

TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into motorcycle safety

Traralgon — 13 December 2011

Members

Mr A. Elsbury

Mr T. Languiller

Mr J. Perera

Mr M. Thompson

Mr B. Tilley

Chair: Mr M. Thompson
Deputy Chair: Mr T. Languiller

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Jenkins

Research Officer: Mr J. Aliferis

Witness

Mr P. Dowe.

The CHAIR — I would like to acknowledge the attendance of Mr Russell Northe, the member for Morwell. I would also like to record the thoughts of one of the people in attendance who highlighted the importance of the road surface on motorcycle safety. Ms Jennifer Tame will be making a written contribution to our committee to amplify her thoughts in relation to this particular issue, and we look forward to receiving that. I also understand she would like to make a brief comment to the committee as well.

The committee has some time constraints at the present time, but we look forward to the contribution of Mr Peter Dowe. The motorcycle inquiry is looking into a number of terms of reference relating to motorcycle safety and improving outcomes for Victorian motorcyclists. We are looking at road engineering issues, training, bike issues and related matters, and we look forward to your commentary. We invite you to speak to your submission, which I understand you made earlier and to which you have made some further notes, following which we may have some time for questions.

Mr DOWE — Chair, I emailed you the submission.

The CHAIR — That is fine. I can pass that through to the secretariat. If you could speak to the points you would like to make to us.

Mr DOWE — Thank you. I would like to introduce myself to the members of the committee. My name is Pete Dowe, and I am a community-based road safety advocate. My email address and mail address are <addresses confidential>. I am currently in temporary accommodation in Traralgon. If I have to say what that is, I would rather — —

The CHAIR — No, that is not necessary. You can cut to the chase.

Mr DOWE — Yes, good. Thank you. I am making sure that all my facts are appropriate. I sat on a road safety committee for three years and have also coordinated with the chair of this committee, Murray Thompson, as a constituent on local road safety issues, particularly bunch cycling behaviour on Beach Road since August 2007. I have also written approximately 30 letters to editors in local media and major metropolitan dailies on cyclist behaviour, bike lobby advocacy and the lack of cyclist identification for law enforcement capability. I have a road safety blog, which is petedoweroadsafetyadvocate.blogspot.com and two road safety YouTube sites, which contain footage of bunch cycling behaviour on Beach Road and which seek to highlight awareness of problem cyclist behaviour on Beach Road and the need to address that behaviour. Those sites are: <http://www.youtube.com/user/PeteDoweRoadSafety> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/pdowe!>.

The catalyst for me becoming a road safety advocate was the death of a 77-year-old Mentone pedestrian, James Gould, by a racing Hell Ride cyclist running a red light and fatally striking Mr Gould on the Mentone Lifesaving Club pedestrian crossing at 8.30 a.m. on Saturday 26 August 2006. I had written several letters on cyclist behaviour problems predating Mr Gould's death, including a letter predicting that a cycling bunch would likely strike a pedestrian on a crossing by running a red light. I have attached a copy of that letter to my email. Until Mr Gould's death I had naively believed that writing letters to the editor alone would make a difference. After Mr Gould's death I realised I would have to try harder.

Firstly, I would like to speak in relation to the Premier's proposal for road safety messages on numberplates, and also as it pertains to motorcycle numberplates and, perhaps, motorcycle safety messages on truck and car numberplates. I believe there ought to be a range of road safety messages on numberplates rather than just one. At the time of writing the comment below, published on the *Bayside Leader* website and my own blog, I was unaware that the Premier wished to have personalised messages, and I shall return to the point of personalised messages, which I also support. I wholeheartedly concur with the Premier, Mr Baillieu, who said, 'What better place to reinforce road safety messages than on numberplates?'. However, I believe that a range of road safety messages would be best rather than a one-size-fits-all universal slogan.

In order to service the different road user groups with meaningful road safety messages, a range of slogans such as 'Speed kills', 'Drink drive bloody idiot', 'Reduce the risks', 'Share the road', 'Stop, look, listen, think' et cetera would be much more appropriate, effective and interesting. Varying the messages on numberplates would not only spark interest but most likely spark conversation on road safety, especially between parents and kids. I believe a one-size-fits-all universal slogan would most likely bore the road user marketplace into tuning out.

From a law enforcement perspective, varied road safety messages on numberplates would provide more precise ID for law enforcement officers and for eyewitnesses. The particular road safety message could well be a vital detail caught at a glance, especially if the eyewitness was not able to identify or recall the whole number on the numberplate. To reiterate what Premier Baillieu intimated, messages aimed at road users would be well targeted at the roads coalface, serving as a reminder to keep it simple — a back-to-basics brake on lack of restraint.

In fact I made an official submission to the Premier's website under the slogan 'A range of messages'. I also believe a range of messages could be well targeted to highlight local problems with vehicle accidents and injuries by the municipality of the motorist's address. Targeting messages specific to municipal problems could perhaps be developed in conjunction with local RoadSafe committees. Indeed, I would like to pick up on a point made earlier by the lady from VicRoads that, for instance, the highest problem with accidents locally here are falls or leaving the road around S-bends. That is something that could be done. Even if motorists move to another municipality, they would still display a relevant message on their numberplate.

I spoke to Wayne from VicRoads earlier on, and in my short stay in Traralgon I have noticed that the local RoadSafe highlights motorcycles. As a cursory overview from a new kid on the block pedestrian, I notice a couple of factors in relation to motorcycle accidents locally. Collisions in the country are most likely to occur at 100 kilometres an hour or more. As a public transport traveller, the country is not as well serviced by public transport as the city, and fuel is expensive. A motorcycle affords good fuel economy and perhaps a higher participation in motorcycling as a result.

I would like to take up the point of personalised numberplate messages — as in those sought for the Premier's numberplate message competition and created by Victorian individuals — and the potential for further custom-made personalised messages for individuals and families touched by trauma. I believe 'touched by trauma' is a sticker that people place on their car. I also read in a *Herald Sun* quiz recently that VicRoads is selling superhero-themed numberplates. I wonder if families and individuals touched by trauma could have the option of receiving a custom-made numberplate free of charge from VicRoads, as these individuals are passionate about promoting road safety and it would demonstrate compassion on the part of the government for their loss. Also, any individual could pay for a custom road safety numberplate message to promote the road safety issue of their choice, and they could be encouraged to do so.

I return to part of the comments on numberplate messages that I have read from. Varying the messages on numberplates would not only spark interest but most likely spark conversation on road safety, especially between parents and kids. I would like to say, firstly, that the more a message is out there by the means mentioned above, the better. I seek to highlight this point with a counter example from a letter to the *Herald Sun*. The writer spoke of the hypocrisy of being passed by a motorist doing over 100 kilometres per hour displaying a 'touched by trauma' sticker. With a range of road safety messages out there on every motor vehicle, such hypocrisy would not only be widely noticed but I believe would have an inhibiting effect on the driver — a variation on people fearing detection more than conviction, or perhaps 'put your money where your mouth is' or 'I really ought to walk the talk on my own beliefs and be strong in my own values'. With a range of pertinent messages all around us on the roads, we could change the road culture — change the mores of the done thing and the not done thing. What we should and should not be doing would be right in our faces and in many cases what we should be living up to — our own personal standards.

In relation to driver distraction, visibility and alcohol, drugs and fatigue impairment — and I also note motorcyclist distraction — I offer up a slogan: 'Don't let life get in the way. Where's your head at?'. The federal government Department of Health and Ageing national drugs campaign came up on the first page of a Google search of the phrase 'Where's your head at?'. *Where's Your Head At?* was also a popular song in 2002. It was 10 years ago now; I do not know if there are young people, 18-or-so, who would still remember it. It was by Basement Jaxx, and I have given the YouTube link to it. Does the committee know *Where's Your Head At?*

Mr ELSBURY — Yes, I have it in my car, so it is all right.

Mr DOWE — Laura Wilson of Monash University, Clayton campus, who is a graduate of the politics and criminology department — to draw the distinction with Monash University Accident Research Centre — presented to the members of the RoadSafe inner south-east group, of which I was a member at the time. She presented on her study on young people's perceptions of the risk involved in drunk driving entitled *Red Light Raving*. Although Laura researched drivers, I believe there are parallels with other motorists, including

motorcyclists, and the research is relevant to the hazards presented to motorcyclists by drug-impaired drivers. Indeed the committee heard from VicRoads that drug usage by motorcyclists is a problem locally.

I have highlighted certain points from the minutes in relation to Laura Wilson's presentation to the 28 October 2008 RoadSafe meeting, which I attended. The full minutes in relation to Laura's presentation are recorded at the bottom of my submission to the committee today. The minutes of the RoadSafe meeting of Tuesday, 28 October 2008, record five points that emerged from the study, including the normalisation of drug use, the frequency of drug use and how common it is, and the role of the car, which plays a vital role in the recreational drug user's life, especially in relation to attendance at social events and transportation as well as the purchase and use of drugs.

I would like to briefly ad lib two points, and perhaps, if I have the option, type them up and submit them later.

The CHAIR — I would prefer it if you were to keep moving through and keep the momentum.

Mr DOWE — One point I want to make quickly is in relation to the issue of perceptions and prevalence of drugs. Study participants indicated that certain drugs in certain driving circumstances are seen as okay. The participants indicated that they would much rather drug drive than drink drive. The point there is that while the job has been done pretty well with young people and alcohol — so alcohol is politically incorrect — recreational drugs are okay. That is a problem.

Mr LANGUILLER — Just to clarify, is that research on motorcyclists?

Mr DOWE — It was on drivers, but I believe there is a parallel with motorcyclists.

Mr LANGUILLER — It is important to clarify that this is not specifically on motorcyclists.

Mr DOWE — Yes, thank you. While it was not recorded in the minutes, I believe there are parallels with motorcyclists.

The CHAIR — Please continue. I think Mr Languiller is just making the point that the research was not focused on motorcyclists but was in relation to drivers. But you have made the point that there could be a parallel.

Mr DOWE — Yes. While it was not recorded in the minutes, Laura mentioned that a driver under the influence of LSD felt that he drove better than he did sober or clean and that if he fell asleep, he would wake up in time to avoid a collision. In relation to fatigue, a very tired-looking friend told me he had a Zen-like ability when drowsy to be cool as a cucumber and languidly take in all that was around him. These delusions about the impairments of drugs and fatigue strike me as extraordinary in comparison to Dutch courage in relation to alcohol. By the way, I lament the lack of usage of the pithy expression 'Dutch courage' — or maybe it is just that talking. As a 53-year-old I feel our generation knew well that alcohol falsely emboldened them and at worst falsely emboldened them to think they were okay to drive. To believe that one excels at driving or motorcycling while tripping and/or falling asleep is delusional and a cause for great concern. People who have lost touch with reality in charge of a lethal weapon, possibly regularly — where is your head at?

Also not recorded in the minutes, and unfortunately I do not recall the context, was that Laura also spoke of the perceptions of drivers, and I believe there are parallels with other vehicles, of laws that are often not enforced or difficult to enforce. There were two thoughts or beliefs on the part of those offenders — that if it is an important law, it will be enforced, and if the law is not enforced, I have the tacit approval of society to break the law.

The CHAIR — We have a copy of your submission. Cutting to the chase in a different way, you go on to comment on bicycle safety, and while you have made some relevant remarks in relation to bicycle safety, they are not strictly relevant to our inquiry. I think at this point we may be able to conclude the presentation of your evidence. I will open it up to my colleagues to ask some questions of you, if that is okay.

Mr DOWE — Yes, certainly.

Mr LANGUILLER — What specific outcomes would you like to see out of this committee and its inquiry? Can you name them specifically?

Mr DOWE — The point I was making about numberplate road safety messages is that there could be a range of messages and coordination with local RoadSafe councils and local governments so that those plates have messages relevant to those areas. I would very much like to see that. I have made what I think are parallels with fatigue and drug impairment and how unfortunately drug impairment is seen as politically correct, so to speak, whereas beer is not. We have robbed Peter to pay Paul in a way, unfortunately.

Mr ELSBURY — I am wondering whether or not you have a position on the current training of riders and drivers as well and whether or not you have any input you would like to provide on those topics.

Mr DOWE — Driver training in relation to what?

Mr ELSBURY — Training in relation to awareness of motorcyclists. Do you feel it is adequate, or are there any improvements that need to be made? Some of the submissions we have received have suggested things like allowing a moped to be ridden on a drivers licence: firstly, it would allow more people to get the experience of two-wheel vehicles; secondly, it would mean you have more people using them and therefore drivers have to become more aware of two-wheel vehicles; finally, because there are so many people on the road with two-wheel vehicles, there is a greater chance of you having a brother, sister, friend, uncle or cousin who is on the road and therefore you put into your memory bank the idea that you must be more careful on the road because you could knock over someone you know — as self-centred as that is. I am wondering whether or not you have any view on driver training or motorcyclist training in general?

Mr DOWE — In terms of collisions with vehicle doors opened onto traffic, which applies to motorcycles, I believe that most likely happens in strip shopping areas. It makes sense because there is a line of cars and doors opening. In relation to those accidents, signage could well be targeted to strip shopping areas to raise awareness in relation to that. In relation to the member's point that if there are more people on the road then there is more awareness, of course I do not want to insult the member about what he said, but there is an equally simple answer that the more people you have, the more accidents there are.

Mr ELSBURY — I was just pointing out that there was a submission that went along those lines. I do not necessarily agree with the logical follow-through; I was just saying there was a variation among the submissions that were made.

Mr DOWE — I would not agree that just because you have more people there will be more awareness. When you have more people you will have more injuries. Unless you address the attitudes of drivers and motorcyclists to one another and the causes of resentment and the erroneous beliefs, you will still have the same friction. For instance, we heard earlier that the biggest problem here is with motorcyclists falling or just going straight off the road. However, when one looks at the debate in the letters pages, there is quite a bit of bile and blaming one another. In terms of the education of drivers, you have to be realistic about what the problem is, not keep thinking it is the other person's fault and take responsibility for your own behaviour, just as motorcyclists have to be careful not to speed around S-bends and have to wear protective gear.

The CHAIR — I will take the opportunity to interrupt your commentary. We are governed by time, and there was a segment of 10 minutes. We have allowed a generous allocation of time for your contribution. We thank you for it and for the views you have expressed in relation to messaging and there being various messages that might drive a localised campaign to a higher degree. Thank you for that comment and also for your views in relation to changing attitudes amongst road users. Unless there is an attitudinal change amongst different road users, there can be continuing difficulties.

Mr DOWE — It does seem to be the same old thing about blame and being at each other's throats.

The CHAIR — I know, too, from your interest in motorcyclists that there are these behavioural aspects on an ongoing basis. We commend you for your interest in road safety matters and your continuing advocacy. Thank you for your attendance.

Witness withdrew.