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## Taxi reform threatens livelihoods: Sikavitsas

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**PROFESSOR Allan Fels is on a mission - determined to financially destroy the lives of Victoria's regional taxi owner operators, it seems.**

If he has his way, 5000 hard working men and women will be put through the financial meat grinder and be declared bankrupt.

Heading the inquiry into Victoria's taxi industry, it appears there's more to Prof Fels' determination to reform the taxi industry.

Three weeks ago, owner operators gathered to rally against aspects of Fels reform agenda - reform that will send nearly each all of them financially destitute and push some to an emotional breaking point.

Reforming Victoria's taxi industry is welcomed, yet it's not reform that concerns Taxi Industry Stakeholders Victoria, rather elements within the reform that's causing heartache.

In its current state, a number of aspects have the potential to destroy the lives of innocent, men and women of regional Victoria, who through no fault of their own are victims and soon casualties.

And just as there's the financial devastation for regional owner operators, regional communities will also bear the brunt - Colac, Terang and Camperdown will see their taxi services wiped out, jobs impacted, social networks diminished and economies decimated.

Prof Fels argues it's about customer service and reducing fares. Is it really? So how come 5000 hardworking men and women are now left hanging balanced between financial survival and death?

Introducing reforms that will reek financial havoc and claim 'egg shells need to be cracked to make omelettes' and declare it for the good of the industry is bewildering.

Is financially ruining the lives of thousands of people good? No! Yet it clearly demonstrates the scant regard Prof Fels has for owner operators who toil tirelessly every day.

The reality is, taxi fares don't include value for assignment costs or license value and never have, and it wasn't until 2008 when the Essential Services Commission added into the fee structure \$20,000 a year for a licence.

The taxi industry didn't ask for or agree to any consideration on licence values to be included in the fare structure.

However, the ESC progressed without consultation.

Taxi fares haven't been restructured or increased since 2008 and the public aren't paying anymore as indicated by Prof Fels.

What's more crucial is how Victoria continues to be the cheapest taxi services along the eastern seaboard with fares 50c/km lower than other cities and \$1.20/km cheaper than the New Zealand Model Fels has based his reforms on.

Resetting the value of taxi licenses makes these men and women, who in good faith purchased a licence for hundreds of thousands of dollars potentially left with nothing.

Prof Fels is holding hardworking men and women to ransom for the errors of state governments, who were responsible for adopting a free market approach by listing licenses on the Bendigo Stock Exchange.

They're no different to other workers. They have mortgages, families and bills. Yet Prof Fels' commitment to devalue licenses is incredulous.

Australians who have suffered massive losses in their superannuation fund balances in recent years will understand what the industry is now facing.

It's a poor situation where the chairman of the taxi inquiry starts taking swipes at people whose livelihood are being threatened and make out they are all driven by greed and self-interest.

- Jim Sikavitsas is vice president of Taxi Industry Stakeholders Victoria.

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