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IMPORTED MOTOR VEHICLE PARTS

The Federal Government is investigating complaints by motor workshops that a major insurance company is forcing them to use cheap and possibly unsafe imported components in vehicle repairs.

Federal Land Transport Minister Bob Brown said concerns had been expressed to him that many non-genuine imported components used in the crash repair industry were of questionable quality, and possibly unsafe.

"These cheap imports have included body panels, brake linings and even headlights," Mr Brown said.

"As a result of very strong representations by the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services, Peter Staples, I recently visited workshops in Melbourne where I was shown some of these non-genuine components.

"The repairers claim that at least one very large, well-known motor insurance company is exerting pressure on them to fit the cheap parts — which the insurance company itself apparently is importing in bulk — instead of genuine parts produced by the vehicle's manufacturer.

"They say the insurance company has made it clear that if they refuse to use the cheap imports, vehicle repairs will be channelled to other workshops.

"If this is indeed occurring, and if the imported components are proved to be unsafe, the Federal Government will do whatever is necessary and within its power to rectify the situation and protect the public.

"The insurance company in question is on notice, as are those vehicle repairers who have acquiesced to its threats."

Mr Brown said that although he was convinced that some of the cheap imports he had seen in Melbourne were of questionable quality, he was still waiting for firm evidence that the parts were actually faulty or unsafe.

"In the meantime, meetings have already been held between officers of the Australian Patents Office, the Trade Practices Commission, the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce and the Federal Office of Road Safety to discuss the problem and determine how it may best be addressed," Mr Brown said.

"One thing to have emerged is that many Australian vehicle and component manufacturers do not bother to register the designs of their components, and are unaware of their legal rights under design legislation.

"As a start, DITAC and the Patents Office have agreed to promote the benefits of design registration to the local manufacturing industry.

"Australia's patent and design legislation enables the owners of designs to take action against importers, distributors or retailers of products which do not have the licence or authority of the design owner.

"It would also be possible under the Trade Practices Act to ban the importation or sale of specific brand name vehicle components that are proved to be unsafe.

"However, the most desirable outcome would be for insurance companies to cease intimidating motor repair workshops, and for repairers to refuse to fit cheap imports that are of questionable quality and possibly unsafe."

Mr Brown said he was aware that local vehicle manufacturers had taken a number of initiatives to protect their market for replacement parts, and it also was true that apart from the repairers he had met in Melbourne recently, the Government had received comparatively few representations claiming that the cheap imported products were actually unsafe.

"The Federal Office of Road Safety and I will be very interested in any documented evidence that imported parts either are unsafe or do not meet Australian Design Rule requirements," he said.

"If firm evidence is provided to me I will consider any responses which may be necessary, including a possible inquiry reference to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure. This possibility has been suggested to me by its chairman, Peter Morris, and the chairman of the Government's Transport Committee, Neil O'Keefe.

"As I have indicated, if such evidence exists I will not hesitate to take whatever action is necessary."

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