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STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, THE REVEREND CANON D.B.KNOX

COMPULSORY BLOOD TESTS FOR DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL

We are grateful for the opportunity of talking over with you this important matter. We know that the toll of the road is causing concern to you and to the whole cabinet, and we are grateful for the opportunity of speaking to you on the subject. We are here not only as citizens, but also as churchmen; for the problem is not only one which affects every citizen, but it particularly concerns Christians, for mutual consideration on the road is a moral problem, of Christian concern.

The toll of the road has now assumed the proportions of a terrible and continuing civil war the magnitude of which can be realised when we remember that twice as many people have been killed or injured on the roads of Australia since 1901 as have been killed or wounded in all the wars in which this nation has engaged. As a community we must do more than contemplate the terrible statistics, for behind them is the incalculable anguish of tens of thousands of families into whose circle has come the sorrow and loss which is the human equation of this great continuing national and economic calamity. The time calls for an objective and forthright appraisal of the situation, which we all recognise to be complex. Thus bad roads and lighting; inattentive driving; discourtesy excessive speed; faulty equipment and downright incompetence are all factors which contribute, and for the most part these factors are faced frankly and fairly, and what is possible is being done to minimise them. There is however, another factor which is not always so readily conceded and that is the factor of alcohol in the blood of some of those

in charge of motor vehicles on the public roads. This too must be faced frankly and fairly.

The right to drive a car on the public roads is not so much a natural right as a privilege to be exercised with due consideration for the welfare or other users of the road. This is recognised by the fact that a citizen is not permitted to drive a motor vehicle on the public roads till he has satisfied the authorities that he is competent and has had a licence issued to him after examination. The transport authorities may require further conditions, for example, the wearing of spectacles while driving, and if so, the driver has no right nor licence to drive his car without them, for he would then be limiting the range of his vision in a way inimical to the welfare of other road users.

In the same way the law has for a long time recognised that a driver must not drive on the public roads while under the influence of intoxicating liquor, and it is an offence to do so. This is because it has been long recognised that alcohol in the driver impairs his judgment and so his ability to drive. With the advance of modern science it is now possible to determine more accurately the effect of alcohol on the driver's judgment, and also to determine the quantity of alcohol that impairs his judgment sufficiently seriously to imperil the lives of others. There are also more accurate tests for determining the question of whether alcohol is present. An objective scientific test is surely better than the only method formerly available, such as asking the suspect to walk a chalk line or to say test sentences. It is irresponsible to neglect these modern methods of determining the presence of alcohol and they have been widely adopted. We ask the Government to legislate for compulsory blood tests and that 0.05 W/V% of alcohol should be prima facie evidence that too much alcohol has been consumed for safe driving. A Gallup poll has shown that there is overwhelming support in the N.S.W. community for this action.

The use of a scientific chemical test serves to exonerate the innocent quite as much as to demonstrate the guilt of a drinking driver. In this sense it is a protection for all road users who might become involved in an accident. Moreover the knowledge that compulsory tests for alcohol in the blood was the law would have a salutary effect by way of prevention of immoderate drinking before driving, just as the knowledge of police patrols on the road retards inconsiderate and dangerous driving.

It is natural and proper to be jealous of restriction of personal liberty but there are some situations in which a degree of personal liberty must be willingly foregone in the interests of all. For example, pilots of aeroplanes are not allowed to drink within a specified period of flying their aeroplane in the interests of those who are flying with him. Similarly to drive a modern vehicle on the public roads which are used in such large numbers by others may carry with it the necessity of a willing acceptance of a curtailment of personal liberty. Citizens who are unwilling to have their personal liberty restricted by the requirement that if involved in an accident on the roads they may be asked to undergo an examination for alcohol in the blood may preserve their sense of personal liberty by refraining from driving on our crowded roads, for this is not a right but a privilege to be exercised with proper regard to other road users. Those who make use of this privilege of driving on the roads should realise that they may be required to submit to certain examinations to justify their driving, so that the acceptance of this curtailment of personal liberty should accompany the decision to exercise the privilege of using the public roads. This is already the case. For example, a policeman regularly asks a driver involved in an accident to produce his licence to establish his right of driving. It is merely an extension of this principle to require drivers involved in accidents to undergo if necessary a test for alcohol in the blood. Modern road conditions makes this extension imperative and it is widely adopted in other countries. New South Wales lags behind not only overseas countries but other States in Australia.

The problem ought not to be discussed as though it were an extension of the long drawn out conflict between those who advocate total abstinence and those who do not, yet it may be thought that some of the emotive overtones of this conflict have delayed and obscured decisions in this field in our own community. If so, they should not be allowed to do so any longer. When it is remembered that this is a request to people to curtail their drinking only in relation to driving a motor vehicle on the public roads and that the drinking driver is a menace to himself as well as to others, it is incomprehensible that any fair minded citizen should be antagonistic,

~~The matter~~ is simply an application of commonsense principles of good citizenship in a complex technological age where science has thrown incontrovertible light on certain facets which contribute materially to the road toll.

The rising road toll cannot be ignored. Many factors contribute to it, but many other communities have adopted the blood test as an aid in the problem. Surely we have a duty one to another to use this aid as well.