

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into driver distraction

Melbourne — 30 January 2006

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Mr B. Priddle, manager, vehicle assurance and homologation; and

Mr R. Scoular, government affairs manager, Ford Motor Company.

The CHAIR — The committee welcomes Russell Scoular and Bruce Priddle from Ford Motor Company. Ford has always been an active participant in our road safety inquiries. We have always appreciated your input into our previous inquiries, and we appreciate Ford's input into this inquiry. As you are aware, this inquiry is looking at driver distraction. A copy of the Hansard transcript will be made available to Ford and will also be available on the web. We are acting under parliamentary privilege, so what you say cannot be used against you legally in the future. Again, thank you to Ford for the input. I hand over to either Bruce or Russell and ask you to make your submission.

Mr SCOULAR — Thank you very much for the kind comments about Ford Motor Company and its participation in your various inquiries. We appreciate that very much.

The CHAIR — I am from Geelong, Russell — I need to do that. But I did do it for Holden as well.

Mr LANGDON — Not as much, though.

Mr BISHOP — He was a bit quieter, yes.

Mr SCOULAR — Obviously this is a very important inquiry. When we started to really think about it, and the more we thought about it, the more we recognised that it is an extraordinarily significant inquiry. There is a very significant and wide berth of subject material that it covers, when you talk about the mix of in-vehicle and out-of-vehicle types of distractions to motorists on our highways.

We have put some brief comments forward to you on this issue. The things that have really come to our notice are that obviously a lot of the factors that are coming into play now and are making a subject of this nature quite topical in the community are the quite significant developments we are seeing in the technological field — with cell phones, blackberries, DVDs and all those types of activities in vehicles; there is a whole host of them.

One of the things that we have found — and talking to our parent company as well — is that the subject matter is not something that is peculiar to Victoria, Geelong or Australia; it is really a global issue. There is a lot of global research that has been undertaken to better understand these issues but at this stage in many of these areas there is probably not a lot of, if you like, significant empirical data on which to go beyond that point. From our point of view we would like to emphasise the point that the issues are significant; they are global. There is a lot of research activity either about to be undertaken or being undertaken to better understand the issues at play, but at this stage there are potentially not a lot of answers across all the various subject matters.

We are very keen corporately as a company to better understand it. Globally, Ford Motor Company is investing many millions and millions of research dollars into this area. We are sure as we better understand it many of the factors that we learn will play a very integral part in the design and engineering of our motor vehicles and how we use or do not use various technological features. Those are really just some opening comments. We would be happy to take any questions members might have.

Mr PRIDDLE — Perhaps if I can just amplify some of the points Russell made, particularly about mobile phones. I guess it does not take a lot of research to understand that texting on a mobile phone is inherently dangerous because not only is your attention diverted from the road, but you are also physically holding something and looking down at something. Whilst there has been research done on that, to some extent, it is obviously more dangerous, particularly for teenagers. The area where I guess you might say there is a degree of uncertainty is where you might be in a hands-free situation and just how much distraction that really is compared to, say, operating other equipment in the vehicle or other distractions that might exist around the vehicle. When we say that more research needs to be done, it is really in that area of understanding a driver's ability to focus their attention in different types of scenarios, indeed, people individually may be different.

The CHAIR — What research does Ford actually do in Australia — from an international perspective, I suppose? Is a lot of the research in this area conducted in Australia, or do you rely on outside sources? Is it internal, within the company, but conducted overseas?

Mr PRIDDLE — Primarily we rely on overseas research by our parent company. We are essentially a technology taker, to be quite frank. We focus our efforts — divert our resources in fact — to product development. We take developed technology and apply it to a local product. A good example of that is the seat belt reminder system. Ford was the first local car manufacturer to introduce that.

The CHAIR — That is the bipping thing?

Mr PRIDDLE — The bipping thing.

The CHAIR — Thanks for that!

Mr PRIDDLE — But it only does it when you are moving. That was an outcome of research which said that we want to remind people. We do not want to annoy them. We need to get their attention, but we do not want to annoy them to the extent that they take action to defeat the device.

Mr STONEY — Can you?

Mr PRIDDLE — We took that research on board and we implemented this system that only beeps at you whilst you are moving. You can sit in your driveway with the engine running and it is only when you drive away will it warn you that you should have buckled up. I continue to get caught out myself. It is sobering to see how often you actually do drive, even though your intention might be to drive only for a brief period, without your seatbelt on; and we all know how important seatbelts are. So we are technology takers in that sense.

We do get involved, though, with some research. You have probably heard of the ANCIS program — that is, the Australian national crash in-depth study, of which Ford was a founding member. This program is seeking to learn more about injury and the causes of road trauma. There is also the SafeCar project which the TAC may well have mentioned. We were one of the partners in that project which was looking to understand more about certain safety technologies in fleets, with a view to possibly promoting them further down the track. But in the main we look to the global area of research because fundamentally Australians get hurt in the same way as other people do, and I would hazard to say that we are probably not too different from the rest of the world as far as distraction goes. That is where we bias our resources.

Mr BISHOP — Can I ask what work you have done in relation to voice activation — and I think the example of a car radio is a good one? Years ago there were a couple of knobs and now it looks like a 747 console?

Mr PRIDDLE — We do not have any voice activation locally in products, but obviously voice activation is an area that is of interest. Our navigation system has a voice message which gives you direction, but that is an area which we would regard as potentially problematic. It needs to be well thought out, so we have not got our toe in the water yet on that locally. Clearly, not having to use your hands to do something is a good thing, but the instructions you give have to be quite simple, and the way you make the system learn your voice has to be simple. You cannot really afford to be mucking around with your voice while you are trying to drive either, so it is an area that needs more work.

Mr STONEY — Looking five years ahead, what will the Falcon have on it that you do not supply now? I am looking for a bit of vision on where you think an average car like the Falcon will be going as far as safety equipment is concerned?

Mr SCOLAR — I think one of the easiest ways to really visualise something like that is to look back five years or so and say, ‘Where was the car at that point? Where is it today?’. You essentially look at automotive design and automotive engineering as being evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary, so you will see a continued migration and adaptation of new features in the community into our vehicles.

Mr STONEY — I understand that, but what new features will you have in your cars in five years that are not there now; that are in the developmental stage?

Mr PRIDDLE — There are lots of things in development; all sorts of things. Intelligent transport systems (ITS) in general is a very broad area and there is a lot of work going on. The development of telecommunication systems, satellite navigation systems has enormous potential. It is a bit hard to say exactly where it might be in five years, but some vehicles already have adaptive cruise controls which set a distance between you and the vehicle you are following. They are the sorts of technologies that might come into being.

Again, there needs to be some caution with these because we need to ask ourselves how much complacency comes with them from the driver’s point of view? It is something that always troubles me to some extent. We keep adding more safety features, and even though they are very good safety features — Ford was again one of the first to implement what we call the dynamic stability controller, known as stability controls in general, which was first

introduced on the Territory — that have the potential to prevent the driver getting out of control, but how much of that space or that margin for error is used up by the driver thinking, 'If I get out of control the vehicle will look after me'? Anti-lock brakes is another example.

We are going to see the potential for technologies generally to be able to take more control away from the driver, but we need to look at those very carefully before we implement them. This is where more research is required. There are a range of those but I hesitate to say which ones we might or might not adopt.

Mr STONEY — So you have concerns that the new era of gadgets, if you like — safety features and things to stop cars swerving — might impact on driver performance? Are you worried that perhaps drivers' skills will diminish because they are thinking the car will look after them — and sometimes it will not?

Mr PRIDDLE — Maybe drivers will use up margins for error. They might drive more closely to vehicles; they might drive faster around corners. For example, there is not a lot of evidence to show that anti-lock brake systems have been dramatically effective. You also need to consider the vehicles in the fleet that do not have those features. If a vehicle is able to react more quickly to a situation, are the drivers around that vehicle that do not have the benefit of those features going to be able to cope with that. You need to think of the whole system. I think it is a case of cherry-picking those that have been developed and on which thorough research has been done that says they are a benefit — stability control is in that category; there is clearly a net benefit there — and generally being very cautious about just which technologies have been properly developed with thorough research and do have a proven benefit to road safety.

Mr STONEY — Has Ford taken any steps to assess that or to minimise the danger of that?

Mr PRIDDLE — Internationally we are relying on the research that is done to understand driver behaviours altogether. Intelligent transport systems, at a high level, are of benefit in that they can influence driver behaviour. That can be a very good thing — like seatbelt reminders that remind you to put your seatbelt on or encourage you to drive in a certain way that is more safe — but it can also be a negative thing because your behaviour can be influenced in that you think, 'The vehicle is now looking after me, I can take less ownership of my own safety'. One of the areas that is really important is that we continue to emphasise to people the importance of them driving more safely, and the area of distraction is one key area where we do need more education and need to encourage people to realise that distraction is an important issue and you really have to be on your guard all the time.

With respect to the research that Ford has done, there is mention of a simulator in our paper. It is called VirTex, which means virtual test track experiment. That device is essentially a driving simulator. You bolt in a cabin that moves about. It has a total of 300° vision. The people who are the subject of that experiment can be put under potentially dangerous situations to monitor how they behave.

One of the outcomes of that research was that it was concluded that, for example, navigation systems really needed to have some features locked out when you use them. Whilst they are a very useful guide in mapping your course in unfamiliar terrain, you really ought not to be able to input the destination while you are driving, for obvious reasons. It is a case of finding a balance. If you can use technology wherever possible to give customers features that actually help the driving task — because primarily what we need them to do is to aid people in the primary task which is driving, rather than spending time on secondary tasks — then you can also use the technology to lock certain features out so that they only operate when the vehicle is stationary, and give them other features that can be used in a simple easy-to-absorb way whilst they are driving.

Mr STONEY — I notice that a small number of your vehicles do have navigation aids. Have there been any other technical problems that you have experienced besides the ones you have talked about?

Mr PRIDDLE — Do you mean specifically with the navigation systems?

Mr STONEY — Yes.

Mr PRIDDLE — It is still very early days. The fitment rate is still quite low, I think, less than 1 per cent.

Mr SCOLAR — Less than 1 per cent of our vehicles would have what we call satellite navigation.

Mr STONEY — Is that an option, or is it just in some models?

Mr PRIDDLE — Some models have it as standard equipment, the higher series, but in that system you cannot input the destination whilst you are in motion. You can see a map, and depending on how you set it up at the outset you can receive an arrow that says, ‘Turn left in 800 metres’. You can see that at a glance at the screen. Or you can get a voice that says, ‘Take the next exit at the roundabout’ or something similar. You do not have to take your eyes off the road at all and when you get to the intersection there is a little bip that says ‘Turn here’. If you happen to take the wrong turn or you get confused then it tells you to do a U-turn as soon as possible. That is a good example of where we have used technology to help the driver, but we have also used behavioural research to decide just what access the driver should have to the controls whilst the vehicle is in motion.

The CHAIR — In our discussions with Holden earlier this morning, their representatives raised their concerns with the lack of guidelines in relation to intelligent transport systems. I would be interested in Ford’s position on the need for guidelines — whether they should be industry-developed guidelines or whether we need to be looking at legislation — and overseas experiences.

Mr SCoulAR — There are two factors there. As I alluded to earlier, I think a lot of the issues we are talking about here today are global issues, so inherently a global solution, if you like, is a very important part of successfully addressing something. If we look at our vehicle market in Australia, last year, for example, some 75 per cent of all new vehicles sold in Australia were imported. I think a global solution in that environment is very important. I am not too sure what the right answer may be in some areas. I think it is possibly a bit premature to say that it must be legislation or it must be something else. If we are to learn from some of the dialogue that is happening around the world, both in North America and in Europe, there has certainly been a very participative and cooperative approach on the part of industry to work with legislators to clarify or put on the table guidelines for the way some of these technologies may be handled.

One of the difficulties with taking a legislative route, for example, is that many of the technologies are not only in their infancy, but they are moving so quickly, and as you guys possibly know better than I, once something is on the statute books it tends to be there in a fixed manner for a very long period of time. There is a risk in something like the technology arena, which is fast moving, that you might not necessarily get the desired outcomes you may be after.

Mr LANGDON — I think it has already been submitted to us that legislation would not keep up with technology and there is no way that it possibly could. For example, I believe the guidelines in America have changed three times since they were introduced in 2001. I know it is a global issue; I take your point, but in Australia there are basically no guidelines at all, are there?

Mr SCoulAR — No, there is not, but — —

Mr PRIDDLE — There are no published guidelines, but as far as Ford is concerned there are, because our corporate standards now pick up those American guidelines, and they are very similar to the European Guidelines. The only difference between the US and the European guidelines are that the American one has verification methods. When our parent company agrees to adopt voluntary standards, those standards find their way into corporate standards, and we are obliged to meet corporate standards. Whilst, as you point out, those standards have evolved over the years, our next Falcon and Territory vehicles are being designed to those standards, and some of the things we are doing already meet some aspects of those standards. So industry is, even at a local level, picking up overseas standards because of our obligations to our parent companies. But bear in mind that the Australian fleet is about 75 per cent, I think, imported. Everyone else, all the importers, have to meet overseas requirements so you can guarantee they are not doing anything unique for Australia in that respect because the guidelines are very basic and high-level, and probably very broad in that context.

Mr LANGDON — The fear has been expressed to us that without some Australian guidelines, a state or territory might bring in legislation which would make it more awkward so an Australian guideline standard may be a way of trying to limit that legislative involvement.

Mr PRIDDLE — Certainly the purpose of the guidelines overseas has been to avoid the need for regulation. You could ask why do we not just say, ‘We will have those’ — have an Australian standard that says that as long as you meet either the European or the US one that it is adequate. But if companies are already doing it, it is hard to justify the effort and all the people’s time and effort in developing standards. There is also the risk that you end up reinventing the wheel and maybe introducing unique requirements that are not justified.

The CHAIR — In some of the safety development areas does Ford work closely with other manufactures — for example, Holden et cetera? Is there a sharing within the industry of ideas and the development of ideas?

Mr SCOLAR — We work very closely with a number of our key component and service-provider suppliers. For illustrative purposes I will mention one, but it could be anyone. Let us use Bosch as an example. It is a global company, a specialist company in many of the technologies that we are talking about today. We work very closely with Bosch in the development of various features of our vehicles. Likewise, I imagine, some of our competitors, whether it be Holden or others, also work closely with Bosch. Really, the filtering of knowledge across the industry probably comes via some of the leading component producers and their expertise, as opposed to me necessarily sitting down with one of the companies and doing something. There are examples of where we have worked together on issues, and there are a number of organisations where we have also, and can also, work together on particular issues that are seen as having a generic application across the industry.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Russell and Bruce, for your time. We appreciate Ford's input into the inquiry. As I said earlier, Hansard will provide a copy of the transcript to Ford and a copy will be published on the Internet as well.

Witnesses withdrew.