

7/50 Leicester St
Carlton 3053

6th March, 2006

To Whom It May Concern,

Re: Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities

Background Note

I grew up in regional Victoria in Wangaratta, where I resided with my family until the age of 13 years. I was then sent to boarding school in Melbourne (years 9-12), but still spent all school holiday periods in Wangaratta. After secondary-school, I furthered my education at the University of Melbourne, graduating from a Bachelor of Commerce in 2002. I have since lived and worked in Melbourne, now as a professional in the community radio industry. I am currently 26 years of age.

1. Identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside

Education was the initial (and sole) reason for leaving Wangaratta and living in Melbourne.

2. Identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return to the rural communities in which they have previously resided following the completion of study, travel or other fixed or short term activities in other places

Now that I have finished my higher education, there are two primary factors which keep me here.

First, all of my very good friends were made in Melbourne. While not all of them still live here, every one of them return from time-to-time for social functions (birthdays, weddings, etc) or holidays. I value my time with friends as high as any other activity. It is now over 10 years since I have lived in Wangaratta and I no longer maintain in contact with anyone who lives there (considering I was 13 years old when I last spent prolonged social time with anyone there). The only exception to this is my parents and their immediate friends.

Second, is my profession. As I have previously stated, I work in community radio. I envisage dedicating much of my short to medium-term working life to further developing and progressing this community service I find so inspiring. Unfortunately, by nature of being community-based, there is very little in the way of employment opportunities. My estimates suggest that there is between 25-35 full-time employment positions in Melbourne, and Melbourne is considered to have the strongest community radio base in the country (by a long way). Clearly, finding a position at a community radio station in regional Australia, where the majority of stations run on budgets of less than \$40,000 pa, is near impossible.

To counter these points, I put forward the following:

- I am extremely proud of my upbringing in rural and regional Australia, and consider the standard of living to be, in many respects, far greater than that of Metropolitan Australia. (The strongest argument against this is the arts and cultural diversity of places like Melbourne that will never be paralleled in even the strongest regional centres.) I would love to one day return to the country and make it my own (again) – much of my identity still remains in characteristics of country Australia;
- Should I, one day, have the pleasure of bringing up children, I would have an undoubted desire to do so in the country. This is for a myriad of reasons, but the more obvious are: the strength of the local community, the far smaller division between rich and poor (the doctor's children went to the same high school and as factory-worker's children in Wangaratta), the affordability, significantly less consumer-driven communities (eg. coke can't be stuffed directly marketing to the country) and kids can get everywhere on a bike without fear of road toll;
- Despite all my friends being attached to Melbourne, I would be enthusiastic about living in a rural or regional area, meeting new friends and catching up with my Melbourne friends from time-to-time;
- While there are very few employment opportunities in community radio in country Australia, this is due in no small part to their lack of strong and visionary management. Many stations, in my view, operate at between 20-40% of their potential. It remains my dream to return to the country, manage the local community radio station, and bring it closer to meeting its potential. I feel that a well-managed station in a community of 25,000 could easily sustain at least 4-5 employees, one or two being full-time. I think I could have an impact in bringing a station closer to its potential and find the thought of such a challenge incredibly exciting. I eagerly await any such possibility arising.

3. Developing strategies and recommendations on steps that might be taken to increase the number of young people who decide to remain in or return to rural towns and communities.

The most obvious strategy that comes to mind is in regard to employment. Many of my friends are also originally from the country, and many, like myself, would seriously consider moving there if the right employment opportunity arose. Any strategy that can facilitate greater employment opportunities in the country will have a positive impact in moving young-people back to their towns and communities.

The existing arrangements with regards to medical/nursing professionals and teachers that encourage spending a period working in the country are sound. I consider the move of the TAC offices to Geelong as a positive step also, with potential for a greater long-term impact. With the technological advancement of communication in recent times, I see no reason why more government departments can't be relocated to regional areas, or at least to big regional centres such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong. There may be a slight increase in travel and communication costs, but presumably these will be insignificant in comparison to the reduction in property costs. There would be an obvious short-term implementation cost, but this would need to be considered against the on-going cost reduction any relocation would create.

Also, greater facilitation of similar commercial relocations should be considered. It is no longer necessary for many offices to be located in Melbourne and there would be considerable financial advantages in re-locating. This is often countered by industry with arguments about the country not having the necessary labour force. I personally think this is a load of crap, and shows a considerable lack of vision and innovation from the commercial sector. While not all of the executives that they currently employ would want to move to the country, I am sure many of them would. Any short-fall could easily be met by recruiting young, aspiring executives to move to the country. It would not take much of a "relocation reimbursement" to make such a package

attractive – particularly when you take into account the reduced cost of living in the country. And the less education/experience intensive positions can easily be filled by locals – I’m sure you are all aware of the significantly higher unemployment rate in country Australia.

If there were incentives provided by the State to assist with the initial relocation/implementation costs (recruiting and training as-well-as the physical relocation), I’m sure there would be more jobs in rural and regional areas, and more importantly, more professional/career building jobs in rural and regional areas. This can only have a positive impact on enticing young-people to move from the city to the country.

This will also facilitate reaching “critical mass”, where young-people are within regional communities, and therefore young-people are not put off from moving into communities without the possibility of meeting people their own age.

Conclusion

I wish you all the best in undertaking this most valuable inquiry. I sincerely hope that the findings can offer some practical solutions that go beyond political point scoring. Country Victoria has a lot to offer young-people, and a few strategic and innovative initiatives might be all that is required for a real sea-change in country demographics to occur.

Yours sincerely,

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