

Submission
No 87

INQUIRY INTO OPERATION OF THE POINT TO POINT TRANSPORT (TAXIS AND HIRE VEHICLES) ACT 2016

Organisation: Milton Ulladulla Taxis, Limousines and Charter Bus Service

Date Received: 29 May 2020

Letter to Portfolio Committee No.6- Transport & Customer Service

Dear Committee members,

Firstly, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to express my views on the changes that have occurred as a result of the Point to Point Transport Act of 2016.

My name is Scott Wilkins, I represent Milton Ulladulla Taxis which is a family owned & operated taxi network located on the South Coast in the lower Shoalhaven.

We're a family business, operating since 1996 and I come from 3 generations of driver / operators, we've continuously operated taxis in NSW since 1946. I've progressed from washing cabs as a kid, began taxi driving in 1985, worked as a taxi driver trainer from 2000 prior to the Sydney Olympics before arriving in Ulladulla in 2002 to assist in managing Milton Ulladulla Taxis.

Our district consists of approx. 15,000 people & our area of operations stretches from Bendalong in the north to East Lynne/North Durras in the south. Like most south coast coastal towns, Milton Ulladulla is a tourist destination, so in the holiday period our population can treble.

Our fleet consists of 6 taxis, 2 which are WATS taxis, 4 P2P vehicles which includes 1 hire car plate, a stretch limo & 2 booked car vehicles. We also operate a 29-seater bus doing charter work. We operate from 5.30am to 2.00am Monday to Thursday, 24 hrs on Fridays & Saturdays before closing at 2.00am Sunday night.

My position in our business is as follows: taxi driver, customer relations officer, salesman, taxi driver & WATS trainer, secretary, book keeper, fleet manager, operations manager, director and problem solver. Like most country taxi operators, I'm on call seven days a week.

With regards to competition in our town we have four courtesy buses operated by each of the four licensed clubs, two community transport groups operating in our district, Community Transport Aid Inc. with a fleet of 6 cars & Shoalhaven Community Transport which operate throughout the Shoalhaven District running a fleet of over 20 vehicles. Since late 2019 we have also had rideshare enter the market, at this stage it's limited to Uber who selectively operate anywhere from 2-5 vehicles depending on upcoming social events and the time of year.

Over 85% of our work is booked service and our fares are set using the meter as per the gazetted rate for taxi fares in country NSW, a fare structure that hasn't changed since 2014, with the exception for the introduction of PSL in 2018 - so every year we work more for less as costs increase, and it's with interest that I note the reaction of NSW public servants to the news of a twelve month wage freeze- imagine their reaction if that wage freeze lasted six years!

We believe there should be a plate buyback in NSW for both metropolitan & regional plate owners to compensate them because of the substantial write -down in the value of their assets. We don't consider the previous arrangement was in any way, shape or form equitable. Taxi plate owners received an assistance package of \$20,000 capped at a maximum of two plates. Compare this to the hire car operator who received full compensation for the loss of value to their asset and the compensation package was uncapped, so if a hire car operator owned ten plates they were compensated for all ten plates but then politicians don't travel in taxis, they travel in hire cars at tax payers expense

The reforms initiated by the Point to Point Commission have had significant effect on our business in numerous ways.

The first reform that significantly affected our business was the allegedly removal of red tape which in reality shifted responsibility & paperwork onto the operator/network. To on-board a single driver now takes one full day of my time and with a small network who constantly struggles to find taxi drivers I can't afford to stall a prospective driver until I have enough people to run a class. We spend the best part of a day working through all the topics that constitute the driver induction training program to conform with P2P regulations.

The second reform that increased our workload was the onus on the operator/network to collect PSL without any compensation for the time involved in collecting it. At the time of PSL implementation State Revenue concluded that it would cost approx. 50 cents in the dollar for it to collect PSL but the P2P ignored that advice & imposed the responsibility onto our industry with total disregard of the added workload, we feel that an equitable arrangement needs be negotiated, we're in favour of continuing with PSL because this will fund the buyback.

Other changes & deregulation that concerned our industry from day one, included but were not confined to the following changes:

1. Removal of the age limit for vehicles operating as a taxi/rideshare vehicle.
2. Removal of regulation requiring all drivers to wear a compulsory network approved uniform.
3. Removal of the requirement for all drivers to display government issued I.D. cards
4. Removal of the requirement for all drivers to complete industry/government approved compulsory taxi/rideshare driver training.
5. Vehicle inspections to be reduced from four monthly in metropolitan areas and six monthly in country areas to annual inspections.

The review of the TTSS scheme was recently delivered by NSW government with the result that it will now become a provider neutral scheme. The government's rationale being that increased choice for customers, through a provider neutral TTSS, may deliver improvements in cost and quality of services. The reality of the findings is that NSW government hopes it may deliver 'savings', this however is the same government that spends money like there's no tomorrow for 'on demand bus services', of which the cost per head is outrageous. We recommend that the NSW government reverse's its decision with regards to a provider neutral scheme because it will further erode the ability of taxi drivers & operators to remain viable, in light of the present dire economy.

Our industry would like to have access to patient transport services, we've previously demonstrated to the state government that our industry could deliver services cheaper than those being presently offered. So, in some sectors they want to open up the market whilst in others they've maintained a closed shop.

Community transport is another area we'd like to see reforms in. In our area there is a community transport voucher scheme in use, the value of these vouchers is \$5.00 per voucher capped to a maximum of ten vouchers per month, the cost to the recipient being \$10.00. This allows those that are eligible to maintain their independence & hence improves their quality of life. We'd like to see this system extended to more people and the value increased from \$50.00 to \$100 per month, similar to the regional seniors' travel card. Our rationale is that the cost would

be offset from the money both Commonwealth & NSW governments grant to community transport providers. Any extra money spent would find its way back into government coffers in the form of PSL, tax from extra earnings by both driver & operator and spending by those same individuals which will stimulate the economy.

NSW government expects our businesses to be available on demand to our customers, whenever they require it as we've always done, that's the business we're in and we're happy to do it. The majority of networks, operators & drivers in our industry are older people, many of those would have long liked to have retired, but with the constant erosion of our business viability due to government intervention, many of these same people will die at the wheel so to speak, because nobody wants to step up & replace them, nobody wants to buy a taxi or taxi business. So, when they do die who is going to take their place, is NSW government going to subsidise 'on demand transport'? Because the rideshare operators only work in periods of peak demand, they won't be around to transport widows to medical appointments, to the shops or to their social meetings.

Under the present circumstances taxis in regional NSW are still operating, & like many other sectors in our economy, all are operating at a loss. At present over half our fleet is sitting idle at our base because of the current restrictions on movement of people. Our drivers are working all night from 3.00pm to 2.00am and are regularly grossing less than \$100.00 per shift. We pay them a minimum commission of \$140.00 and the PSL as a gesture of good faith because they're loyal enough to keep turning up to work, even though we've had to cut back on the number of shifts we offer them. It's a pity NSW government didn't show the same loyalty to our industry. We still operate to 2.00am from Sunday to Thursday and 24/7 Fridays & Saturdays, as a service to our customers even though we're losing money by doing so – I'm presently paying drivers out of my own pocket so I can keep them for when things get back to normal.

Our industry needs support, it needs a break from the constant government 'reforms' that has seen plate values & driver/operator earnings plummet, most of us are cynical regarding the outcome of yet another review, the findings which, could have already been decided, because out there in the community most people over 50, and not only those involved in the taxi industry, are of the opinion that the taxi industry has been treated very unfairly.

In summing up the Point to Point Commission, I would say that there is very little, if any, benefit from a taxi operator's perspective as a result of the changes that occurred when this body was initiated. Should NSW government ever see fit to canvas our clients in country & regional NSW, I'm sure their reply would be 'It wasn't broke' so the question is why destabilise a service that was acceptable to providers & customers.

The promises previously made by Premier Mike Baird & Transport Minister Andrew Constance are hollow comfort in light of our current situation, repeating that this situation was dire before the Covid19 saga. It is for the reasons outlined that I believe it is incumbent on the NSW government to offer the same buyback compensation package afforded to hire car industry when they were deregulated. This would then allow our industry to restructure & operate in a more competitive market, with new players entering the market at a lower entry price, allowing us to operate on a more even playing ground than that at present.

Thank you for this opportunity,

Kind regards,

Scott Wilkins

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T/A

Milton Ulladulla Taxis, Limousines & Charter Bus Service