

TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into motorcycle safety

Wangaratta — 29 November 2011

Members

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Mr T. Languiller

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Witness

Mr. D. Sunderland.

The CHAIR — Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the public hearings of the Road Safety Committee's inquiry into motorcycle safety taking place today.

Today we have a researcher joining us, by way of exchange from France, Flavian. This is his first trip into the north-east of Victoria, so I trust it is a good moment in time for him to take on board the evidence and information. We also have a number of guests here in the gallery. We have two ladies here who I will acknowledge; one is an experienced Harley rider who also in her other life writes for Hansard, Maria, and the other is Jenny. Maria and Jenny are recording the material today. Any comments that you make today have the benefit of parliamentary privilege but that benefit does not extend to outside of this room. You can say what you like to us broadly but be polite and be respectful. If you want to speak in what I call 'in camera' or in private and only speak to the committee we can clear the room out and just hear informally what you would like to say.

Mr SUNDERLAND — I have two questions that I would like to talk about in private.

The CHAIR — All right then. When you get to those points we will take the opportunity to clear the room and take those matters on board. I appreciate too that there are some sensitive matters. We did take evidence from a witness in Geelong who recounted the deaths of three of his friends and there were some wider issues there of a sensitive nature, so we are very happy to take that evidence in what I call in camera.

Mr SUNDERLAND — You can have that copy.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr SUNDERLAND — It is based on what I want to discuss.

The CHAIR — All right, thank you. We will put it on the parliamentary record. Thank you very much. We are ready to hear from you. For the assistance of the Hansard reporters, could you give us your name and address?

Mr SUNDERLAND — My name is Doug Sunderland. My address is <address confidential>.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Doug. If you can lead off with your evidence, we are ready to listen.

Mr SUNDERLAND — I get frightfully upset with car drivers. It is really bad. I have been riding for 73 years although I must admit that for the first few years it was minus a licence. It was during the war and I was apprenticed to a motorbike shop down at Camberwell Junction. I had to do all the messages on the motorbike because very few people had cars during the war, and unfortunately one day a nasty policeman pulled me up and booked me for 15 shillings and that was my week's wage. I was riding a motorbike because I had no alternative because we had no transport and I had to do the messages, but I made sure I never got caught again. That's life.

Seventy-three years of riding have taught me a lot about drivers. I have one pet hate which could be fixed by this stupid government which makes these ADR rules but does not enforce them. Here is a typical example. In this month's *RoyalAuto* there is an Ambi Pur — that little label has a smelly thing to make your car smell nice and the instructions are 'Hang this from your rear-view mirror'. Now being on a motorbike, I know those kinds of things block the motorists' view. It is really serious. I rang the *RoyalAuto* who crap on about road safety, yet they put that in this issue of *RoyalAuto* — I worked for them for 37 years and I know how they go. I was so annoyed I rang up and I got nowhere. They were not interested. I said, 'What about a retraction next month?', but they were not interested. I rang the people that make the Ambi Pur thing and they were not interested. I mean I am a motorbike rider and I could get skittled one day because of stupid things like that, and in spite of all the statistics they blame the motorcyclist for many, many accidents.

With 73 years of experience behind me I know that some of my friends got killed just after the war because of cars coming out of T-junctions and that type of thing and ignoring the motorcycle. The motorcycle swerves to miss them, hits a tree, the car keeps going and they blame it on the motorbike — another motorbike accident. They overlook the fact that it was a car that caused the problem in the first place. Now we have this in last week's paper, a 9.7-inch GPS, which is the size of an A4 sheet of paper, with instructions to put it on the windscreen. What are we doing in this country? We might as well give the car drivers open slather and let them kill everyone on the road.

As I asked in that write-up that I have given you: what happens to a little kid on a pushbike? This argument that they cannot see you is a great lot of rubbish. I wear a bright blue coat, and I mean bright blue. My motorbike is bright red. I have a bright red crash hat. I am at the main roundabout in Wangaratta at Ford Street where Harvey Norman is. The people going to Melbourne, you could stand there and watch them. They are driving to Melbourne and Ford Street is there. You never see their head turn around and look; they just go straight ahead through the roundabout. I am on the bike and when I enter a roundabout I have one hand on the brake and my foot on the pedal all ready to put the brakes on. It is a disgrace that I have to do that.

These bloody mobile phones. We have ADR people who allow these things to be used in a car. I do not care what they say about how it is against the law; they all allow it. It could be fixed. In other countries they have a device, a sensor on one of the wheels of a car and while a car is rolling the sensor activates an electronic thing that blocks the phone from working. Why can't we have that in Australia?

The CHAIR — In which country is that applied?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I wouldn't like to tell you which country, but this is what I have learnt. I have been to 49 countries around the world and I have ridden in 19, and the drivers in this country are completely anti-motorbike. They have a pet hate against motorbikes. It does not matter whether it is a kid on a pushbike or not, we are still human beings. We deserve the same treatment as anyone else, and I get very annoyed. I know my friend Damien will back me up on that. So many motorbike accidents are attributed to the rider. I know for a fact I saw one of my friends on the footpath with his brains hanging out because a car did a U-turn in front of him, but the motorbike is blamed. That is where we go wrong with our statistics; they do not go into the detail.

In 73 years I have had one accident and that was because a car went through a red light. All he got was a couple of pound fine — it was pounds in those days; he got a couple of pound fine. I broke my pillion passenger's ankle. That is what happens. That is the only road accident I have had; I would not exaggerate. I would have had thousands of accidents off the bike in the deserts; I have ridden through every desert in Australia on my own. People say it is dangerous. It is more dangerous riding down the main street of Wangaratta.

I have crashed 12 to 15 times a day, which is normal when you are crossing the Simpson Desert, because your front wheel gets bogged and you just go over the handlebars, but that is part of living. I do not expect to ride around Wangaratta and have to have my hand and foot ready on the brake because of females. Young females today, I want to put them in jail. They cannot survive if they do not have a mobile phone to their ear. I am surprised they are not born with a bloody phone to their ear. On television last night there was a show that put the female point of view. These three young teenagers could not possibly live, they said, 'without our phone'. They take them to bed and everything. It is a wonder they do not marry the bloody phone.

We get treated very shabbily by the government in particular. Your government should hang its head in shame for allowing this country to get to the state it is in. My generation built this country; today's younger generation are stuffing it up with all this stupid nonsense of allowing too many things. How they could ever allow that GPS to come into this country is ridiculous. I get very aggro. I am off the motorbike at the moment. I have not been on the motorbike for four months because my doctor said, 'No motorbike until your hip heals up'. I fractured my hip. Do you know how I fractured my hip? What is the first thing that comes to your mind?

Mr ELSBURY — You tried to put your leg out to stop the bike from going over? No?

Mr SUNDERLAND — What is your answer? Why did I fracture my hip?

The CHAIR — Mr Sunderland, perhaps if you direct your questions through the Chair. We are happy to have rhetorical questions.

Mr SUNDERLAND — All right, what is your —

The CHAIR — But we will leave it as a rhetorical question and allow you to come in and answer it. It might take too much time if you ask for us to guess exactly what happened.

Mr SUNDERLAND — All right. I came home from Geelong four months ago and I decided to make a cup of tea at the kitchen sink. I turned around to put the keys on the table and 1 hour 50 minutes later I am still lying

on the floor with a fractured hip. They say motorbikes are dangerous. Making a bloody cup of tea is more dangerous.

The CHAIR — Yes, it depends what you put in the cup of tea, I guess, too; there is strong water up this way. Mr Languiller has arrived. I will just welcome him and allow you to continue. We have some questions for you. We will just monitor our time as well.

Mr SUNDERLAND — Before you do, my invite clearly said they want to find out the secret of my success. I can put it very simply. Seventy-three years of riding and the moment I get on that road every one of you people in a car, bus or truck is out to kill me. That is the attitude I take. There is not a vehicle on the road that is not trying to kill me, and that is how I have survived for 73 years.

Today's generation, the young ones, take the attitude that I took when I was between the ages of 18 and 24. I was a murderous motorcyclist. I should have been put in jail a dozen times. I broke every rule in the book. There was no such thing as a speed limit. I was a typical young fellow. I ignored every speed limit. If any of you people know Camberwell Junction, Toorak Road, Swan Street, Richmond and so on, I would regularly go down there over 90 miles an hour during and just after the war. I was so proud of the fact and now I am ashamed of it.

From St Kilda Junction, Luna Park, to Box Hill police station I held the record of 11 minutes. To do it now would take you over 1 hour. I would deliberately go past every police station with the finger on the horn button to make the cops come out in their little Fords and try to chase me. My Triumph would do 98 miles per hour and I have a certificate to prove it. Road laws meant nothing. When you are 18 to 24 or 25, there is no such thing as a road law. We turn around and sell motorbikes to the teenagers. We put limits on the size of them. It does absolutely nothing. They ignore it. It is part of growing up. But when you get to my age you realise that you should not have done it. I am ashamed of the fact that I did it.

The CHAIR — Thank you for providing your reflections. Do you have any solution to the attitude that might prevail amongst younger motorcyclists, as you understand it?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Yes, the complete lack of education by this government, an absolute, complete lack of education. All children, particularly from secondary school, should spend a couple of hours in a hospital and see the results of it. I can still see my friend lying on the footpath outside the East Hawthorn tram depot in Camberwell Road. I can still see him lying there with his brains laying out, and that is in there as a permanent picture. That is what slows you down. It slowed me down. That was the end of my speeding days.

The CHAIR — Approximately what year was that — or decade?

Mr SUNDERLAND — It would have been 1946 or 1947.

The CHAIR — And the accident was due to excessive speed?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Speed on his part, but the car doing a turn in front of him. That is what killed him.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr SUNDERLAND — It was both their faults.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We might move to questions. I might get my colleague the Deputy Chair just to draw you out on the first question.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you, Mr Sunderland, and it is a pleasure to be able to have you providing evidence to this committee. I apologise for arriving slightly late. Mr Sunderland, the committee understands that you have only ever had one accident whilst riding a motorcycle. Why do you think that is the case, and what do you do when you are riding which makes you different from other riders?

Mr SUNDERLAND — What do I do?

Mr LANGUILLER — Yes. What makes you different from others?

Mr SUNDERLAND — What makes me different? Seeing four or five of my friends laying dead on the road, even going back probably about 22 years since I saw the last one laying dead on the road. That is what slows you down; there is no argument about it. That is why schoolchildren should be educated from the moment they arrive at school.

Mr LANGUILLER — Can I put a supplementary question to you? I understand you have travelled to around 19 countries.

Mr SUNDERLAND — I have been — —

Mr LANGUILLER — Did the fatalities occur in Australia or outside Australia?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I rode through four countries in Europe, England, the Isle of Man, Malaysia, Vietnam, Peru, Bolivia, Chile — and that is all within the last 15 years. In fact I celebrated the end of my 75th year — —

Mr LANGUILLER — Did the fatalities that you spoke about happen in Australia or in any of those countries? You talked about — —

Mr SUNDERLAND — Seeing the victim?

Mr LANGUILLER — Yes.

Mr SUNDERLAND — I saw a lady laying in the middle of the road in Vietnam because a dog ran out and took out the wheel of the motorbike. I saw a man laying on the road in Bolivia who just wanted to die. He said, 'Just leave me be'. He did not want to live because he had bad internal damage, but he survived. But I am not kidding you, the sight of a friend or an unknown person laying on the road is the greatest education of any. That is why all teenagers — particularly teenagers — should be made to go to hospital to see the results of road accidents. There is no such word. Why does this country, including the politicians, allow the use of the word 'accident' when 90 per cent of them are not accidents? They are incidents, but they are not accidents. Look at the dictionary — —

Mr LANGUILLER — You mean they are preventable? Is that what you mean by saying they are not accidents?

Mr SUNDERLAND — The word 'accident' is used incorrectly. It is not an accident when a person coming head on to you decides to do a right-hand turn and you are on a motorbike. You swerve, and you hit a lamp post. The car keeps going. That is not an accident; it is absolute murder. We should never use the word 'accident'. I lost my daughter at 19 years old. I had to go down and identify my daughter and my son-in-law. I can still see that, and it was 40 years and six months ago. I can still see them laying on the slab at the morgue. It was not an accident; she fell asleep because her husband took sick and he said, 'Get me home from Melbourne to Wangaratta'. They only got as far as Baddaginnie. My daughter fell asleep and hit a tree.

The CHAIR — On a motorbike or in a car?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Car. How do you define that? Would you call that an accident? We use the word 'accident' as soon as someone hits something. It does not matter whose fault it is; it is not an accident. We need education to be priority no. 1. I cannot impress upon you people, particularly politicians, why we allow this to happen. Having driven through 19 countries around the world, I watched a motorbike rider hit a car because the car turned in front of him. That is a very common accident. He was not speeding; he was only doing about 20 or 30 kilometres an hour. We should have the rule they have in Bolivia. Have any of you been to Bolivia?

Mr LANGUILLER — I have.

Mr SUNDERLAND — They have a 30-kilometres-an-hour speed limit in the city. There is a male and a female with a machine gun on nearly every intersection. Our bus was on a tour. The bus driver heard a whistle blow, and he stopped. The door opened, and a woman came in and put out her hand. He opened the glove box and gave her a handful of money, and away she went. They do not pay their police; they rely on fining people for doing the wrong thing. I said to the bus driver, 'What would happen if you did not hear and stop?'. 'He would just shoot'. Perhaps that is what we need in this country. I cannot imagine us ever getting to that stage.

The CHAIR — Mr Sunderland, I would like to run a few questions by you.

Mr SUNDERLAND — Go for your life.

The CHAIR — Mr Tilley will put the next question to you.

Mr TILLEY — Mr Sunderland, I just want a bit of commentary. During your contribution this morning you have spoken about your self-awareness and your formula for your safety and seeing other car users as the enemy. You have spoken about your riding experiences. You have also spoken about generational attitude change with motorcyclists today.

Mr SUNDERLAND — Yes.

Mr TILLEY — We learn enormous amounts from history. We can take something from your over 73 years of riding experience, but over the several days and weeks that this committee has held public hearings we have heard enormous amounts of information in relation to encouraging advanced rider training. Do you have any specific thoughts in relation to how we might be able to change and keep our young motorcyclists safe on our roads today by using advanced rider training?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Put into effect the two things I suggested. I repeat that education is the greatest way to help to solve a problem, and make it compulsory for all teenagers, or pre-licensed people, to visit a hospital. Seeing people badly injured taught me a hell of a lot.

Mr TILLEY — Your system of operating your motorcycle when you are on the road and in your experiences riding off-road through the deserts — you talked about getting stuck in the sand and going over the handlebars. I have had similar experiences with riding in those sorts of conditions over the years. You have had off-road experiences while riding through deserts and in a number of countries throughout the world; do you think some of those conditions have kept you safe while riding on on-road surfaces?

Mr SUNDERLAND — You will never stop off-road accidents because for the type of people — young fellas — who are involved in those accidents, it would not matter what rules you brought in, they would treat them with contempt.

Mr PERERA — Thank you very much for your contribution this morning, Mr Sunderland. You have many years of riding experience. What are your thoughts about protective gear? Do you wear it?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I wear the armoured protective gear but not usually around town. As soon as I go out of the city I wear my armoured gear. But of the many thousands of accidents I have had — if you could call getting bogged in the sand and going over the handlebars an accident — all the protective gear in the world would not have stopped them. Most of the injuries you suffer from are arm and leg injuries. In India I heard my crash helmet bouncing along the road a few times, but protective gear is really overrated. If they brought in a law like the idiots suggest to make you wear compulsory fluoro gear, I would not be seen dead wearing it. I would treat that law as absolutely ignorant.

Mr PERERA — How about the leather trousers, leather pants and leather jackets?

Mr SUNDERLAND — That is not going to help your arms and legs. That is why I have a steel knee now. Off-road riding up in the alpine area — you just cannot stop that with all the protective gear in the world. I wear Draggin jeans and that, but 99 per cent of times you come off the bike off-road you hurt your arm or your leg.

Mr ELSBURY — Thank you very much for your contribution today, Mr Sunderland. What would you like to see as the specific outcomes of this committee's inquiry?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I have said it about six times now — education.

Mr ELSBURY — You are saying people should be taken to hospitals to see the outcomes of accidents. But apart from doing that and possibly using it for shock value, are we looking at improved driver training and improved rider training?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Yes.

Mr ELSBURY — From my own experience, I have done 6 hours on a bike and they gave me a learners permit. I rode at a breakneck speed of 30 kilometres per hour whilst under training, and yet now I am legally allowed to ride a bike at 110 kilometres per hour. Do you think the rider training that is currently going on, if my experience is normal, would be inadequate, and should it be improved?

Mr SUNDERLAND — A lot of it is inadequate because there is too much cheating going on with the number of hours. I know that for a fact.

Mr ELSBURY — There is no requirement of hours. I have done 6 hours. All I had to do was turn up for a 2½-hour course to be shown, 'This is a motorbike, and this is what it does', take the test and then be given a learners permit. I took an extra 3½ hours of training prior to that. You do not have to do that prior training; you can just turn up and do the test. You have people who have a minimal amount of experience, such as myself, versus people who have possibly got experience off-road either on a farm or on a property. There are people who understand how to use a bike — they have the balance, they have the speed sorted out, they have had a few tumbles but nothing too bad — versus a bloke like me, who spends his entire life in suburbia, with 6 hours experience, and now I can ride like anyone else.

Mr SUNDERLAND — But it is not you who is going to be the cause of a fall.

Mr ELSBURY — I reckon I could fall at 0 kilometres per hour; I am pretty good. I could come up to a stop at a set of traffic lights, forget to put the leg out and go over.

Mr LANGUILLER — He is telling the truth.

Mr SUNDERLAND — I have had into the thousands of crashes — 12 to 15 times a day was normal to crash. Having ridden through every desert in Australia, I know that the slower you go, the worse the crash. I do not care what anyone says. You only have to watch the grand prix races, where they come off at 280 to 290 kilometres per hour and get up and walk away. My worse accident was the result — —

The CHAIR — Making a cup of tea, was it?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Making a cup of tea? That is why I have a steel knee now. In India a car hit me head on because it was on the wrong side of the road. I was doing about 25 to 30 kilometres per hour, and they crap on that speed kills! Speed does not kill. Speed saved me. I can still remember when I was a late teenager that I opened the throttle and gave it the herbs because I was halfway across the intersection, and that is why he only hit the back wheel. Speed saved me from a major one, otherwise we would have both lost a leg. Speed is overrated in accident statistics, believe you me.

The CHAIR — Shifting to some other questions if I may, do you have a view on lane splitting or filtering?

Mr SUNDERLAND — To be quite honest, I would ban it because of the number of stupid car drivers. I have never done it, and I have no intention of doing it; I can survive without lane splitting. If the cars are stationary, I agree with it, but while the cars are mobile all the car drivers do is as soon as they see you in the mirror — I have seen them, I have watched motorbikes in front of me — they just veer across to frighten the hell out of you.

Mr LANGUILLER — I want to come back to you with a question in relation to protective gear. Given your extraordinary experience in riding — and I really mean that — what about wearing gloves and boots? Can you talk about the importance of those two items, not necessarily the jackets and the trousers? Given your experience, can you please talk about the importance of gloves and boots and whether you would make them compulsory?

Mr SUNDERLAND — If you have ever seen the SBS documentary called *Grey Voyagers* showing me in a serious condition when I got kind of knocked around a bit, I took my gloves off to take a photo. I did not bother putting them back on because I only wanted to go a couple of hundred yards, and this man on the wrong side of the road came around the corner and cleaned me up. I chopped my hands a bit.

Mr LANGUILLER — Are you saying that you think gloves should be worn?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I would not complain if they made gloves compulsory.

Mr LANGUILLER — You would not?

Mr SUNDERLAND — No.

Mr LANGUILLER — What about boots — shoes that are protective?

Mr SUNDERLAND — When I see motorcyclists riding in a pair of thongs or sandals on I shudder.

Mr LANGUILLER — Or high heels.

Mr SUNDERLAND — In the last 60 years I have never ridden a motorbike without having boots on.

Mr LANGUILLER — Would you say the same about the boots?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Yes.

Mr LANGUILLER — Would you say that you strongly recommend them, would you make them compulsory, or would you strongly advise riders to use them?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I would not complain if they made boots compulsory, but not motorbike boots — ordinary boots like that.

The CHAIR — I would like to thank you very much, Mr Sunderland, for your evidence and the benefit of the wisdom of your riding years. You have contributed to our deliberations. Hansard has recorded your comments and a copy of the transcript will be sent to you. Your task will be to read it and then get it back to us, if that is okay?

Mr SUNDERLAND — So you are doing what the national library in Canberra did to me just recently.

The CHAIR — I do not know what they have precisely done.

Mr SUNDERLAND — They spent three days putting me through the hoops.

The CHAIR — Are you comfortable reading, or would you like some help with that?

Mr SUNDERLAND — I am easily pleased. I do not believe in privacy; that is one pet hate of mine.

The CHAIR — There are a couple of minutes before we will be adjourning for a break prior to our afternoon session, but are there some matters you would like to give us in camera — that is, in private?

Mr SUNDERLAND — Yes.

The CHAIR — That being the case, I invite people in the gallery to leave. If there are any last-minute requests, we are happy to deal with them and speak afterwards to anyone who is here at the moment.

Proceedings in camera follow.