

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Melbourne—Tuesday, 21 July 2020

(via videoconference/teleconference)

MEMBERS

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Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESSES

Mr Stan Gates, President, and

Ms Rhonda Armour, Secretary, Australian Driver Trainers Association (Victoria).

The CHAIR: I declare open the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. We welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

Before I begin I will read a short witness statement. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment made outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion. Could you please state your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then begin your presentation.

Mr GATES: My name is Stanley Gates. I am President of the Australian Driver Trainers Association (Victoria), and I live on Phillip Island.

The CHAIR: Excellent. So, Stan, you and Rhonda can start the presentation. We are all ears.

Mr GATES: Okay, then. The perception of the public in Victoria is that professional driver trainers are simply an expedient—a means of attaining an end. The bulk of the 120 hours required to take the licence assessment is generally completed by a parent supervisor who is not current with good driving practice or road law. The PDs, the professional driver trainers, see deficiencies in the learners and have minimal time to ensure safe driving practice before their solo is licensed and driving solo. If we raise the standard of PDs, the public will see the advantage of sending their learners much earlier to consolidate safe driving practice.

The Australian Driver Trainers Association is strongly supportive of the measures being taken by the Victorian government to improve road safety and reduce the road toll. The Australian Driver Trainers Association accept the basic premises of the Transport Accident Commission's *Towards Zero* campaign. Until no-one dies on our roads we have not done enough on this, and that is the reason for our submission. We believe strongly in driver trainers lifting their standard up so that parents and supervisors will look at driver trainers as professionals that can provide a more sustained service to the public and reduce the road toll. Thank you. I am quite happy to take questions.

Mr FINN: I have a question that might not be directly related to the submission, which should not surprise anyone, but I am keen to know about the testing process itself. Obviously driving instructors are vital parts of preparing for that process. Do you find there is a similar standard of testing across Victoria, or are there some areas that are perhaps not as strict as others?

Mr GATES: You have asked a very appropriate question there, and I can easily come across that. I will give you one simple answer. You can take a student to two LTOs—licence testing officers—and you will come up with two different results. And this is true. VicRoads does their best, but really the test is based on the ability of the LTOs' own driving habits. They are trained in, we call it in our industry, the tick-and-flick attitude—as long as they do their head checks, look straight and, you know, just stop at the stop signs. A test today is very, very simple, and I think that really the Australian driver trainers believe that our testing should be a lot tougher and a lot harder.

When I first entered the industry about 25 years ago—I will give you an example—on a hill, with a manual car, you were not allowed to roll back more than 1 foot or 12 inches. Today you can roll back 2 or 3 metres as long as there is not a car behind you beeping their horn. You can roll through a stop sign today and just be granted a

critical error. There again, coming to some of the testers, if you roll through slowly they might not pick it up, because they are just busy ticking and flicking.

Mr FINN: Do you think government needs to be stricter in regulating the testing process?

Mr GATES: Definitely, yes. Basically a student is rewarded with their driving practice, because unfortunately a student will only come to a driving instructor maybe at the last moment just to teach them how to do a reverse parallel park or a three-point turn, just to get them over the line. If you think about it, the 120 hours have been delivered mainly with their parents or supervising drivers. Everyone develops bad habits. That is why the driving instructors like to do PDs to keep themselves up to date. If you think about 120 hours, a student will pick up bad habits, and then on the day they will listen to their driving instructor and do everything right, and as soon as they obtain their licence then all the bad habits kick back in again. We see it too often—too many times.

The CHAIR: I will move to Mr Barton if he has got a question. He is a former professional driver.

Mr BARTON: Good morning, Stan. Stan, one of the areas that I feel very strongly about is lack of training and how we give our licences—people achieve their licences. There are two stages: if we lift the standard of those professional driving instructors—that should be always our goal, to always improve. But do you think for the young people learning to drive that out of their 120 hours there should be a nominated amount of hours that should—say, 20 hours should go to a professional driver, as opposed to picking up the bad habits of Mum and Dad?

Mr GATES: Well, the best solution basically is right at the start. If a student who has never driven before comes to a driving instructor, we can set up the guidelines for them with a few driving lessons—two or three or up to five; that all depends on the parents—and then halfway through they come back to their driving instructor and we can see if they are picking up any bad habits and then at the end have another couple of lessons, that will really keep them on track. Unfortunately they only come to us right at the end, mainly, and we just do not have the time to try and correct their bad habits. They will listen to you on the day and pass the test—as I said, the test is very simple and very easy; it is too easy to pass—and then the bad habits kick back in again. I will give you one example. I live in the country, and the young people mainly knock up their hours if they play football or the girls play netball—they just travel long distances. So they are used to long-distance travelling and speeding, and then when they come to the towns they cannot really slow down, and because the last 120 hours have been spent speeding or going fast, at 100 k an hour on roads, it is very different for them. But they feel comfortable when they are driving solo on their own. So it really comes down to a mixture of parental practice and driving lessons.

Mr BARTON: Over my professional driving career I did a number of driving courses. I did things because I was working with the federal police, protective services, VicPol; we did a lot of—and it is a really bad term, and no-one likes using it—advanced driving courses. We should be saying ‘Defensive driving practices’ or finding a better way of wording it. But what do you say to those people—and I have heard this many times—that criticise that these sorts of things create an overconfidence in the kids?

Mr GATES: It basically comes down to the individual. I think defensive driving courses are good; once they have obtained their licence and they have had, say, two or three months experience on the roads, if they do a defensive driving course I think they can benefit from that. But here again it comes down to the psychology of the student. Some students will really gain out of it, and some will actually abuse it by thinking that they are invincible and they can do anything they like on the road. I think when they do the defensive driving course that you could bring a little bit more psychology into it and explain it to the student. A good defensive driving instructor will be able to pick that up. Some of the courses out there I think are good, but some of them are not so good.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Stan. Thanks, Rhonda. I might direct this question to Rhonda, but you may also throw it back to Stan. I note in your submission that you talked about how young drivers in the system today tend to drive the oldest cars, and I think we have all got experience of that in this meeting. It is about affordability and such, and I shudder when I think about the car that I learned to drive in and sat my drivers licence test in. So I was wondering what sort of impact you think that has on the overall road toll—the age of the vehicle and the

older cars being in the hands of our most inexperienced drivers—and what, if anything, you think the government might be able to do about that.

Ms ARMOUR: The best way I could answer that for the moment is that driver trainers—professional ones—are actively encouraging their learners to get into really good up-to-date and current vehicles that have all the technologies to protect them. Driver trainers often try to encourage parent supervisors that when looking at cars to look at ANCAP rating. It is a well-known fact that even for an older vehicle, if parent supervisors can access the best car they can at that time in that year group that is going to make their solo driver a safer person. But there are certainly avenues for advancing technology. By the same token, my personal experience is I have a current car with lots of technology, and I think you will find that many driver trainers find their learners have done all of these hours with family but in fact they do not even know the basics. Learners do not even know how to access their demisters in a car. So if we could get them knowing their basics, then the technologies will stand them in good stead.

Mr GEPP: Can I just tease that out a little bit, Rhonda? Thank you for that. Are you suggesting perhaps that what we should consider introducing into the driver training system, prior to somebody being able to obtain their licence, is that part of them demonstrating their ability to be safe on the road is also understanding the machinery that they are actually operating before they start driving?

Ms ARMOUR: [Zoom dropout] years of experience. We speak to our members all the time, and our learners simply do not know their fundamentals of a vehicle. So even as part of the licencing process, instead of doing the miniature little predrive we do currently, maybe they need to demonstrate what all those controls in their vehicle actually mean and how to use them. Further knowledge of their vehicle will be a massive advancement in their safety when they are a solo driver.

Mr QUILTY: You have called for a minimum age for learner drivers and they should have a minimum age on the car they drive. Is there a problem, do you think, with young trainers? Do professional trainers currently have bad cars?

Mr GATES: Are you directing the question at me?

Mr QUILTY: Either of you.

Mr GATES: Okay. Well, basically, most driver trainers have up-to-date cars. It is usually the best way to train the students, by showing them all the modern technology in the car. Not many driver trainers would have very old cars, just because of the number of kilometres that they do. But I am not quite sure of the question. Are you talking about learner drivers or are you talking about driving instructors?

Mr QUILTY: Driving instructors.

Mr GATES: Okay, the age of a driving instructor—you rephrased. Look, in our submission we say 25 and over would make a more suitable driving instructor unless they have been involved in the CFA or they have been involved in some organisation that matures them. We have had conferences and we have had Dr Bridie—whatever her name is.

Ms ARMOUR: That was Dr Bridie Scott-Parker from Queensland.

Mr GATES: That is right, from Queensland, and Dr Michael Carr-Gregg. They have both stated at our conferences that the male brain does not mature under 25. And if you think about it, if you have a driving instructor who is just off his Ps, he does not have the really worldly experience and does not have the experience of communicating properly and understanding the problems on the road. With somebody over 25, we hope they would have better maturity in delivering their message, of course, of safe driving.

Mr QUILTY: I accept that—the science behind it—but is there currently a problem with young trainers or professional drivers? It just seems to me like you are calling for a solution to a problem that does not really exist. Do you know of any young professional drivers under the age of 25?

Mr GATES: Well, the way things are going now with the high unemployment we do find one of the biggest problems is employment agencies. If somebody comes in and they cannot find them work, they will ring me up or they will ring Rhonda or somebody like that and say, ‘Look, how can a young person obtain their

accreditation to become a driving instructor?', on the basis that it is really basically to get them off the books—this is true—and just to get them a job. Now, driving instructors are a profession. I have been one for 25 years, and we take it pretty seriously. We like to see young ones coming in who are more mature and really are dedicated to delivering up-to-date driving lessons properly and towards the road safety. That is what we are really all about. That is why, if you look at our submission, we are saying that before a person even sits for their driving accreditation course they should actually be tested on their road laws, their knowledge and their driving ability. At present, you could go along there and sit for it and enrol for a course, and you would just do the course. Some institutions will put you through pretty quickly, and it is basically—excuse the expression—bums on seats, really, to get them through. That is what does happen today. I hope I have answered your question.

Mr QUILTY: Sure. You are calling for CPD hours. Most people who have been involved with doing CPD will know that a lot of it is box ticking and an exercise that generates money for professional associations. Why would this CPD be better?

Mr GATES: Well, we are calling for PDs as professional development courses. In answer to your question, if you are an accountant, if you are a doctor, if you are a nurse or a teacher, everyone has to do updates. Now, there are still driving trainers out there today, unfortunately, that have done only certificate III years ago and they have not bothered to do any updates. So their training standard is a lot lower than the ones that have done the certificate IV. And we feel that if we can have professional development mandatory, so they have to do one a year, at the end of three years—and that is what we have, a three-year accreditation; we have to renew it every three years—they will go to the CPVV, Commercial Passenger Vehicles Victoria, and they will present that they have done three professional developments over a three-year period, which is not really a lot. It is not hard to achieve doing three PDs through a year. We pushed for 5 hours over a three-year course. It is just keeping the driver trainer up to date with everything that is happening and when. Otherwise driver trainers can develop bad habits themselves.

I have heard that people say, 'Oh, you shouldn't have to do a PD', but look at all the other professions. Everyone has to do PDs, especially teachers. I was talking to a teacher yesterday, and they said they do 20 hours a year. And in answer to your question where you say it is just ticking boxes, you can arrange different types of PDs. You can do training PDs. You can do conference PDs. I have already done two PDs this year, and that is with Keys2drive and Road Smart. Road Smart is a Victorian government initiative and Keys2drive is an Australian initiative. And just to bring you up to date, Keys2drive actually came to Victoria then went to Tasmania and fell into a heap. We brought it to Victoria, and the Australian Driver Trainers Association took it on board and now it has gone Australia-wide. And it is really producing good-quality learning practice for some of the driver trainers that have taken it on.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Stan, and thank you, Rhonda. Look, I just wanted to address something there. I think largely, and certainly in my experience as far as driver training is concerned—and I am happy for you to correct me here—a lot of the training for young drivers falls back on parents, friends and relatives et cetera partly because it is cultural here in Australia that this falls to people like that. But also do you feel that there is perhaps an economic impediment—that driver training through professionals such as yourselves is to some extent with some socio-economic areas being priced out and that there is perhaps a greater role for government to intervene there and provide some sort of credit system or some sort of economic backup? And I know the solutions for a lot of people—everyone seems to put their hand up and say, 'Well, why doesn't government pay for this?'. It seems to be a fallback for lots of things, and government only has so much money. But in something where we are trying to reduce the road toll, do you think that this is an area that would be great for that investment?

And the next question that I have is something of a completely different nature. Do you feel then that also, going along the lines of what you were saying before, with you as professional driving instructors having accreditation and having continual updates and those sorts of things, drivers themselves as they go along through their years on the roads, this is something that we need to introduce—to have people come back and do some sort of not having to sit necessarily their licence again but just an update of familiarisation of the road rules and the changes, whether they are up to date with them, because I know there have been some introduced, like, for instance, the slowing down to 40 kilometres when you see police or emergency vehicles parked on the side of the road? There are lots of people who do not even understand that that is a rule now and they still go past at speed.

Mr GATES: Well, in answer to your first question regarding the financing of it, yes, unfortunately driver trainers have to be paid. We are not always looking for handouts from the government to pay that. But if you look at an average family, parents are more inclined to spend money on tennis training, ballet, horseriding—any sort of sport, they will spend a lot of money. But when it comes down to actually driving on the road, which is really life-and-death situations, they always look at the cheapest way of handling it, and that is usually to say Dad, Mum or an uncle or an aunty or a friend takes their sons and daughters out and just gives them the practice. Parents seem to think that they are giving lessons. They are not really, because they are only giving practice and they are only just enhancing their own driving bad habits, or lazy habits, themselves. It is a difficult question. It would be great if the government would come in and mandate, say, so many lessons and the government would pick that up—as long as the professional driver trainer has to be doing the PDs and ticks all the boxes himself.

In answer to your second question—yes, look, you ask yourself: an 18-year-old obtains his licence. When he is 28, because it is for a 10-year licence, he renews it again. When he is 38 he renews it. When he is 48 he renews it. There are no checks and balances, and then they come back to us. I work a lot with occupational therapists, and so does Rhonda, and they will come back to us when somebody is in their late 50s or 60s who might be starting to show dementia or something like that. But you see the way they drive; they have developed bad habits over the years. Now, if they were picked up every 10 years or every 20 years and just had to do a refresher course—I do not mean doing a test, but a refresher course—with a professional driver trainer who has ticked all the boxes, I think we would be able to pick them up on some of their bad habits and keep them safer on the roads.

As you know yourself, anything that you do, if you are a builder or whatever—a gardener or something, everyone takes shortcuts in the end, and a lot of drivers do the same thing. They cut corners. It is just normal driving. It is human nature. So I think you have got to keep in mind this is coming back to why we believe the driver trainers need to do PD, to keep them refreshed and on track, and then they can pass their good habits and good training on to their students, young or old—

Ms ARMOUR: I would just like to come in there if you would not mind, Stan. On the first question, there is the L2P program that does have assistance for people who have financial difficulties. There are also increasing multicultural backgrounds, where people from overseas have moved here and for various reasons do not have access. So there is an area for government to perhaps offer more assistance for over 21s, and that would help people to become safer drivers. I just wanted to add that in.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Rhonda. I think that is a really relevant point. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rhonda. We are just on time now, so Beverley, if you have got a question, I will allow you one more question, and then we will have to move on to the next speakers.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Stan and Rhonda. I must say I would caution against any more government funding of anything. It is not the government that has got any money, it is the poor taxpayers, and they are being fleeced at every level at the moment. I think Stan is absolutely right: it is a matter of priorities. If parents think that a child should have a licence, then maybe they ought to ensure that that is a priority in their training. But I was just curious: if you think there should be a minimum age for trainers, do you think there should be a maximum age for trainers, Stan?

Mr GATES: That is a difficult question really. A maximum age of trainers—I think a good trainer would be realising he is starting to slow down and not perform as well. I would not like to put a figure on it, but I think most trainers would understand that it is getting beyond them and they would give it up.

Mrs McARTHUR: So, Stan, isn't it really about the level of skill and competence that the trainer might have, not necessarily something to do with their age?

Mr GATES: Definitely.

Ms ARMOUR: I will come in.

Mr GATES: Okay, Rhonda, you come in, please.

Ms ARMOUR: I was just going to come in there. I believe, in answer to your question, it is the same for the everyday driver as it is for the driver trainer. There are people in their 90s who are absolutely competent and can drive safely. There are people in their 20s and 30s who have issues. So I do not believe that age is necessarily an issue. It comes back to skill. And to answer your question: yes, driver trainers should assess themselves to make sure that they are on track and that those degenerative diseases such as dementia and whatnot have not stepped in to take over.

Mrs McARTHUR: Is there a case for the accreditors being trained or accredited?

Mr GATES: Sorry, I misunderstood.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, the organisation that you have to apply to to get your licence or renew it or whatever it is: if they are perhaps not up to date with everything, how do we know that they are not just ensuring that boxes get ticked—that they perhaps need some accreditation or training, or somebody needs to be checking on the checkers?

Mr GATES: Are you talking about the RTOs, the registered driver trainers?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes.

Mr GATES: Yes, totally agree. I think we all need checks and balances and we all need to do professional development and we will need to tick all the boxes to be checked on. I totally agree with you. What about you, Rhonda?

Ms ARMOUR: I was just going to say with our regulator, other than signing us up and overseeing that we all meet the current requirements, there are actually no checks and balances on driver trainers as there are really no checks on the everyday driver. So that would be my answer to that question.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I notice that we have come to the end of our allocated time. On behalf of the committee I wish to say thank you to the Australian Driver Trainers Association and to you, Stan and Rhonda, personally for your submissions and presentation today. It has been a pleasure to listen to you and get your insight into driver training.

Ms ARMOUR: Fantastic.

Mr GATES: I would like to take the opportunity of thanking the committee for allowing us to present our case, and we look forward to hearing from you in the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.