

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 21 July 2020

*(via videoconference/teleconference)*

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**WITNESS**

Mr Troy Parsons.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. I wish to welcome members of the public who are watching via the live broadcast.

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 comments you make 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. 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. Could you please state your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then begin your presentation. Over to you, Troy.

**Mr PARSONS:** Good morning. Yes, my name is Troy Parsons, and I want to thank the committee for this important work. I want to thank you for continuing through this COVID thing. And I guess, on that note, thanks to you, as members of our government, for the bold action the government has taken on this COVID-19. By taking bold political action you have saved the lives of many Victorians. By the same token, the city of Oslo took bold political action on traffic violence. In 2019 they saw effective Vision Zero, with zero pedestrian fatalities and zero cyclist fatalities. Most hearteningly, no children were killed by traffic violence in all of Norway for that year. How wonderful it will be to soon see the same in Victoria. And what a great success it will be when inner Melbourne, the size of Oslo, can claim no person died in our transport system. So I applaud this committee's courage and commitment to taking the same bold actions to eliminate lives lost in our transport system.

The committee has received many great submissions. I have read probably the majority of them. I ask, as you review them and speak with other submitters, to never leave this triangle out of your mind—that being the hierarchy of risk control, which is in my submission. This hierarchy is the industry gold standard for eliminating deaths and serious injury to people. At the top we have got 'Elimination': if you eliminate the risk, of course there is no death or serious injury. Below that is 'Substitution': by replacing a deadly hazard with a safe alternative, you may eliminate or at least significantly reduce death and injury. Below that we have got engineering controls: you know, some technical barrier to a risk—maybe it is a guard on a lathe or something like that. And then at the lower levels we have got administrative controls and finally personal and protective equipment.

These lower levels are quite often clumped into what we call cultural safety, particularly when it relates to our road culture. And this is because sometimes they include the red herrings we chase because we are unwilling to face up to reality. As an example, we Australians are often left scratching our heads at the US gun debate. From the outside the solution is pretty obvious, but from the inside a kind of mass cognitive dissonance means they cannot take meaningful action to stem the plague of gun violence in the US.

So a lot of the time when you mention these things people sort of think that, 'We can't do that'. But we actually already do a lot of this stuff, you know? Bourke Street Mall and then more recently Acland Street in St Kilda are great, wonderful people-filled places now, where we have actually eliminated the risk of injury to people in this regard. Part of Norway's success was them putting 'heart zones' around schools to eliminate vehicular risks to children—so doing the things that count. Melburnians frequently get around by walking or cycling or on a train or tram. As we do so, we pose no threat to others. By substituting a safe mode of transport, we create a safe city; this was quantitatively explored in the research paper by Dr Jason Thompson that I included in my submission, and that paper is quite interesting. He shows a very strong correlation between the investment of space in rail corridors with a reduction in transport-related deaths.

The previous submission you had on driver training was excellent; I really enjoyed that. And that is certainly important stuff, but even substituting private vehicle trips—taxi trips or rideshare—might be an effective thing, because we are effectively substituting in a professionally trained driver. Before, there was the example of the stereotypical hoon in the cap backwards in the ute. What if he was a lout on a bicycle instead? A lout on a bicycle is at best an annoyance or a jerk, but a lout in a high-powered motor vehicle is potentially lethal. We actually already do a lot of this stuff in Melbourne, and we can do a lot more of it. What I ask is that the actual safety sits in these top layers, and I would like to see a lot of that come out of this committee hearing.

Of course this cuts both ways, and this is why our lives lost has increased. While we have spent most of our time kind of fiddling around at the bottom layers achieving marginal improvements, we have kind of gone backwards on a lot of the top layers. In terms of eliminating risk, of course, we have got more vehicles and more kilometres driven than ever. Substitution—instead of the smaller vehicles that we used to have, they are now substituted with larger and more dangerous vehicles. And in terms of engineering, hood design and crumple zones are now protected by roo bars and stuff like that. In fact on the BBC I just saw a pretty interesting article on the post-Brexit trade talks between the UK the US. The UK are refusing to allow the import of US SUVs because they fail to meet their quite stringent safety standards. And of course the UK has got a pretty admirable road safety record that we could strive towards. So I guess that is the main point I would like to make in my submission, and that is where we keep our focus.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Troy. I appreciate your perspective. I have got a few questions, but I would not say that cycling poses no threat to others because I had a family friend that was actually knocked over by a cyclist and lost her life through a head trauma from falling over in Melbourne's CBD not too long ago—only a few short years ago. So I would not say that cyclists pose no threat to pedestrians and others, but obviously relative to vehicles such as cars they are a much lesser threat to pedestrians and vulnerable groups on our roads.

**Mr QUILTY:** It seems to me that most of your submission was very Melbourne-centric. I do not know if you paid much attention to drivers in regional and rural areas who might need cars that go faster than 30 kilometres an hour. Can you comment on that?

**Mr PARSONS:** Sorry, are you asking if I gave a lot of consideration to that?

**Mr QUILTY:** I feel like there is very little in your submission that applies to regional areas and you have not put much thought into how regional people use cars.

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes, my submission is certainly very urban-centric. But I have lived across a number of countries, and even living in the US, which is certainly a sprawling, car-centric society, their regional towns, in my experience, were actually far more pleasant to walk around and more accessible in that regard. They are still a bit more compact and just have better amenity for that kind of stuff, so alternative forms of transport were more viable. In other countries, in terms of this hierarchy of risk controls the Netherlands is the gold standard for isolating people from the risks. Even in regional areas they provide separated cycle paths, for instance, away from any road that is over sort of—I don't know—50 kilometres an hour whatever it is. And those modes of transport still have a really high mode share in those regions.

**Mr QUILTY:** Just picking up on, for example, powerful cars and roo bars, they serve obvious purposes driving on rural roads. I can get out, go around and get back in again safely, and the roo bar obviously protects my car from being ruined if a kangaroo happens to jump on the road as they do from time to time. I feel like you are dismissing these things a little bit too quickly.

**Mr PARSONS:** Well, I do not know. One of the things I mentioned in the submission was that roo bars are completely unyielding, and I am not sure that is the correct solution. Perhaps roo bars should actually be yielding instead, and I believe there can be engineering solutions to that. Also, certainly the requirements of regional Victoria are different to urban Victoria, but what we see around urban Melbourne is air-conditioning contractors and cabling technicians driving around with roo bars which serve absolutely no purpose whatsoever. So I think it is really lacklustre application of controls in our society that allows something that helps protect regional Victorians but is imposing a significant threat on those in dense urban areas.

**Mr QUILTY:** You touched on e-bikes in your submission. I understand you say that cars should have more restrictions. We were thinking that we should lift the speed limits on e-bikes because they are far less deadly and by making them more useful get more transition to cars. Do you have a comment on that?

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes, that is a reasonable thing to look at. All of those things are kind of a matter of degrees, so in terms of shifting the ones on bikes, in my personal opinion I think the speed is probably about right, because above 25 k you are kind of using your body power. But I think the main thing is that people sometimes just need a bit more wattage if they have got kids on the back or they are carrying a load for work or something like that. But our motor vehicles, for instance, have no controls whatever. So it is not a matter of degrees; it is just that there are none at all. So implementing something would be a good step forward—a very important step forward.

**Mr QUILTY:** Okay. I am keen to hear you talk about how you would roll out car-free zones around schools, but perhaps someone else will touch on that.

**Mr PARSONS:** A lot of the schools around where I live—I think it is easy to do. They are not on main roads. Schools that are on main roads obviously are a bit more difficult. Many countries, particularly in Europe, do this—there is a car-free zone within a certain distance of the school. People who do drive may park somewhere and then walk the last 400 metres or whatever it is. But it really helps kids get out and independently get to school, particularly those who go to local schools. Some of those schools in Yarra are already on streets that provide some filtering, so part of the problem is already done. The problems are not technical; the problems are really political.

**Mr BARTON:** Good morning, Troy. I just want to touch on what you are saying about making vehicle manufacturers accountable—we should all be driving smaller cars as such. Australian design rules are a federal government policy, and I would put to you that having a smaller car is not necessarily safer. The federal and state governments are encouraging people to get into newer cars. We have got ABS brakes, lane variations, airbags—all those sorts of things. There has been an enormous amount of work done around cars. Having what you are saying are less powerful cars—you can have a one-cylinder Daihatsu drive into a tree at 100 kilometres an hour; that is going to have a fatal result. It is irrelevant whether it has got eight cylinders or whether it has got one cylinder.

The other thing in terms of how we move around is that this is a big country, and a lot of people are outside of the tram tracks. We tow stuff, we pull horse floats, we take stuff down to the tip—all those sorts of things—so there is an absolute need. And I also would say in terms of where you are saying things like you see tradespeople driving around the metropolitan area with a bull bar that is not necessary that you are unaware that that very person may be driving back to Albury, or he may be going back to Wangaratta—that is where he lives, but he has been working in Melbourne. It sounds awful, but in terms of numbers I think the bull bar is not a really major issue in the road toll overall. What do you say to that?

**Mr PARSONS:** My main point is I think we need more statistics on that. As we have seen in the US, the proliferation of large vehicles has contributed to a larger number of pedestrians being killed and other vulnerable road users being killed. And in your example, larger vehicles have been causing more deaths and fatalities and serious injuries in those people in smaller vehicles. So there is protection of the person in the vehicle, but there is also the protection of the people outside of the vehicle. Both of those need to be considered in what we do. It is not to say airbags are not important—of course they are—but by the same token crumple zones and all those things are important to protect occupants of other vehicles and other people on the street.

In terms of trips to the tip and all that stuff, of course all of that stuff needs to happen, but the main problem in a lot of Australia is we do not really give people a meaningful choice. In the inner areas we do have more choice. As you say, it is quite easy to go and get on a tram or a train or possibly walk to your local shops. In a lot of these new areas on the outer fringes of Melbourne we have created transport poverty: people do not have any choice in the way they get around. They do not have any rail connections, they do not have tram connections and they do not have bus connections. They have no alternative but to get in a car, and that further puts a lot of costs on these households. And those people who may choose to try to walk or cycle somewhere are put into more significant conflict with the high volume of traffic that ensues, so by not allowing the choice we are creating a more dangerous environment. Going to the tip is just one type of trip, which is quite infrequent, but going to the shops is an everyday occurrence. There is really no reason why people should not be able to easily walk or ride—or whatever it is—to the shops.

**Mr BARTON:** If it is practical. You will not get a stronger advocate than me to try and convert people to move to use the free trams in Melbourne. I think we should be expanding that, and we should encourage public

transport at every opportunity. But what we are talking about is a cultural shift and getting people to leave their cars behind when they can. And that comes down to starting with the kids, and they should be getting free public transport now. Some of my colleagues do not believe that, but it is a cultural shift and we have got to find a way of doing it. But there is also a cost. We have 25 million people here—5 million people in Victoria. How do we pay for it?

**Mr PARSONS:** Actually, I believe it is the other way around. I think we are paying for it already. A sprawled city is far more costly in terms of the infrastructure required to service it. If you just think about it logically, in a highly sprawled, spread-out city, far more paving and road is required. More sewerage is required, and more telecommunications is required. We pay more in all the other services to those in terms of garbage collection and so on. Denser cities are cheaper to accommodate all that kind of stuff. Ultimately it is kind of like we went down the wrong road a bit, so to speak, with that one. We are paying the costs already in terms of a monomodal model for how we get around.

Having it car centric is a problem that has perpetuated us, and then we feel like we cannot dig ourselves out of it, whereas in urban design circles it is often kind of noted that if you design a city exclusively around car travel it does not really work for anyone at all. It does not work for walking, it is hard to ride around, public transport is bad and of course everyone gets stuck in cars, so it does not even work for those who need to drive. But if you have a city that is actually designed with transport options—you can walk, you can ride, you can jump on a train—it actually works better for those people who need to drive because they are not fighting for a limited amount of space in a mode of transport that is kind of geometrically unsustainable. When everyone tries to get in the car—you just look at the freeway or Hoddle Street or whatever—it just does not scale to the kind of city with the population of Melbourne, whereas you look at far bigger cities—a couple of years ago I was in Shanghai. Shanghai is 25 million people. It is the size of our whole country in a city. Yet it was so easy to get around. I could ride. It was safe. There was not any aggression on the street. It was a really interesting thing to behold.

**Mr BARTON:** That is interesting. Thank you, Troy.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** One of your recommendations talks about changing planning laws away from car-centric travel, and I know we have touched on areas around schools. Are there any particular laws or changes that you would like to see happen or you think need to happen to achieve that?

**Mr PARSONS:** For inner Melbourne residents one big problem, for instance, is mandated parking requirements. Far more parking is put in the inner city than is needed or ends up being used. Around the corner from me there is a property that went up I think literally 100 metres from the train entrance. It is right near the Capital City Trail. There is a bus stop right outside and all this stuff. And yet the developer had to build many metres below ground in order just to put in a car park. So I think that is fairly damaging.

Also, the way we build parking is kind of problematic. We tend to put it in every building, which not only creates streetscapes that are kind of ugly but, if you think of a streetscape, creates more driveways which are more mid-block crossings, which introduce a lot of risk to people who walk along there, whereas many American cities, like New York, for instance, might have a single privatised parking facility on the street. What that means is there is a single entrance in and out for cars. People who want to buy a property are not paying for parking they do not want to use. If they do want parking, they pay for it. These things do not come for free. At the end of the day someone pays for it. The developer has got to build it; he has got to pass on that cost. We pay for it in our housing costs. In terms of our housing shortage, it also increases our unaffordable housing problem. That is an instance of planning laws that I think are problematic—that we mandate parking, for instance, in well-served transit corridors.

I suppose the other main one would be in relation to our residential streets. The world leaders of road safety are probably the Dutch—or at least they are up there. They have their sustainable safety paradigm, and one of the principles of that is homogeneity. Their streets have a singular purpose, and that is also clearly conveyed to users. They only have three types. They have through roads—that is a fast road for travelling distances, like freeways, motorways, trunk roads, all that kind of stuff. Then you have an access road—that is your end of destination; that is where people live and work. They are not mixed. Then you have your distributor road, which kind of connects those things up. In Melbourne I think we have a problem with our residential streets in

that they all function as through routes, and because people can drive quickly and fast through them, they do, and the results are fatal.

In terms of cultural change—and I acknowledge some of these things are politically hard to sell—people like living on quiet streets. They fetch higher house prices. No-one wants to live on a street where people are barrelling through it. I think if our residential streets by default were filtered out—people could walk through them and ride through them but you could not get all those fast-moving motor vehicles travelling through—you would get a lot of that other stuff for free. People would start walking because they can and it is safe and it is enjoyable. So that would be one thing I would like to see in our road network. How that quite relates to planning I am not entirely sure.

**Mr FINN:** Troy, thank you very much for a very interesting submission. I am interested in a couple of points that you made and getting a bit of expansion on those points. You are recommending that a new licence type be established to test-drive large utility vehicles. I am just wondering what your definition of large utility vehicles might be.

**Mr PARSONS:** I do not quite know how that would apply. I cannot really recommend that necessarily. You might need to speak to VicRoads or RACV or something on how that works. I do not know if it is vehicles over a certain mass or vehicles over a certain power or height or whatever.

**Mr FINN:** Okay; fine. Now, you have also proposed that residential areas be redesigned to prevent drivers from using residential streets to weave through traffic or rat-run. I am just wondering how you would go about redesigning residential streets. Are we talking about walls up at the end of streets and all that sort of thing that we see through North Melbourne and places like that?

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes, similar to that. So in terms of like around Melbourne, Canning Street is a pretty good example that we have. I am not sure if you are familiar with that, but that just has a few areas—

**Mr FINN:** I am.

**Mr PARSONS:** A smaller one—Napier Street—is quite a good example. And you know, the other upshot of those is they are actually very pleasant and beautiful streets and highly sought after. The other thing is I feel like those kinds of interventions are relatively cheap to implement, and I think they are also kind of politically cheap to implement. Living in the City of Yarra, progress has been made recently in terms of putting in things like protected bike lanes and so on. But with protected bike lanes, while they are fantastic and very important things, there are two things in that they can be just, dollar-wise, expensive to implement. Every metre of what you lay down, be it freeway or bike track or rail, has a certain cost. And in those areas where it might cost on-street parking, that also becomes a political cost and a political barrier to our elected representatives. Whereas if you are able to take a street and then just put a pocket park or a garden at the end which stops motor traffic going through, you are not taking away anyone's parking so politically it is a far easier sell. You are making the street more beautiful so politically it is an easy sell, and in terms of the cost to probably a local government area, putting in a little garden or some bollards or something like that would seem to be a lot cheaper than say 5 kilometres of protected bike track. So that is why I think that is quite a good blueprint for remedying some of the issues we have in Melbourne.

**Mr FINN:** How far out would you take this plan?

**Mr PARSONS:** I would foresee that most of that would probably come down to local government areas to implement this kind of stuff. It may need the state government to assist with funding or enabling that to happen. It would just seem logical that that would kind of start more from within and start to emanate out. You know, having said that, I am not too sure of so much around Melbourne but sometimes you go to an outer suburb and you see this kind of stuff done anyway. A couple of years ago I was over in Perth. I got taken on a tour through one of the more northern suburbs of Perth, and it was really interesting that they had kind of designed this. Whereas in Melbourne we see really high cycling rates in the inner north of Melbourne, this part of Perth, which was a good 15 kilometres from the CBD I think, actually had the highest mode share of cycling in all of Perth. It was just because they had this wonderful street design of quiet streets linked up with a few bike tracks and so on.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Mr Parsons. Wow, there is a lot to unpack here. And this may seem like a very strange question, or a very silly question too, but I along with Mrs McArthur and a few others here, we are in regional electorates, and so, as you rightly said, a lot of the things that you talk about do not apply to us and could not apply to us simply because we do not have a public transport system. It is virtually non-existent. I cannot see regional people, for instance, even on a rainy day for instance, dropping their kids 400 metres from the primary school and allowing them to walk in the rain. They will want to be able to drop them—because that is not safe for them either, you know, on a public health basis—at the school.

The other thing I am just thinking of, and this perhaps ties into your imposing limits on manufacturers: vehicles are not necessarily more dangerous because they are larger. And indeed some time ago there was a limitation on probationary drivers—that they were not allowed to drive V8 cars, because those were the types of vehicles at the time which were considered the most powerful, and young men between the ages of 18 and 25 were the single most represented in road trauma and road death, and I believe they still are. But the effect of that was that these young men just graduated to going to six-cylinder and four-cylinder cars and spent their disposable income on various modes of increasing the power, and that encouraged a whole system of things like illegal street racing—all those sorts of things—which again resulted in a lot of trauma and death.

Out in our regional Victoria we have a need for vehicles that have a certain amount of power, because towing, as Mr Barton quite rightly pointed out, towing a horse float requires a vehicle with a certain amount of power. I mean otherwise you become a risk to other drivers on the road. If you are towing a horse float uphill and you do not have enough power to stay at the speed limit when you are going up that hill—or near to—you could well present an impediment to other traffic on the road, particularly large vehicles like B-double transport and things like that, which we also do need out in the regions because we need to be able to get produce that we produce to transportation hubs and distribution centres. I am just wondering where all that fits in with your reckoning.

**Mr PARSONS:** I do not know. I do not think everyone has horse floats. I think a lot of these high-powered vehicles are usually for vanity reasons. I think quite often they are not for practical reasons, particularly in urban areas anyway. But I certainly acknowledge regional Victoria needs a different approach, and I am not going to pretend I can be an expert on that, so I do not really want to tell you what is right or wrong for regional Victoria. In the terms of reference I think you even acknowledge that a different approach is needed for regional Victoria from Melbourne greater metro.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Apologies for my absence at the beginning. I was involved in another Zoom conference. Some might be surprised to find that I might be in furious agreement with my colleague Mr Meddick from Western Victoria on this matter, because, Troy, with great respect, I think this is a very inside-the-tram-tracks proposition. Please do not think that the City of Yarra could be replicated around Melbourne, let alone outside of the tram tracks. I do not know whether you are aware, but heavier vehicles, as they have been made, are actually safer in most instances. We certainly need reasonably strong, powerful vehicles out here in the country because, I can tell you, the road surfaces are so bad that if you have an urban car you will end up with new tyres every second week because the road edges are shocking and we are in grave trouble. We often need a bull bar because we have got kangaroos and things on the roads out in country Victoria outside those tram tracks in the City of Yarra.

As for dropping children at school distances away from the school, that is just to me totally impractical. I think parents have got a duty of care to their children, and they want to make sure that they get to school in the safest possible way. Sure, we do not want them involved in car accidents or pedestrian accidents, but banning people from dropping their children off at school certainly would not be politically acceptable, I think, let alone really practical. I can appreciate your position comes from within the City of Yarra or within the tram tracks, but you might have to be cognisant of what happens outside this very exclusive area.

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes, I totally agree. Many of those points were touched on earlier.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** My apologies for missing them.

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes, that is okay. When you say larger vehicles are safer, it depends—safer for whom? You are mostly talking about the occupants. Where I live and with the schools around here, I can tell you it is certainly the other way round. One thing we need to remember is the leading cause of death for kids is transport accidents, and for kids, I think, aged 10 to 14, four out of 10 deaths or maybe a bit higher are caused by some

kind of road crash. That is reprehensible. If we could eliminate that, that is a 40 per cent drop in fatality for young people. And it cuts both ways—you cannot say what is right for regional Victoria is right for urban Melbourne.

**The CHAIR:** I think a point that has already been addressed is exactly we are a victim of our urban sprawl. Some of the best examples, some of the cities or countries you mentioned such as the Netherlands, have got much better densities—maybe triple, maybe eight, nine times our density we have in Melbourne—so travelling from one end to the other is a lot easier. Even in metropolitan Melbourne it takes a much longer time. But I did notice that you did make about 20 recommendations for us to consider. Obviously some of them would be quite expensive and probably you will not get much necessary public support for their implementation. Which would be the two or three recommendations that you think this government needs to take on board or this committee needs to take on board? I know there are about 20 recommendations, when I looked at your submission. Some of them were quite interesting; some of them were quite good. But what would be the one or two recommendations that you would say should be a priority for this committee? That is a tough question.

**Mr PARSONS:** Yes. I think probably the main one is really about our planning at least for Melbourne metro, so planning laws allowing alternatives that are not just car travel and single-purpose streets, say, perhaps looking at the Dutch concept of sustainable transport where they have single-purpose streets that clearly convey their intended purpose.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that, Troy.

**Mr PARSONS:** I think probably the only other one is this trend that they have noted in the US, where their road deaths have been going up as well. They have identified that it relates to large vehicles. We survived very fine for decades without these modern oversized vehicles, so I really truly do not believe they are necessary any more than you. We got around in the 80s just fine. We did not have the same technical safety things in vehicles like airbags and so on, but we can have all that great stuff without these giant trucks as the default choice of getting people around. So I think for safety standards of vehicles we should look to Europe on what their safety standards are.

**The CHAIR:** It has been an interesting presentation, Mr Parsons. I have enjoyed the debate. It has obviously rattled some of our committee members, but more importantly it does bring to focus the differences between inner urban, outer urban and rural areas of Australia. So I appreciate the debate, and I want to thank you on behalf of the whole committee for your presentation and your submission. I enjoyed reading it, and it turned my mind to some issues that I had not considered before—definitely a different angle—so I appreciate that. Thank you very much for your contribution.

**Mr PARSONS:** Thank you kindly, and I wish you guys really sincerely the best of luck in addressing our road toll.

**Witness withdrew.**