

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Melbourne—Tuesday, 21 July 2020

(via videoconference/teleconference)

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Mr Peter Cox.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the inquiry into Victoria's road toll. We wish to welcome any members of the public that 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 provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide in this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment made outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false 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 I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Can you please state your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then begin your presentation? Over to you, Peter.

Mr COX: Thank you very much. My name is Peter Cox. I live in California Gully, which is a part of Bendigo. Thanks for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. During 1967 and 1973 I was a researcher and community activist working with many communities throughout Victoria on the road toll. I commend all those people over the last 50 years that have contributed to such a dramatic decline in death and injury on our roads. I believe very strongly in the 'all the community' approach. I believe it is the most singular, major factor why the campaign has been successful and sustained over such a long period.

I talk to you today not as an expert on the road toll but as a community development worker. I was a member of the Young Christian Workers movement back in the 60s and early 70s—better known as the YCW. And of course, as I said, like most other organisations we experienced death amongst our members. A particular accident where Paul Ladds died in 1967 highlighted that we needed to do something, particularly as so many young people were involved in road accidents. The YCW started a campaign at that time for community action to reduce the road toll, and then we joined with other organisations and the government to continue that. Social action on the road toll rather than road safety is what it was all about in those days. We undertook some research on the 1200 files in Russell Street police headquarters. That was in 1971, and it led to slogans like 'Turn off before .05', 'Country people die on country roads', 'Seat belts save lives' and 'Be light, be seen'.

In 1969 I was working full-time for the YCW, and then in 1972 I worked for Don Gibb and Associates, who had a contract with the state government to promote measures to reduce the road toll. Then in 1973 I worked for *Outcry*, which was basically a newsletter that went out to young people and organisations. I was quite impressed when I saw this book, *From Roadside to Recovery*, and I think the front cover says it all. In other words, back in the 1960s, if someone was invited to go and speak to schools or organisations, they talked about road safety and how we could drive safer. The change, I think, that occurred is that it was about social action. The question that was asked when we went to speak at meetings after that time was, 'What can you do to reduce the road toll?'. I guess from my community work experience it all amounts to: people who are directly involved in the particular social issue that is having a devastating effect are the best people to comment, with the experts and research, to bring about change.

In our research what was quite thrilling about it was that we did not have computers and all those sorts of things in those days, so we had five or six maps on the wall and we actually put a pin for every fatality—for every driver, passenger or pedestrian et cetera. But when we went back to the office, the police headquarters—I remember still vividly—the four of us sat in an office and we said to ourselves, 'Well, obviously alcohol is having a major effect and causing road accidents', and we came up with 'Turn off before .05'. To see that as such a prominent slogan in the years after that time was very pleasing. The attitude in the 1960s was basically 'You're not going to cut the road toll. It's a fact of life. Everybody's out there driving'. Something had to change, and that community input, I believe, was what it was all about.

Death on our roads is unacceptable, and the *Towards Zero* road safety strategy action plan demonstrates the government's commitment to reducing these fatalities. Perhaps it is now time to take a step further to introduce a tally of road injuries. Just doing a bit of research on the computer over the last few months, it was quite

difficult to get stories and information about the injuries that are occurring. Once I did get some, there is a different story about the people who are affected in fatalities compared to injuries. We know that the males have had a dominant bearing on the road toll for so many years, but when you look at the injuries, while for deaths 25 per cent are women or female, the injury rate for females goes up to 43 per cent. So it seems to me that there is a different story that can be told and one that needs to be. With the 25 per cent reduction this year in fatalities, which no doubt has a bearing in relation to the COVID-19—not so many drivers on the road—it seems to me that the stories need to be told, and it is just not about the facilities.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Peter. Most of us on the committee, or probably all of us, have read your submission, and I found it quite interesting. I appreciate your advocacy over many, many years on this issue. It has clearly touched you, and you have touched many others in raising awareness. I may allow for questions, and then we can get back if we have time at the end.

Mr FINN: Peter, thank you for your contribution today, and can I congratulate you and thank you for your contribution indeed over many years. If we had more like you, we would have a better world. So I thank you for your contribution. I just point out, for the benefit of myself and Mr Gepp, those years that you spoke of—67 to 73—encompassed three Richmond premierships, so that was pretty good as well, which would please anybody.

Mr COX: I am a Richmond supporter myself.

Mr FINN: You are a Tiger man?

Mr COX: I am.

Mr FINN: You are a good man. I knew you were a good man. There was something about you. I could pick it.

Mr GEPP: Let us just adopt your recommendations. That is it.

Mr FINN: Peter, I know that the YCW is a great organisation, and I know that over a long period of time they did a great deal of work and obviously back in the 60s did a great deal of work as well. In 2020 have public attitudes changed? We see a lot of volunteering dropping off these days in a wide variety of groups. Who would be driving this campaign if we were to adopt it in 2020, or would it have to be coming from the government?

Mr COX: Well, you might have noticed that I have suggested that the police probably need to be taking a backward step in relation to education and the whole media campaign. I think the people that drive it are the professionals on the front line, who are seeing that the people that are injured and the families that have been affected by a death have something really important to say. I think that is what it is all about—getting those stories on regular basis out in the media.

Obviously the government has got a funding program. What concerns me a little bit is that in country Victoria we see all these barriers that have been put up, and that is a response to country people dying on country roads. But what I am not seeing is the effort in behavioural change. In other words, drivers particularly have to take responsibility themselves, and we need to be encouraging them, or empowering them, to have the knowledge. I remember in a conference—500 young people, and the question came from the audience and asked the police commissioner at the time: how many beers can a driver have in an hour to stay under .05? Of course they could not answer the question. We did not know at that point of time.

The benefit of people who are affected directly and involved coming up with ideas—well, we needed to change that. So we were given the task. We entered into a partnership with Dr Santamaria at St Vincent's Hospital, and they ran an experiment. It was our job to get 200 people of different ages, different weights, different backgrounds. They could come along and they had to drink at the Sandown hotel for a couple of hours, and as a result of that we found that five beers in an hour or two glasses of wine in an hour—it meant something to people. Now, we could not have run the 'Turn off before .05' campaign if we did not know that.

And so it seems to me we do not have, I guess, the many organisations that were around in the 60s and 70s. And things have changed because people generally do not join organisations, but that does not mean to say that you cannot have a group of people who are managing the publicity—the media campaign—getting those

stories out and asking what people are thinking. And of course, you know, in the early 70s, 55 per cent of those people who died on our roads were under 25. They are the people that said, ‘Well, how many beers can you have in an hour?’, so it was pretty relevant. So involving ordinary people through social media and organisations can hit the nail on the head and keep the people who have the contracts to do that media work on the ball.

Mr FINN: Thanks, Peter. And thank you for your contribution again.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Peter, for your advocacy over a long period of time. Clearly your passion for this issue in particular is very evident. And you get two ticks from me today: you are a Tigers supporter and I also am a resident of Bendigo—just up the street and around the corner from good old Cal Gully. So thanks for coming along today.

Peter, I suspect that some of what you have just said will also answer the question that I have got. You talk in your submission a lot about country drivers and the impact of the road toll on regional drivers and regional communities, and you are suggesting that we find a way to empower country drivers to take action to reduce these horrible road toll figures. Can you just take us through a little bit of what you are getting at there, what your proposition would be around how we go about empowering people and what they would be doing?

Mr COX: Well, back 50 years ago I guess there was a thought in rural areas that it was the city people coming to rural Victoria and they were the ones being killed. So it was not until we mapped where the accidents occurred and where the drivers lived that we actually convinced ourselves of the stories about country people dying on country roads. And I think that message is probably not getting out there, or I am not seeing that. When you see a TV ad there is not a lot about country drivers—and they need to take responsibility for it. And so if they do not know or are not aware or it is not before them on a regular basis, we are not reminding them that they do have responsibility. The days went in the late 60s—well, I hope they did—that we need to tell people to drive safer. You just cannot make a statement like that these days, yet you still see it in ads. It does not say anything.

If I could re-emphasise: doing the research and having an outcome from it is what I think it is all about. In other words, with seatbelts, for instance, we travelled country Victoria, at shows and whatnot, not to talk to people about the importance of wearing seatbelts but we had a slide that we had at shopping centres, shows and markets all over the state. We travelled around with it, and we put people at the top of the slide with a seatbelt on. They came down the slide on wheels at a fair pace, and they could come to understand what it meant if you did not have the seatbelt on. Research has to be very practical so as we are getting our message across. And it is not just on TV; it has to be done on the ground in communities. With fewer organisations around that might do that, schools present a wonderful opportunity to run a social action campaign survey involving particularly the VCE students who are about to get their licence. So I guess what I am saying is that part of the research can be the education itself and the people that are directly affected in the road fatality and injury numbers need to be involved in that research so they are discovering for themselves what is causing road accidents and what are some of the issues that might alleviate that.

Another good example last week—talking about Richmond—was Bachar Houli coming out and talking about his mum being in hospital on social media. Now, he is a community leader, both in football and in his own community, and he is a respected person. We need to have that happen time and time again. In our day, with Peter Brock as a 20-year-old, it was just great going to a public meeting in Ballarat or Mildura or Wodonga—wherever—and having him on the stage because he was just becoming a respected driver and his 05 car was around for so long and meant so much to so many people.

Mr QUILTY: I guess I will be brief, and I respect your passion for this issue. If we wanted to end the road toll tomorrow, we could. We could ban cars. We do not do that because those cars are useful to us. In fact I take objection to the whole Towards Zero thing. The idea we can get to a zero road toll is nonsense. We accept a certain level of death. The question is: what level of death are we willing to accept and at what cost? This is in fact the whole process of government. We should have probably paid a bit more attention to this with the whole COVID-19 thing. What are we prepared to spend to prevent a death? I am not sure if there is a question here or not, but I feel like there is a level of death that we need to accept as a government and move on.

Mr COX: I do not accept that. That was the attitude during the 60s: that we could not bring it down from 1100 deaths on our roads. And it has been proven time and time again that it is possible. The government is spending \$1.4 billion on the *Towards Zero* campaign. I think what is really important is that there is balance. In other words, engineers will do something about roads. The car industry can do something about, like, seatbelts. For instance, if using mobile phones is a factor in road accidents today, well, decisive action needs to be taken about that. With seatbelts, what happened back then was that we were able to put seatbelts into older cars; not everyone can afford to go out and buy a new, safe car with the requirements that it takes to drive safely on our roads today. And so we need to be introducing measures so that if mobile phones are in fact a problem, we will ban mobile phones in cars—apart from hands-free—and come up with a cheap alternative for hands-free in the older cars.

But where is the balance in behavioural change? I am not seeing anything in papers or in social media or TV advertising trying to bring about behavioural change. When you look at reducing alcohol and its effects on road accidents and seatbelts and its effect on road accidents, that was all about behavioural change—the story got out there. So when it comes to expenditure, if you are spending millions and millions of dollars in putting barriers up to stop people running off the road, it seems to me that there needs to be more balance. There may be lots of money spent on behavioural change, but what I am saying is I am not seeing that. It is a cheaper and effective way, which was demonstrated back in the 70s, to change the road toll.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Peter. I have a different view to my friend and colleague Mr Quilty. I do support the *Towards Zero* program. I think it is a fantastic program, and it is something that we should constantly aspire to. You clearly have seen over a long period of time, from the 70s right through to now, the very changing nature of road safety programs, and I think you are actually on the money in terms of behavioural. We have better cars and we have better infrastructure, but we have not changed the behaviour of people. We still have people drink driving. We know that deaths where people are affected by drugs are now greater than those who are drinking. I think even this year people are still not wearing their seatbelts. I think there have been 17 deaths this year where people did not have their seatbelt on. People have gone as far as going down to the wreckers to buy the buckle so they could clip it in to shut their alarm off. I just find that staggering that we still have not won some of those fights.

I think what you are suggesting is this education and this behavioural change where it becomes socially unacceptable. I can certainly remember as a young bloke getting in our car, it just was not cool to drink and drive. You just stopped doing it. You stopped doing it. However, people will still do it. I think we probably have become used to having deaths on the road—and we should not have. So I agree with you; I think we have to get into people's faces a bit. My question—sorry, I am just rambling—is getting towards the TAC programs where they had some very graphic advertising. I think that worked. I feel that it did. What did you think of those?

Mr COX: Yes, I think the graphics work, but at some stage people may turn off from that. I am saying the road toll is a social issue that needs work done by communities. In other words communities need to take on responsibility, and no stone is left unturned to get that road toll down. Organisations have to be challenged. I remember I think it was in 71 you had the Courage brewery introduce a heavy beer, and their media launch was at the Australia Hotel in Collins Street. And we were there and we were tipping their bottles of heavy beer down the gutter drain, and that got acknowledgement through the media. But it was young people saying to other young drivers that just—and the name 'courage', I mean, that is why we all drank in those days.

Mr BARTON: The old Dutch courage, yes.

Mr COX: To give us the courage to do what we might not do. No stone should be left unturned. Communities need to take responsibility, and it could also be a job creation program, in other words, to get some ambassadors, not social workers but social action workers, out there talking to those most affected by road accidents and encouraging them to tell their story. It is very different now of course, because what is it? I am not too sure of the numbers of under-25s involved in death and injury right at this point of time.

Mr BARTON: It is too many.

Mr COX: It is too many, but back in the late 60s, early 70s it was 55 per cent. I think that is down to about 25 per cent now. I might be wrong on that, but it is around those figures. But when you analyse the figures,

particularly with the over-60s, the very people that were being killed and injured most on our roads back in the 60s are now the biggest group that are in fact being killed and injured on our roads today. So again you just do not have the social action program with young people today; you pinpoint who are the people that are most affected and get their stories out so it can repeat itself. Involve people and they will respond.

Mrs McARTHUR: Despite the fact this is not actually the football show, the TAC do spend a lot of money, it seems to me, advertising in football stadiums. I do not know whether you think that is working. And I am very pleased you have raised the issue of those barriers, where they do spend half a billion and counting on those devices, which are to save us from ourselves, apparently. And while I totally agree with you that we need community activism on all this—and there are not enough Peters, I think, in the world to help us these days; everybody is very busy doing all sorts of things, probably a lot of them not terribly productive—we perhaps also have to encourage people to be individually responsible for their own actions and for those of their dependents and the rest of the community, because sometimes it is always somebody else's fault and we always think somebody else should fix the problem, often government. That actually means the taxpayer. I think we do need a better approach to how we change people's behaviour, and it is about changing their behaviour to be responsible. We are largely irresponsible in many areas.

So I do not know how you think you can change this mindset these days. You know, we can have 10 000 people protesting about all sorts of things, but how can we motivate people to get excited about changing the road toll? Maybe more good billboards, yes, but they might have to be in a variety of languages it seems because we do have a problem with international drivers causing accidents as well. Reading English road signs seems to be an issue, let alone knowing what the rules might be. So I do not know how you think, in your local area and Mr Gepp's great electorate of Northern Victoria and that fine city of Bendigo, you are going at drumming up community support to get excited about changing people's behaviour like you have done in the past. How will we go about getting people motivated as individuals and as a group?

Mr COX: The word 'story' is what it is all about, I believe. In other words, people have experiences and they need to talk about them. You know, back in the early 70s Victoria had its citizens, particularly its young citizens, who were running local campaigns. For instance, lots of towns pulled out some crashed vehicles and put them at the sign of their local towns. So there was a partnership between an organisation, the local government, the local hospital and the local car wreckers, and people saw it as a social action. I saw it, and many of my friends saw it, as an injustice. In other words, we had over 1100 people die on our roads and there was no good reason why that was happening. Because you went for a licence test and you drove around the block and did not even answer one question about alcohol. You had no understanding of what speed was or your responsibility when it came to pedestrians. So people are looking for meaning, and the way I believe you give meaning is through the stories.

I guess the hospitals have a big story to tell today, and that is why I am thinking that with so many social issues. There was a woman from Latrobe University who I saw in an article last week with child abuse issues. It came about over many years to get something done about it because those people who were affected under very difficult circumstances had the courage to speak out.

So the message I guess I am giving today is not just about the road toll. I have had the experience working with unemployed people who created their own businesses and in education, people who left school in year 8 or whatever it was, being re-educated, and how best that can happen. So I guess my main message is that we need to be asking the people that are most affected by a particular issue what it means to them and what do they think are the answers. And that means that comes back to the balance of expenditure, and all three areas are really important—the infrastructure of the roads, the safety of vehicles and the behavioural change—but there needs to be an expenditure balance between the three of them.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, Peter, we have all been impressed by your passion and advocacy on this issue for many years. We wish to thank you for your submission and your presentation. Thank you today for coming along.

Mr COX: Thank you—much appreciated with the opportunity of being here.

Witness withdrew.