

TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into motorcycle safety

Geelong — 15 November 2011

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Witness

Mr P. Bell.

The CHAIR — As a committee I would like to thank everyone for their attendance here this afternoon. I have spoken to Mr Boag and Mr O'Brien, and they are welcome to return to give evidence if they have any insights or comments they would like to make, and they can liaise through our executive officer.

For the motorcycle riders who have attended today, I am happy to take on board some 1-minute snapshot comments if anyone does have a remark that they would like to make. We had one person who had so indicated earlier on. We have to be out of here shortly, but if you would like to step forward and make a comment, what we require is your name. I note that we have had a postal address given, but for the benefit of the transcript it would be helpful if you could narrate that to us as well. I may mediate the length of commentary.

Mr BELL — My name is Peter Bell, <address confidential>. I have a management degree and I have had a bit of experience in life, but I am here for three friends who have died on motorbikes. I would like to bring up a few examples that might have altered the situations for them. In my own experience of riding a motorbike first, I found if I had a car licence before I got a motorbike I was much more aware of the problems on the road. When I did get my bike — a year after having a car — it saved me from getting into a lot of situations, because I knew the stupid things that cars did, so I foresaw them, otherwise I might not be here today.

It comes down to whether you want to live or die in this world and how you approach life. I have always wanted to live; I have not wanted to die. I drove to Perth and did a job for 3 hours Saturday afternoon, did a job for 3 hours Sunday morning, and I drove back. I did the job because I did not want to die, and I know what I have got to do on the road to do that job. A lot of people do not have the attitude that they want to live in this world, and unfortunately we have to protect them, and that is why your committee is here today.

Regarding my three friends who have died, my first friend, Lyn, was a university student. She had a small powered motorbike to go to university on. The situation was she was not seen, and I figure it should be compulsory for people riding motorbikes up to 250 cc to wear a yellow safety vest.

A second situation was Robyn. She was in the Ulysses group. She died on the Ballan–Daylesford Road. She was exposed to a car doing a right-hand turn stationary in the middle of the road. A car came up behind, shoved into the back of that car because they were not watching or paying attention to the road. Because this car's tyres were turned in the stationary position, it pushed the car across in front of her and she was killed instantly.

My situation here is that on all country rides the old tram rule in Melbourne should apply — that is, you sit on the left-hand side of the road until the traffic is clear before you do the right-hand turn. Quite often you will find country people who have a farm on a highway will sit on the left-hand side of the road waiting till the traffic has all cleared before they will drive across the road into their property. I think this rule has to be mandatory not only for motorcyclists but for cars.

The next example is Daffy. Daffy knew the road too well. A surfer mate of mine from Lorne, Daffy knew the Great Ocean Road like the back of his hand. You could blindfold him and tie one leg behind his back and the other arm behind his back, and he could still go down the ocean road to Apollo Bay and back to Lorne in record times. The problem with Daffy was he knew the road too well. This comes down to complacency, and it has happened to me too. I am guilty of this. I did it in a car between Lavers Hill and Apollo Bay. I knew the road too well. I got caught out; I had a head-on accident on the old dirt section of the ocean road. But because we live in an area and we know the road so well, we start to reduce our caution and our abilities on that stretch of road. I do not know where you go there — maybe retesting, speed limiters; I do not know.

The previous gentleman said \$15 million has been spent on the ocean road. I used to go down the ocean road to Apollo Bay with my grandfather when the Mount Defiance section was gravel. I know that road back to front. I can drive it blindfolded. I can tell you exactly where we are if we left Lorne to go to Apollo Bay blindfolded. I could tell you which bend we are on and which camber we are on and which everything.

I do not know where that \$15 million has gone, but I can tell you what: I have not seen it doing any good, because I have seen parts of that road where I have seen three motorcyclists go over in the exact spot. I said to my girlfriend, 'Look! A motorbike has just gone over'. She said, 'What?'. I said, 'No, they all go over there'. We will pull up on the top of the cliff where I can park safely, and we will walk down the cliff and see whether he is all right. She did not believe me until she saw him over the road. There is now a double solid barrier — the old metal barrier — rails there where that part of the road is at the spit past St George River. If I was coming

around that corner and I dropped my bike, I would want the bike to go over the edge and I would suffer wherever I was going to go. But if I was going to hit that rail at full speed, I probably would not survive.

I have just seen ludicrous implementation of measures on that ocean road that defy logic. I used to ride that ocean road to myself, like a lot of other Lorne people did back in the good old days. We did not realise how good we had it. The only problems we had on that road then were the wet sections in the shadow of the parts of the hill where the sun never hits, so because you knew the road so well you would slow down and cater for them. The only other problems I used to have was snakes. If a snake was crossing the road and you come around the corner and you are leaning on your bike, you knew you were going to lose traction once you hit the snake, depending on the angle of your bike and depending on how big the snake was. I will tell you what: I have seen snakes as thick as my arm crossing that road. If you hit one of them you are soon going to know about.

The problem with the Great Ocean Road is that it was built out of bloody nothing. I have seen all the photos of it. My family has been along there since the 1880s, and I have seen all the photos in the family albums and the surveys of how that road started off. It has not advanced much ever since. From Lorne to Apollo Bay where the road is built into near-vertical cliffs it now caters for maximum traffic. We have backpacker buses, tourist buses and everybody in the world wanting to come to Victoria to see the Great Ocean Road. It does not cater now for motorbikes, but the motorbike fraternity have always heard that it is a good ride, and they still go down there. It is a congestion-plus situation. You have to go down there and talk to people who live down there and who used to ride motorbikes on that road.

The spot I talked about at the spit of Mount Defiance is a red-X corner, and it needs to be marked appropriately. Inexperienced motorbike riders going down there come around the corner and think they have finished the corner, but it tucks into another corner. When they find that 'Oh, oh, the corner is still going, and I have to hook in harder, harder, harder', then that is where they drop the bike, and that is why they go over. I have seen three go over in the one spot.

The CHAIR — The location again is the red-X corner, did you say?

Mr BELL — No, I just said dangerous corners where excessive accidents have happened should be marked.

The CHAIR — Do you have a specific corner that you were speaking about there?

Mr BELL — They should be marked with a specific sign to pre-warn drivers. This is when motorcyclists come back heading north towards Lorne. They come around the spit, which is the geographical name on it. It is an easy corner when you first come into it, but it tucks around and then hooks around again into another even tighter corner. It is when they find that the extra hook is involved and complete an even tighter turn that they drop the bike. I have seen three with my own eyes go over at that exact spot, as I am heading south coming from St George River.

That is about it from me. The only thing I can think of is the situation now with modern car design is that we have thick front window pillars to get the 5-star ANCAP rating. They are big thick chunky pillars, and it is hard enough to see cars behind them. I nearly hit someone up here coming on to High Street from Laura Avenue in Belmont. It shocked the life out of me. I thought, 'I am such a good driver, and I've missed this. How did I do it?' and then I realised it was the bloody pillar. How can you see motorbikes behind those pillars?

There has to be some electronic radar system that might be developed in the next 5, 10 or 20 years which would give the car driver a sense of somebody being there, or maybe a transponder on the motorbike which causes a light to go off on the dash of your car. You would not want 'beep, beep, beep' going all the time, but maybe the motorbike could emit a signal that alerts the driver that there is a motorbike within 20 metres of them. In Australia we could probably get away with it, but in India the light or the beeper would be going off a million times an hour, and you just could not deal with it. But maybe in this country it would help a lot of people to realise that they have a motorcyclist within cooe of them.

I am an experienced rider, and I am an experienced road user, and just recently on a number of occasions I have had the living daylights scared out of me because of bikes going up either side of me from blind spots at amazing speeds. I have thought, 'Where did he come from? What's going on?'. It does not matter how good or careful you are, you are still going to have this problem. I do not know whether the idea of a transponder to alert drivers that motorbikes are coming up might work. Maybe motorcyclists who are excessive speedsters and

recidivist offenders could have a GPS put on their bikes and be monitored. If they get caught speeding so many times or they are caught without the GPS working on their bike, they would get an even bigger fine. There are those people out there who will never learn until they are lying 6 foot under in the cemetery going, 'Everyone told me I was going to end up here one day, and here I am'.

The CHAIR — Peter, thank you for taking the time to speak on behalf of three people you have known. Two accidents you think might have been due to motor vehicle error in the collision, and the third one perhaps resulted from excessive speed and complacency on the road. Your remarks mirror aspects of evidence that we have received during the course of our inquiry. We thank you for giving up your time to place those case studies on the record.

Witness withdrew.