

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into ride sourcing services

Melbourne — 8 September 2016

Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Participating member

Ms Samantha Dunn

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Secretary: Ms Lilian Topic

Witness

Mr Thomas Banks, director, Centre for Access.

The CHAIR — I declare reopen the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. Welcome to all those present this morning. The committee is hearing evidence in relation to the inquiry into ride sourcing, and the evidence today is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and therefore you are protected for what you say in here today, but if you were to go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Thank you, Mr Banks, for agreeing to be a witness today at our inquiry. At this point I will hand over to your good self for any introductory comments, and then we might move into some questions from the committee following that.

Mr BANKS — Hello. My name is Thomas Banks. I would like to acknowledge the committee and thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I feel honoured to be here representing people with disabilities. I want to start by talking about what life was like before Uber existed. Taxis were hard to navigate. I would be on hold for hours when I called to book a cab. Then when I finally got through the operators could not understand me. They would hang up on me without even trying. I often waited for cabs which never turned up. Some drivers would pull up, wind down their windows and ask me where I was going. They would refuse me because they either thought I was drunk or would not accommodate the short distance. They would drive off when they could not understand me. It really frustrated me.

My world changed forever when I was introduced to Uber last year. I could suddenly get around without experiencing the same barriers with the taxis. I did not have to wait on hold for a long period of time. I loved how I could contact the driver directly and rate him after the end of my trip. I loved how simple the app was to use. It was good how my receipts were sent directly to my email address. I no longer needed to fumble with any small pieces of paper anymore.

I recently caught Ubers in the USA, which was amazing. They have a service called uberPOOL, where you can share a ride with strangers to keep the cost down. I hope to see uberPOOL introduced in Australia because it is fun, but it is also really cheap for customers. You never knew who you would meet.

One of the arguments with the taxi industry is that Uber is not a professional service. I can actually have conversations with the drivers when I catch Ubers around. They are not talking on their phones in another language. It happens all the time when I am in cabs, but it rarely does when I catch Ubers.

Now I would like to give some recommendations about how Uber can be more accessible for people who have disabilities. I know a lot of friends who have disabilities who would benefit from catching Ubers around. They cannot access the service, because Uber currently do not have any wheelchair-accessible vehicles available. Many people with disabilities are entitled to a half-price taxi card, which is subsidised by the government. If the government worked with Uber to offer the same incentive, there would be so many people with disabilities who would benefit from using the service.

I would like to see Uber establish an advisory group where they invite people with disabilities in to learn from their lived experiences. It would be great if Uber invested funds into having every one of their drivers specifically trained to understand how to communicate with people who have disabilities. I am available to work with Uber and other companies not only to deliver the training for their drivers and employees but also to support them to understand what access really means and how to implement it into their day-to-day business activities. I have so many other innovative ideas about how Uber can make the app more disability friendly.

People with disabilities have had to put up with the unreliable taxi industry for so long. As someone who relies heavily on public transport to get around, I am excited to see how Uber will contribute to the disability community in a positive way. Now we finally have a reliable choice, but Uber needs to be accessible for everyone, and that includes people who use wheelchairs.

Before I finish my address to the committee, I have a challenge for you. You should all catch taxis and Ubers with me, especially in peak times, so you can experience the way which I am treated and so you can experience firsthand what the difference is between both services. It would also add credibility to the final outcome of your inquiry. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Banks, for your contribution today. I think it is something that we have heard from a number of people who have presented insofar as we find ourselves with a significant opportunity in terms of transport here currently in Victoria, particularly with Uber and the like, and right now the right decisions do need to be made to ensure that people with mobility issues or low vision or the like do find these

ride-sourcing options accessible. So I am curious to know: you mentioned about an advisory group that might be able to help. What would that look like, do you think? How would an advisory group work with the likes of Uber to assist in ensuring that members of our community with mobility issues, vision issues and the like are not left behind?

Mr BANKS — I will write my comments, so please be patient.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr BANKS — So a lot of times people with disabilities are not consulted, so it is really important that it happens. Uber Melbourne currently does not have an advisory group, but it is really important. So my hope is that the group meets every few months to give feedback directly into the further development of Uber in Australia, and also they should pay us for recognising that we are in fact the experts because we have to navigate these barriers every day. Also Uber should employ in an access position someone who identifies with a disability.

The CHAIR — Indeed. Further to that, we have heard about the multipurpose taxi subsidy that is available currently only to taxis. Is that something that you believe is important to be extended to Uber and other ride-sourcing organisations?

Mr BANKS — This is an important issue which needs to be addressed. From a personal perspective I think Uber should have a government subsidy, because people with disabilities deserve choice.

The CHAIR — Absolutely. It is a very good point.

Mr BANKS — And a reliable choice.

The CHAIR — Indeed, yes.

Mr LEANE — Thank you so much, Mr Banks. I agree with your sentiment that we need expertise like the Centre for Access and you. Disability access or access for everyone in the new rideshare-Uber world is a huge issue for us as a committee. It has been one of the major issues. Uber gave evidence just before you — I noticed you were in the gallery — and I asked Uber how many of their 14 000 vehicles are actually wheelchair accessible. I am not sure I got the answer, but can I ask you: how many people that you know, you deal with or you assist who rely on wheelchairs have accessed Uber? Do you know if any have?

Mr BANKS — I do not think any have, which is a real issue. Before I came here today I consulted with people, and people in wheelchairs who own wheelchair accessible-vehicles want to drive, so maybe the government could subsidise a small portion of funds for wheelchair drivers to start to make the industry more competitive.

Mr LEANE — Good on you. That was my only question. Thank you again for helping us.

Mr BOURMAN — I have just one quick question. Thanks for your evidence today, Thomas. Are you aware of whether the taxi industry has an advisory group for people with disabilities?

Mr BANKS — They did, but they cut it.

Ms DUNN — Thanks, Mr Banks, for coming in today. I wonder if you have got any views on the \$2 levy that is proposed for each trip.

Mr BANKS — So basically I personally think it should not be implemented, because it would affect people with disabilities dramatically, but at the same time, when taxidriviers get bookings, automatically there is a \$2 extra cost, so it needs to be fair. The only difference is when I hail the cabs there are no fees added, which is a disadvantage to Uber. I do not know what happened with the taxi inquiry last year. Will there be an outcome?

Ms DUNN — Good question. I do not know either. The other thing I wanted to ask you, Thomas, was: do you know anywhere where fully accessible ridesharing works well, either in Australia or across the world, that maybe we could look at and see what a good model is?

Mr BANKS — Good question.

Ms DUNN — We would love to think there is one.

Mr BANKS — I do not know any.

Ms DUNN — Okay, no problem. Thank you for that.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Banks, for your attendance today and providing testimony to the committee. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's evidence, and you can proofread that and provide any changes as necessary. That transcript will ultimately make its way onto the committee's website.

Mr BANKS — Whichever way, let me know what happens.

Ms DUNN — Yes, we will absolutely let you know what happens. The other thing I did forget to say, Thomas, is that I would be very happy to come and share your journey on the taxi and Uber and see just how that goes. I would be very happy to.

Mr BANKS — All right. Lilian has got my email.

The CHAIR — Very good. We will be able to follow that up. I am sure other committee members would be interested in doing that as well, so we might be able to do that.

Ms DUNN — We can go on a trip together.

Mr BANKS — Funded by the government, of course.

The CHAIR — Yes, we will get Mr Leane and his friends to look after that for you. We joke, we joke. Thank you, Mr Banks, and thank you for your time today. As I say, you will be provided with a transcript of today's evidence, and once again, thank you for your attendance today.

Witness withdrew.