

## **ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into improving safety at level crossings**

Melbourne — 5 May 2008

#### Members

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Mr T. Mulder

Mr D. Koch

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#### Witness

Mr S. St Clair, chief executive officer, Australian Trucking Association.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the public hearings of the Road Safety Committee's inquiry into safety at level crossings. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided for by the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. However, any comments you make outside the hearing may not be accorded such privilege. As you can see, we are recording the evidence and will provide a proof version of the transcript at the earliest opportunity so you can treat it as appropriate. Please proceed with your presentation, and we will ask questions as necessary.

**Mr St CLAIR** — My name is Stuart St Clair. I am the chief executive officer of the Australian Trucking Association. I thank you for the invitation to come before your committee on such an important issue.

As a bit of background, the Australian Trucking Association was set up following the horrific heavy vehicle crashes at the end of the 80s in Clybucca, near Kempsey. I think most people involved in road safety will remember that era.

The industry got together and felt that it needed to look at itself and to start to put in place procedures to raise the safety profile and safety performance of the heavy vehicle industry. That came about with the formation, as I say, of the road transport industry forum in the beginning of the 90s. Our focus has been on safety ever since.

We are a federation of associations, both state and territory, sector associations, the Transport Workers Union of Australia federally, and seven of the larger logistics companies in Australia such as Toll Group, Linfox, TNT, KNS, Australia Post and Boral. Our focus is to deal predominantly on national issues. We deal with the Australian government. We deal with the various departments, and we have a large degree of dealings with the National Transport Commission on a whole range of issues.

We did write a small submission to you people last year, but we normally do not get too involved in state-based inquiries, only because the state-based associations are normally involved and they are certainly in a better position to discuss local issues than we are. We just felt it was important to have a view put to these types of inquiries from a national perspective, particularly as it is such an emotional and emotive issue when we are dealing with the cost of lives across Australia. When we have a significant incident, as you are aware, it affects everybody through the whole of the communities, and it is very easy, as you know, to simply point the finger at one particular person. Being involved, we do not think it is as simple as that, although we acknowledge the fact that our industry has to continue to have education programs in place for our own drivers to ensure that they obey the road rules. There is no excuse for not obeying the road rules, but there are things I think in this debate that we certainly want to be part of.

I have been a professional heavy vehicle driver for probably 30 or more years. I still drive, when I am allowed to, and I still find it a fascination in this country that you can go across major transport corridors where we have so many unprotected level crossings. I have looked at the debates over many years about what can be done. There have been a significant number of inquiries held over a long period of time, as we are aware. There are a significant number of recommendations that often come out of parliamentary inquiries, both state-based and federally. Sometimes those things are taken into effect and actually happen, and other times, for a whole range of reasons, the recommendations are not implemented.

Our view, again without being too specific to Victoria — and I do understand obviously that this committee is involved within Victorian boundaries but obviously the ramifications are wider — we do believe that conspicuity of trains is an issue. It has been raised on numerous occasions, and I will not go into the details of it. I just cite the simple view that, if you are driving in the country in particular and you spot a grader or a council vehicle, it often just simply has an orange rotating light on the top, and you will spot that from a vast distance away. Why is that? Because it is out of place, it is different, so as a driver you will often pick it up because it is something that is different in your landscape or in your vision. I think from our point of view of representing the vast majority of people that operate heavy vehicles in this country, it is often those things that are a bit out of the ordinary that will raise the awareness of drivers as they go along their path.

**Mr KOCH** — Stuart, when you say you represent the vast majority of drivers, you indicated the association includes several of the larger truck operators in the country. You mentioned nothing about the small business operators with one to five trucks or one to eight trucks. Who is representing them in this debate?

**Mr St CLAIR** — I should add to that that we do have owner-driver representatives on our council. We also have what we call a small fleet operator representative on our council for the one to five truck businesses. But

the majority of them are represented by member associations. You cannot be a member of the Australian Trucking Association unless you are a member of a state-based organisation or a sector-based organisation.

**Mr KOCH** — They have got an ear for the whole process, that is all I was — —

**Mr St CLAIR** — Absolutely. On the issue that the previous speaker raised of train speed and truck size, yes, truck size has changed as we know. B-doubles were introduced in the mid-80s and really started to take effect in the early 90s. They have certainly become a significant productive vehicle for the movement of freight. They all operate on designated routes which are laid down with due care by road authorities to ensure that the route that they travel on should be able to cope with them, and I would assume that road authorities would look at the question of level crossings.

We are looking at bigger vehicles, particularly in Queensland and the Northern Territory and WA, as you know, with road trains. Road trains have been vehicles that have operated in this country since motorisation of heavy vehicles came about.

On efficiency of trucks, as the previous speaker mentioned, it takes about that 18-odd seconds to get across an intersection. It is a significant period of time. There are, of course, cars that can take that long as well, and pushbike riders and pedestrians and a whole range of things that we share the road with every day.

Speed and the question of sight distance to us is significant. I have been caught myself coming to an almost stop, popping the truck into another gear and taking off with a load on, and then seeing the train come, and I can assure you it focuses your attention very quickly because with 4000 tonnes running at you and you weighing 42 tonnes, it is not a contest. Many of the angles of the roads for crossing are very difficult to see, as you would all be aware, and a lot of that happens on main corridors.

I do not have a great deal to add, to be honest. I am quite happy to answer questions, but many of the things that we would cover come from a practical experience and an understanding of what people talk to us about nationally.

**The CHAIR** — So what is your view about the recent announcement to reduce speed leading up to some crossings?

**Mr St CLAIR** — I think it is a good idea providing speed limits are obeyed but often there is a pursuit to get the maximum time for distance travelled without taking necessarily due caution at places where you need to reduce speed, and there are places where there needs to be, in our view, a reduction in speed. If that is on a main transport corridor, where you are approaching a frequently used crossing, and if you have to reduce that speed to 80 or to 70 or 60 kilometres or whatever the speed desired is, then that should be the case.

**Mr MULDER** — Stuart, is there an issue with familiarity with trucking and truck drivers in particular in relation to believing they know and understand the timelines of particular trains that are travelling on lines?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Absolutely, without question. I spent nearly 20 years in a local town that had two level crossings, one at each end of the town. The amount of accidents happened because locals ran into the train. It was not passing traffic or people who were inexperienced, it was the local who said, 'The train is not due for another 20 minutes or half an hour, or it is cancelled; or no, it has been started again' or something. There is no question that this occurs with heavy vehicles, and we saw that in the Northern Territory with the smash at Ban Ban Springs where there had been about 600 or so crossings by vehicles before a train came along. Consider the infrequency and whether the line is still operative, particularly in regional areas across Australia.

**Mr WELLER** — With the GPS technologies we have now, is there a solution in there for the heavy trucks and the trains to be talking to each other through that?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Again, I am not a technically minded person except to say that the GPS can certainly be programmed for when a crossing is coming up, so you will know where a crossing is. Many major operators program their GPS now for speed sign changes or changes of speed areas, so you might be coming into an 80 zone or a 70 zone or a 60 zone, and they can program the process into that. We have never understood why you cannot have a simple system that activates when a train is approaching a level crossing and cuts across your UHF radio or your truck radio. They do that in tunnels in Sydney and Melbourne. I do not know why that cannot be the case.

I think professional drivers, and that is what they are, have a radio of some sort on and it is generally a UHF or CB radio. You could just cut across that, simply call the crossing. I recently completed a major tour through Queensland in a semi-trailer predominantly on single lane road train routes which is an exciting experience, particularly at night-time. How do you deal with a triple road train coming at you if you are in a single lane? Simply, you have a radio.

The common courtesy is that people call certain crossings or bridges and that is a normal process of making sure that people are aware of where you are and what is happening. I think that many of those things can be automatically activated.

**Mr KOCH** — Whether they are on or off?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Yes. Just cut over the top. How you stop the wags from creating problems with that, I am not quite sure.

**Mr KOCH** — That is the other thing, Stuart. Do you see that technology at the end of the day being affordable for those smaller operators, or do you see them jumping around the boundaries and not having that total coverage?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Jumping around the boundaries.

**Mr KOCH** — That would be my concern. It should be quite affordable. No-one has indicated any numbers to us, but we know that these products are readily available now, available for single-car use if people wish to purchase them. They would not be a whole lot extra to put into the transport industry; it is the same product or a variation of the same product.

Is your association looking at greater compliance across the whole transport industry when this comes along? Do you see education policies or programs you might put in for the trucking industry at large to actually accommodate this sort of technology?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Yes, we do, in two parts. Each vehicle is fitted with a UHF radio. Just about every heavy vehicle has got a UHF radio in it. There may well be local deliverers that do not, but generally when you are talking the heavier end of the market — —

**Mr KOCH** — Against that, though, they would have a radio of some sort?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Absolutely.

**Mr KOCH** — If it is not UHF, it certainly would be fitted with a standard radio?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Absolutely. The challenge is going to be to ensure that those who will always stick with older gear — and there is nothing wrong with that providing it is well maintained — but something that comes over the top of the radio system will do that. We as an association are about to launch at the end of this month a new mobile education centre which is a 45-foot or 13.5-metre trailer being produced here in Melbourne that will go to all the schools across Australia.

We had a safety education trailer some years ago which served us well for five or six years. We now launch this one; it is a \$1 million project. In that we will certainly have tips and issues about ensuring that people understand that level crossings are dangerous, that, 'You need to be aware', to raise the awareness.

**Mr KOCH** — Any feedback from association members in relation to rumble strips next to the lights — the pre-warning lights 250 metres out on the backside of a rise?

**Mr St CLAIR** — We have the view that they are a great idea. We have seen those operate on roads now. Where already you may have signage of 'a steep descent coming', you had problems with heavy vehicles or any vehicles for that matter on steep descent, and you will often see the oscillating lights up there, and we think they are a great idea. They should be at least 300 or 400 metres away from the crossing, particularly activated if a train is anywhere in the region. It is just something that again takes out the mundaneness of the work. We know they successfully work on roads, and they have them, as we say, on some intersections.

**Mr KOCH** — Any evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, about rumble strips?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Rumble strips is merely anecdotal. It will wake me up, but how far away am I going to be from the crossing when I hit the train? If I am coming up to the train at 100 kilometres an hour and there is a ripple strip 50 metres in front, it is too late. It's all over!

We feel that lights are a much better way of going. They can be done by solar panels, as we know, and we believe that that will have a significant effect. Sirens, bells, whistles — modern trucks today are like driving a car: they are quiet. You have got a CD on; you have got climate control inside; the vehicle is automatic. You are very comfortable, you are concentrating on the business of driving the road, but for noise penetration to come into a cab nowadays is past history. And the traditional way of driving the truck in the old days with your elbow out the window is just non-professional; it is just amateur.

**Mr MULDER** — On the issue of conspicuity with trains, that we are talking about before: how does your association get to the negotiating table with the state governments? I know this has been discussed at a federal level, but we have got a situation here in Victoria and I know they commented about it, where V/Line has started to paint their fleet battleship grey, which blends in perfectly into a winter sky. Do you get a seat at the table on those sorts of decisions, or are you brought into those discussions?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Normally not. The Victorian Transport Association here is a member of the ATA, and certainly they would put a view that reflects the views of their members. NatRoad, which is another national organisation that is a member of ours, may well get one, but we do not normally get something.

Can I just make a comment on the grey? I spoke to a woman in Western Australia who many of you may have met or heard, whose daughter was killed some years ago by driving into the side of a wheat train on their own property, where the train basically filled the vision so when you are driving into the crossing with three of them in the front seat of a utility, they simply just drove straight into the side of the train because they could not see it.

Colour is an issue. Green locomotives are a great way to blend in with the background, but look at the sugar trains. What colour are sugar trains? They are bright yellow with lights on. There is a reason for that because as we know in many towns in Queensland, those trains share the roadways all the time with motor vehicles.

**Mr KOCH** — And green leaf.

**Mr St CLAIR** — Yes, exactly.

**The CHAIR** — Any further questions?

**Mr St CLAIR** — I will check my letter, Chair, in case I have left something out there, but I think most of these things this committee will have heard before. Certainly, as I said, we do not differ with what the previous speaker was saying, except that the rumble strips will be an interesting trial. I am not sure how you are going to pop them up all the time, how long that is going to last for.

**Mr KOCH** — Stuart, ongoing driver behaviour in the transport industry is often cited as one of the curses, for want of a better word, of what is taking place in relation to rail safety. It is also rare, it is said and as you can easily believe. I am sure the association is supportive, but is it actively involved in areas of driver behaviour for your associate members?

**Mr St CLAIR** — We certainly are, in two ways. The increase in professionalism of our drivers is something that we have pushed back down through our members for the simple reason that it is very difficult for us to argue with members of Parliament over improvements to productivity gains if our drivers on the road are doing the bad thing. The challenge is that it only takes one driver to tailgate someone or one driver to go past somebody at 120 kilometres an hour in a 100 zone for us to lose credibility. It is the one driver who is creating difficulty.

We are also the owners of a national accreditation tree scheme called TruckSafe, which was undertaken in the mid-1990s as a form of accreditation that moved to the professional and some of the operation of the vehicle. That included mandatory medical exams, for example, annually for drivers, or every two or three years depending on the driver's age. It also had driver behaviour. It also had the behaviour of the management of the company as much as the driver.

Chain of responsibility legislation, which I think is coming in to Victoria and certainly around the other states, is going to have a significant effect. We think that is a good thing. We think that that needs to broaden right out, which that legislation will do to attract a lot of other people into the chain. It is not just the driver. It is about a culture within our industry that is often assisted by other people involved in the industry. So we would see that as a very good thing when it comes in.

**Mr KOCH** — Is the driver certification — away from medicals annually or every two or three years — on a repeat basis so your drivers actually got through a campaign every three or four years of their professional careers? Or is it a case of ‘Once through the gate, forever through the gate’?

**Mr St CLAIR** — It is actually ongoing. It is done quarterly, so the audits are only done once every two years once you are accredited, but your process in places are actually done — —

**Mr KOCH** — Who is accredited, the transport operator or the actual driver?

**Mr St CLAIR** — The operator.

**Mr KOCH** — I am talking about the driver down at that level.

**Mr St CLAIR** — We have spent a reasonable amount of time recently on the question of retesting drivers, that type of thing, particularly for heavy vehicles, multi-combination vehicles, so you are talking of 62.5 tonnes, and up.

**Mr KOCH** — And if we get to the triple we have got another combination there?

**Mr St CLAIR** — Absolutely. And there may be a case for a different standard of driving licence. We have noticed the comments made on Friday by the federal minister about a national licensing scheme. We think that is a terrific step forward, well overdue, and I am pleased to see all the states seem to have come on board. I live in Canberra, so if I am going for a multi-combination licence — in other words, a road train licence — I would do that based in the training depot at Queanbeyan, which is actually in New South Wales.

I will sit for a certain standard. If I lived in Queanbeyan in New South Wales I would actually have a different set of standards. Those areas that can be potentially fatal, such as level crossings, also need to have that greater impact, and I think it will come.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your attendance.

**Mr St CLAIR** — It is a pleasure.

**Witness withdrew.**