TRANSCRIPT

LAW REFORM, ROAD AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17

Wodonga — 4 October 2016

Members

Mr Geoff Howard — Chair
Mr Bill Tilley — Deputy Chair
Mr Martin Dixon
Mr Khalil Eideh

Ms Fiona Patten
Ms Natalie Suleyman
Mr Murray Thompson

Staff

Executive officer: Ms Yuki Simmonds

Witness

Mr Bernie Squire, manager, Wodonga Chamber of Commerce.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — As the parliamentary Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee commences, it is certainly good to be here at Wodonga Senior Secondary College campus today. Bernie Squire is the first person presenting to us today, from the Wodonga Chamber of Commerce. We are undertaking an inquiry into the possibility of lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17.

By way of introduction, we did open up for written submissions a little more than three months ago. We have had 91 submissions come in to us, we have also been having hearings in Melbourne and more recently in Ballarat and Warrnambool and it seemed appropriate to come up to border territory today to be here in Wodonga.

The other thing I also say to people who are presenting to us is that Hansard staff are here recording the total of the discussion that we have. A transcript of the relevant component of the discussion will come back to each person. Bernie, you will get a transcript in a couple of weeks of your contribution for you to correct any misrepresentations that you believe are there. After that this becomes part of the public record. People who speak to us today are covered by parliamentary privilege. I do not know whether that is relevant, but you would remember that only applies in here if you were to say something. If you said the same sorts of things outside, a different set of circumstances hold, and you could be held for libel if you were to take advantage of parliamentary privilege in here. However, I think that is all I need to say.

It is good to have you here, Bernie. You have already spoken to me before and said you used to come from my territory of Ballarat area, worked in local government and have had an interesting history in the golfing world since that time but now represent the chamber of commerce here in Wodonga. We are pleased to have you come and join us. I welcome your initial series of statements or what you would like to share with us, and then we will be pleased to enter into a bit of discussion with you after that. So over to you.

Mr SQUIRES — I guess that I am the first to present to the committee. Being in the leadership role that I do have in Wodonga, I would like to welcome you guys to Wodonga. I hope you have a successful time here. Please feel free to go out and do some shopping, stay in the Quest apartments and make sure you ask people if they are chamber members. If they are not, then gently refer them back to me; that would be officially appreciated.

I took some notes this morning, and in my haste to get here and worrying about the rain, I have left them back in my office, but I am sure I will remember most of that. I probably sit here with two hats on, so I will give a little bit of personal anecdotal evidence that I do have from my history in the golf industry, and then I will get to the chamber submission.

As a golf pro in the early 2000s, when I moved to Wodonga I was employing quite a lot of younger staff for a number of reasons, the main one being that was all I could afford initially. Having come from Ballarat and not really understanding the border situation, it was quite interesting for me to then start employing younger boys in particular, because it was a golfing environment and there were not a lot of girls around. A couple of younger boys took the opportunity to, let us say, falsify their home address so that they could get their licence 12 months earlier, because in New South Wales they can get their licence at 17 rather than 18, as in Victoria, so they mysteriously lived with aunty or uncle whoever. I was quite naive to that practice, but it does actually happen.

That is, I guess, some anecdotal evidence from a little while ago when I was employing young people myself. I do not quite have as much current experience with that, but it certainly was happening in the early 2000s, and I cannot see any reason why it is still not happening today.

If I head to the chamber submission, which I believe you all would have a copy of — or hopefully you have — I will talk to that somewhat, hopefully not to bore you with the stuff that you have already gone through. The chamber itself is the fourth-biggest regional chamber of commerce in Victoria, behind Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo. We currently have about 380 members, so it is not an insignificant chamber by any means, and we do a lot of surveying of our membership. Whilst I have some personal opinions, hopefully what I will impress upon you today is the view of the chamber rather than just my own personal opinion. That is why we do a lot of surveying.

The core purpose of the chamber is to foster the development of a world-class business community, so we are trying to be quite progressive and really advance Wodonga particularly but the region in general as well. Having conducted the survey, we had 40 respondents to the survey. The first question we asked was: are you more
likely to employ a young person aged 17 with a licence — in this case it would be a New South Wales licence — over a 17-year-old Victorian who did not have a licence? Sixteen of the 40 respondents said that they would be more likely to employ someone with a licence. That number surprised me a little bit. It is a little bit higher, probably, than I would have expected; 40 per cent is certainly not an insignificant amount.

The second question we asked was more of an opinion: in your opinion, what would be the impacts of lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17? Thirty-nine of the 40 respondents gave an opinion there, and it is fair to say there is quite a large range of impacts, which you can go through at your leisure. But the impacts range from people believing there would be no impact whatsoever all the way up to more accidents and the like. Just to touch on a couple of them, one of the respondents said it would bring Victoria in line with other states and potentially provide more opportunities for younger people. There was some concern about one year of being on a learners permit not being enough, so perhaps if the committee entertains changing the probationary drivers age, then maybe it could also entertain lowering the age that a young person can obtain a learners permit. Most people seem to think the two years and 120 hours is a workable system and would not like to see that removed.

Another possible negative impact was on parents if they are potentially still paying the cost of or supporting the child. If the younger person does not have a licence, they would probably be purchasing a car for them and paying their petrol and the like. Another negative was that, by definition, more people on the road would increase traffic incidents and accidents. If there are more road users, it is probably not a very long bow to draw to think that there might be some more accidents.

There were potential benefits for apprentices, so if you are an apprentice and you can get your licence a little bit earlier, you may be able to then drive the work vehicle potentially during the day and/or to and from work. So there would be a benefit there. Another of our respondents quite rightly said it might help with educating younger people at a younger age before, in my words, too much bravado and bluff and bluster comes into their personal way of operating. At the same time, the respondent who said that also said that it would be probably opportune to toughen penalties for infringements around the same period, so if you were lowering the probationary drivers age, then you would get a little bit tougher on those who are potentially creating infringements. If we toughen those penalties, it might be wise to do so at the same time.

Another respondent said, and again I think it is quite a reasonable response, there might be a potential benefit in having the younger person being on the road for at least 12 months before they are legally able to drink. So lowering the probationary age to 17 and leaving the drinking age at 18 was seen as a potential benefit as well.

The third question we asked was in terms of public transport: do you think the availability of current transport infrastructure and services hinders your ability to employ a young person of non-driving age? We offered a yes, no or comment option to the respondents on this one. We had 39 again of the 40 respondents answer this question, and 25 of the 39, or 64 per cent, believe that the availability of current public transport was a hindrance to them employing a younger person. A lot of them, I think, when you give them the option of yes or no or a comment just take the yes or no option. So there are a few comments there, and again I probably will leave you to sift through those at your leisure. Most of them are around people living in more remote and regional areas, and I guess if you are talking about having more public transport heading to those areas, there is a cost associated with that. Someone would obviously have to pay.

The last question we asked was: do you believe there are any barriers for people of non-driving age to access employment, study and training? Again there was a yes, know or comment option offered to respondents. All 40 respondents answered this question, and 31 of the 40, or 77.5 per cent, believe there are barriers. On reflection I think this is perhaps a slightly leading question considering the question before. We had already warmed them up a little bit into thinking there is a potential issue here with public transport, and then we asked them if there are any barriers. A few of them I guess inadvertently having been led a little bit did mention limited public transport in regional areas as a barrier.

It was interesting that some of the respondents who gave a comment believed that parenting has a part to play here and that there are probably no more barriers than there were many years ago. But nowadays with two-income families and the need for more parents to be working have probably created some potential barriers. Again, a large number are obviously saying that there would be some potential barriers; 77.5 per cent is certainly a significant amount.
They were the four questions that we ran with, and I think we were led a little bit by the terms of reference of this committee and the brief that I received, so that is why we chose those questions — because we believe they align fairly well with the terms of reference of the committee. That is our submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Bernie. It is very helpful that you have gone to the trouble to do this petition. Can I just check: the members of the Wodonga Chamber of Commerce are all from Wodonga and there is not any linkage over the border?

Mr SQUIRE — No, we do have some cross-border members. I could not give you the exact number but of the 380 there might be 50 that would either have businesses on both sides of the border or just on the Albury side, which is obviously a recognition that customers cross the border every day. If you are a business in Albury, you are not just servicing the Albury community; you are servicing Albury-Wodonga and region. We have some members from far and wide too. We have a couple of members who run businesses in Beechworth, a member from Bendigo and we have a couple of Melbourne businesses who are Wodonga chamber members.

The CHAIR — Were you able to say with the feedback you received that the issue of young people maybe having trouble getting to employment or being favoured existed more for the out-of-towners — those who live a distance away from central Wodonga, for example, as opposed to those who live within Wodonga?

Mr SQUIRE — No, we are not able to say that from the survey. What I would say is that being on the ground and anecdotally what you hear on the ground there is enough of an issue even in the Wodonga community and very close surrounds. Obviously that probably gets expanded the further out from town you are. I think one of the pieces of feedback was from someone in Beechworth, who might have mentioned that it takes their daughter I think it was an hour and a half to get to it might have been school or work and it involved two or three different changes of transport and things like that. I guess the further away you are the more difficult it may be, but it is not exclusive to the farming community, for example. There would be pockets within the urban area of Wodonga that would still experience some sort of difficulty.

Ms PATTEN — Bernie, thank you for doing this survey. I think it is really helpful for us. Just out of interest, you mentioned that you survey your chamber members a lot, which is great. Is 40 respondents quite a good response?

Mr SQUIRE — A good question. I was thinking about that myself, thinking 40 is not very much in terms of 380. It is a pretty good response for us. We send out about 1000 newsletters a week, and if 100 to 200 of those are opened, we are pretty happy with that. We talk quite often at chamber meetings about why we are surveying, the importance of surveying and the fact that we do want the members feedback, even if is quite negative and even if it is negative about us. You can fix the known; you cannot fix the unknown. So our members are quite good at giving feedback, but generally speaking the ones that have the most skin in the game will be the ones that will respond. So you get different member responding to different surveying. But 40 is okay. Around 50 to 100 would be a sort of stellar response, and 40 is about the median — —

Ms PATTEN — Yes, but it is about a 10 per cent response, is it not?

Mr SQUIRE — Yes, it is not too bad.

Ms PATTEN — That is not too bad.

Mr TILLEY — Bernie, just a couple of things.

Mr SQUIRE — How are you, Bill?

Mr TILLEY — No good for golf today, I said earlier, but anyway. I was just interested in your experience employing younger people, and you mentioned particularly salaries. Certainly here in the north-east on the border our average salary is significantly less than what you will find in metropolitan and suburban areas, but as an employer you find that employing youth is of benefit to business because you pay them a significantly smaller amount, I guess. Can you advance that conversation a little bit about the employability of our youth, and then I will go on about the driving age and employers. If I can have that conversation and just expand it a bit more, Bernie.

Mr SQUIRE — I could take this in a number of directions, but — —
Mr TILLEY — They are all helpful.

Mr SQUIRE — All businesses are the same; they take in a certain amount of money, they have a certain number of expenses and there are a certain number of hours in every day when the counter needs to be manned and that sort of stuff. In the business I was in, I was being dragged out of the shop quite a lot with a number of other things that I needed to do as a golf professional. So I needed to employ somebody, and generally speaking the only person I could afford to employ and be within the award system was someone of a junior age; someone under 18. Normally it was the kids who were hanging around. You had the opportunity to talk to them a lot, and if they were interested in the game, obviously that was the reason why they were hanging around, so they were reasonably motivated and not bad employees. When I say ‘not bad’ you get what you pay for. You are paying for young people who are inexperienced. You have got to do a lot of training and spend a lot of time with them.

Again, as an employer and a business owner, as they are moving through the ages they are getting more expensive for you. They are not really doing any higher-level work, so you tend to put a lot of time into a 15, 16, 17 or 18-year-old who you know you are going to lose. In this community they are then heading to university or looking for something more than just a bit of part-time work in a pro shop, for example.

This example could be played out in any other business in Wodonga. It might be a retail business or whatever. So as they become more expensive and if they are not bringing in as much as they are covering, you are probably going to lose them. University and that sort of higher education is a really big pull, and generally speaking we lose a lot of our talent. They head to Melbourne or Sydney, so that talent retention is a difficult thing. So a small business owner who has spent three years training somebody up, got them to the point where ‘I’m comfortable to go home and have 4 hours off because I know they will do the job’ finds they are gone, and so the cycle repeats itself. That is one part of it.

In terms of employability, and I am not sure that it is within the charter of this committee, but I am going to get onto the soapbox a little bit here.

Mr TILLEY — Please, Bernie.

Mr SQUIRE — We have two committees running at the moment around youth engagement and youth employment and how we can get more youth into the workforce, because we have quite a high percentage of youth unemployment in terms of the rest of the state. I cannot quote the number, but I believe it is in the high teens — 17 or 18 per cent — youth unemployment in Wodonga. In terms of employability, from the employer feedback I get, that is the biggest issue — that a lot of the softer skills are not there any more. I am generalising a little bit. There are plenty of kids around here that will get a job tomorrow if they want one, because they are cracking young boys and girls and they have been well brought up and well educated and all that sort of stuff. They are not the kids we are talking about.

These committees are trying to connect with the ones that are struggling to get employment. Quite frankly it is really easy to connect with the kids on the youth councils and stuff like that, but it is harder to connect with the disengaged ones, because they are disengaged. So it is hard to connect with them and find out what it is they are looking for. But the employers are telling me that they will not show up on time, and they have got no resilience. As soon as they are disciplined about anything they just leave the job. They just walk out and will not come back. Their numeracy and literacy skills are not great. There are a whole raft of things, but even just shaking hands and looking somebody in the eye when they are talking to them and those sorts of softer skills. Again, as I say, I am generalising. Probably 80 per cent of the youth in Wodonga have that, but it is the ones that do not and connecting with them in some way is what is really difficult. So I am not sure whether I have answered your question or gone off on a bit of attention.

Mr TILLEY — No, that is good. Off that, if this committee’s findings and recommendations to government were to bring the driving age down to 17, it would not significantly enhance the employability or engagement of some sections of our unemployed youth —

Mr SQUIRE — Would or would not?

Mr TILLEY — Would not.
Mr SQUIRE — Would not, no. I would not think so. Again, we are speaking generally about a small percentage. It would just put a licence into the hands of a small percentage who probably are not ready for it at 17 but probably would not be ready for it at 25.

Ms PATTEN — That just actually leads on to a question I want to ask. One of the considerations we are thinking of is more of an exemption, so if someone does need their licence for work, then we would give them an age exemption on their licence and allow them to work. It would not be for every 17-year-old; it would be for a limited pool of 17 — —

Mr SQUIRE — Employer sponsored or something like that?

Ms PATTEN — Employer sponsored or even education sponsored, so if it was about getting to their TAFE or about getting to their employer. Do you think that would resonate with your members?

Mr SQUIRE — That is a great idea. There is talk in the cross-border community about some sort of a shadow law. Again, this is bigger than this committee. This is probably more of a federal thing, maybe. There is talk about all sorts of anomalies that we suffer in the cross-border community and a bit of frustration from state governments making metropolitan decisions. They do not understand that I can travel 1 kilometre and be under a completely different law than when I travel back. So some sort of shadow, 50-kilometre radius or whatever it might be — smarter people than me will make that decision. For example, if I am a builder or a plumber or a sparky, I have got two different sets of licences if I live in Albury-Wodonga, two sets of compliance and costs and red tape and all sorts of stuff. That sort of sponsored model makes a hell of a lot of sense.

Mr TILLEY — That is where I was going. If I could finish, Chair? On the other side, particularly for employers and being on the border, would much of the chamber membership be aware that if they have got a 17-year-old Victorian who has a New South Wales probationary licence, they are in fact unlicensed and if they are driving a company vehicle, it would void their insurances and those sorts of things and leave them without a company car in the event of a crash or any of those sorts of things? Would your membership beware of the other offences?

Mr SQUIRE — I cannot speak for the membership on that, Bill, but that is the first time I have heard it, so I would say that would be the first time a lot of the members would have heard that. Most business people at the moment — again I am speaking generally, but that is my job here today — are so damned busy making ends meet and surviving that they would not have had time to think about that at all.

Mr THOMPSON — Thank you very much for your evidence today and for your contribution to the sporting and commercial life of Wodonga. The establishment of a standardised national licensing system is one possible approach that might redress the cross-border anomalies. Do you have any commentary that might support the introduction of a standardised national licensing system?

Mr SQUIRE — Mainly that I think it is, again, a really good idea. If we are talking about drivers licences for a start, you would then get into, ‘Is it 17? Is it 18? Who moves?’. My experience completely away from this sort of realm but growing up in communities — again, as Bill has alluded to I am a golf professional as well — that had five golf clubs when they probably should have only had three because there was just not the supply and demand, no-one is prepared to give any leeway. I could see New South Wales and Victorian governments completely butting heads all the time saying, ‘Is it 17? Is it 18?’. So that national sort of federation in terms of licensing makes a hell of a lot of sense in all sorts of areas, not just in driving but in building, construction, planning and all sorts of areas.

Personally I would have to go back to the chamber on it. That is a different thing. If I was giving the chamber’s point of view, I would not be so bold as to just give it off-the-cuff; I would need to talk to members first. But my personal opinion would be that if you are talking about some sort of blanket licensing in a whole raft of areas, not just in driving, you would get a fair bit of support from broader communities all around the country, not just on the New South Wales-Victorian border but on the New South Wales-Queensland border and on the Victorian-South Australian border. There are border anomalies everywhere with licensing. It is a big issue.

The CHAIR — Can I also ask you, then, Bernie — the golf course; how far is it out of town? I am not aware of it.
Mr SQUIRE — It is 2 kilometres that way.

The CHAIR — Have you employed 17-year-olds who do not have their licence?

Mr SQUIRE — Yes, I did.

The CHAIR — And how did they get to work?

Mr SQUIRE — Mum and dad, or they lived, really, in the country club estate, so they just walked down after school.

The CHAIR — All right. So it is certainly possible in some cases.

Mr SQUIRE — As an employer, there were plenty of times where I had to take kids home. I felt like I was a bit of a taxi and a pseudo parent a number of times. But again, I grew up in a very large family; I am one of 12 kids. I can remember as a young fellow — I am probably dressering a little bit — my older brothers not driving me somewhere when I really wanted to go, and I made a real commitment to myself that if somebody needed a lift or a hand or whatever it is, I would hope that I would be prepared to do that for them. So I drove the young guys that I employed around quite a bit, but a number of them lived fairly close by, so they could just walk down or mum and dad would bring them down to work.

The CHAIR — So I imagine a number of parents of 17-year-old kids would normally think, ‘Well, that is part and parcel of having a 17-year-old when you’re living in the country’, that you do need to be the taxi until they turn 18 and get their licence.

Mr SQUIRE — Yes, and most of them, as I said earlier, are two-income families by that stage, but as the kids are almost finishing secondary school, they are certainly adult enough to walk a couple of blocks down to work or whatever. I had a 1970s upbringing — fairly strong morals and standards — so I was certainly a reasonably tough employer when I needed to be, but I was also, I think, very good to the young fellows. They are all still great mates of mine now, so I could not have been too bad.

Ms PATTEN — Just on that, I was thinking about the licensing, and I guess given your background in sport, some of the young people that we have spoken to have spoken about the problems with getting to sporting events and the fact that they want to play basketball and they want to do rugby on the weekends but both their parents are working — so getting to and from those kind of activities. I was raised at about the same time as you, and I got my licence when I was 17 and that enabled me to continue playing sport, where I may not have kept it up at that crucial time at 16 or 17 years of age. Do you think that is another valid reason to allow people to drive at a younger age? I know we have talked about work.

Mr SQUIRE — It depends on your priorities, I think. To me, sport sits in two categories. Obviously it is a fantastic thing to do and to get involved in for your physiology as well as for socialising and all the rest of it. As a new person to a community, if you play football, cricket, netball, tennis or whatever it is, you have instantly got friends and you are assimilating into the community really quickly. But the other side of that coin, I think, is that that is a choice — sport. I think just getting out and walking around and doing other things like that can still have those physical benefits. If you choose to represent or play in whatever — if you go into a rep team or whatever it might be — there is some sort of onus on you to make sure you can get there, and maybe that falls back on your parents a little bit as well. Walk, get on your bike, do all those things.

We are wrapping this generation up in cotton wool a little bit. There were probably as many — parliamentary privilege! — lunatics, idiots and stuff around in the old days, but they are probably just reported on more now. I think people think if they let their kids ride their bike to school, someone is going to abduct them or something. I do not have any kids, so I cannot speak with a lot of authority on this, but that is what I see. I have got a couple of young nieces that live in the town, and they get driven to school every day. They get driven to the bus, even. Our parents are so afraid to let their kids walk two blocks. I think the Wodonga community is really quite safe, but if that is happening here, around the state it is probably only worse.

For me growing up, if I wanted to play whatever it was — I played football for East Ballarat, and that was miles away from where I lived — I made sure I went to the coach’s house and he drove me to training or whatever, or I got a lift. Sometimes my parents had to do it. As I said, I grew up in a very big family. We had to do a lot of stuff ourselves. We had to walk to the basketball stadium. We used to get involved in umpiring so we could
make a little bit of extra money. Nowadays kids are not encouraged enough, I do not think, to work part-time jobs, and when they do, their parents do not even take any board off them. They have got no understanding of the worth of them. So there is a whole heap of things that I can roll into this discussion, which will completely sidetrack it from what we are here for.

There is a real emphasis on the individual, I think, but having a licence will fix that for 12 months or be a potential solution for 12 months. It does not change the commitment of a 14-year-old or a 15-year-old or whatever.

Mr THOMPSON — Bernie, taking into account your life journey, experience and chamber of commerce role and your interest in driving straight, how would you encourage my colleagues to avoid a duck hook to the left or a fade to the right?

Mr SQUIRE — Metaphorically speaking?

Ms PATTEN — Actually, we would like some training.

Mr SQUIRE — All I would say to that question, whilst probably a little bit humorous, is that the theory behind it can go into anything. I think what is happening today is part of what I would suggest in a golfing sense is all about preparation. Generally speaking, in the golfing world what you do prior to swinging the club has a far bigger impact on the result than the actual swing itself. Lining up right and positioning, your grip and all those sorts of things — the fundamentals — are all much more important than what happens in your swing. If you watch golf, you will see lots and lots of different golf swings all produce a very similar result. What this committee is doing today, and I believe you are doing it in other regional areas, is all part of the preparation to make the right decision. In answer to your question, preparation will stop a lot of those sorts of things, and what you are doing here will have a big part to play in making the right decision.

Mr THOMPSON — A good par answer, thank you.

Ms PATTEN — It is an excellent response.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Bernie, for your contribution on behalf of the chamber. That is very helpful to us.

Mr SQUIRE — Thank you. Good luck.

Witness withdrew.