forever is dreaming. That is why I think technology in vehicles, which will be longer lasting than the people who might learn something this year and forget it next year, will be the key to this. And technology and roads also—permanent, long-lasting—and if you are a bad learner, you could still not die.

Mr HOWARD: Yes, forgiving roads are very important. Can I just say on the cocaine issue, I think it would be relatively straightforward to communicate with New South Wales, find out what the incidence is up there and then take some decisions on what that might mean for Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might pass over to Mrs Bev McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen. Look, I have a series of questions and I am not sure whether the Chair is going to allow me to ask them all, but if not, I might ask if they can be put in writing to you.

For a start, I am just curious that you think that lowering the speed limit—I take Mr Quilty’s point—on rural roads is going to be the solution. We have the most shocking roads. The least amount of expenditure is expended on rural roads. We have massive expenditure going into the urban area, but the rural areas are left wanting desperately. So lowering the speed limit because we have got unsafe roads, to me, is ridiculous. You need to actually advocate for fixing these roads up to a proper standard. And Mr Quilty is right—the cost of doing business and getting your food to the tables in Melbourne will increase dramatically, also, if we cut down this. I mean, what is safe? You might say some roads are only safe at 40 kilometres an hour. We could not operate if we reduced the speed limit down to a point where it was totally safe on some rural roads. So I take issue with that. We need far greater expenditure on rural roads. The government cut their funding to \$1 million per local council for bridges and roads funding—that was critical—and they are struggling to maintain their roads, while urban municipalities have huge amounts of money to expend with basically no road infrastructure to maintain. So that is an issue.

There is also an issue with international drivers which I am not sure you have touched on. Twenty-five per cent of accidents where ambulances are called involve international drivers.

We have another issue with the new philosophy that roadsides should be wildlife corridors and conservation zones. I have been taken recently on a tour of many country roads in my electorate where new roads have been built and the roadside vegetation is still allowed to be right at the edge of the road. It is a major safety issue. You cannot see around corners, and you cannot properly maintain the roads because of the vegetation causing damage to the underneath carriage of the roads. So we have to change the philosophy to where roads should be safe places—not wildlife corridors and conservation zones. And as a result of this philosophy, we have ended up with wire rope barriers—do not start me on them and the amount of expenditure that has been perpetrated by the TAC in that area. So there is a start, Chair—

The CHAIR: No, no, I appreciate your feedback, but I think it sounds like there will be a number of questions to come from that statement. It might be easier if you could put some of them in writing and then we will forward them to David and Eric, and if they are happy to have a go at answering those, that would be appreciated. Would that be possible, Eric and David?

Mr HOWARD: Of course.

Mr ANDERSON: Could I just put something on the record that maybe we have not been good at explaining? We have not said that speed limits on rural roads should be reduced. We have said that there is a link between road conditions, safety facilities and speed limits, and it has got to be a balance. If we cannot improve certain roads and we want to reduce the number of crashes, then the only thing, unfortunately, policymakers would have at their disposal would be speed limits. We are not advocating for lower speed limits. We are advocating for safer roads. There has to be a link between road conditions and speed limits.

Let me take an example. It is an urban one. Let me take Pakington Street, West Geelong, and one of you people has an office there. No-one would suggest that the speed limit should be greater than 60. That is a silly example. So we are saying that there is a link. You can do one or the other but only if you want to reduce crashes; if you do not want to, do not bother.

The CHAIR: Look, I think Mrs McArthur said—sorry, Bev, but on this one I am having to search for the question. I think it will be easier, because I think there are differences of opinion—

Mr HOWARD: Mr Chair, could I make a very brief comment, which I think will help: I think that we need to see the travel from farm to market in Melbourne as involving a number of roads. We all want the state highways to be of the highest quality so that people can travel at 100 kilometres an hour. We want many of the other major arterials—the B or C roads—to be at 100-kilometre-an-hour travel, but it will be some of the journey. If we have not got the unlimited funds to upgrade of the whole network, well, you need to look at speed limits. That is what we are saying. We appreciate the impact on rural communities. The two things are not inconsistent. It is complex; there are very many components to this. I hear the frustration in your question, and we understand that. But there are things that can be done that will not ruin the economics of country folk.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, can I say, gentlemen, that it actually gives governments a cop-out to suggest that you lower the speed limit instead of fixing the roads. The easiest thing a government can do is stick a reduced

speed limit sign on a road instead of fixing it. I do not think we should be encouraging governments to cop out of their responsibility for fixing roads.

Maybe you could comment on the change in philosophy—I think it happened in 1997—on roadside vegetation?

Mr HOWARD: Well, that is a very big issue. Look, in a pluralist society there are strong environmental proponents—we all know that. It became very obvious much earlier than that in my engineering career at the Shire of Dundas that we could not clear roadside vegetation or our hands would be lopped off, so we had to find other ways to deal with that risk as road engineers and as road safety people. Then I spent many years at the Shire of Yarra Ranges where the trees are pretty important. It is a matter of a balance. The barriers give us a way of getting through that problem. There have been some problems with how they are rolled out, but they are highly effective. I read the Auditor-General's report; I could not understand it, frankly. If you have a barrier, you will not be killed if you go off the road. That is what is really important.

Let us face it: the Swedes can clear the trees. They can have big, 20-metre verges that are clear of trees; we cannot. They have got trees everywhere; we have only got them, often, on the roadside. So that is a societal issue. I think the barriers are a response to that conflict. I think they are very effective. They could be better implemented—I do not disagree with that—on occasions. But we are never going to get away from having to deal with environmental demands. I mean, that is our society. It is like many of the things that are more sophisticated and more complex than the lives that we had 30 years ago. And I think we are not bad at dealing with that as a community generally.

Mrs McARTHUR: But isn't that contradictory if you say, 'We perhaps should get to zero blood alcohol, zero drugs in your system', but it is okay to have trees on the side of the road or vegetation right up to the side of the road in dangerous situations. That is okay because we like trees. Isn't that an issue? If you want to have a totally safe place where people go from A to B, surely we are not suggesting we drive through a park. We can go to state forests or whatever to enjoy the trees and gardens and whatever. Surely roads should be safe places.

Mr HOWARD: It is a very good point. It is a very complex issue. I cannot hope to deal with it in this environment in a few minutes. But the environment is important to a lot of people, and road safety is a window into our lives; it is a tough taskmaster. What we try and do is find the policy opportunities that might be achievable, and that is the basis of this discussion.

The CHAIR: I am sorry to have to cut our discussion and debate short. We have already gone 15 minutes over, and I am acutely aware that our next speaker is ready. I would like to thank you, David and Eric, for your submission and presentation. It has clearly taken the interest of committee members. I understand a number of committee members have actually expressed that they may have a number of extra questions. I am sorry I am not going to be able to get back to all of you, because a few of you messaged me. If we could collate those questions and send them over to you, would you be fine with trying to respond to those questions in a timely fashion?

Mr ANDERSON: Absolutely pleased to answer any of those and have a debate.

Mr HOWARD: Yes.

The CHAIR: It has been very enjoyable and very informative. We will forward those questions in due course. On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for coming along today.

Mr HOWARD: Thank you for your time. Good luck, stay safe.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.