

# Submission to the Rural & Regional Services and Development Committee

## Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities.

By John G Brown AO

Chairman of Champions of the Bush Inc.

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**By way of background:**

Champions of the Bush Inc (COTB) is a group of successful private businesses and organizations that operate proudly in country areas, employing collectively in excess of 10,000 Australians.

The members are both 'champions' in their own right, and committed to championing the cause of regional and provincial Australia. The organization has brought together individuals and businesses that are passionate in their commitment to rural and regional areas.

COTB members have made a major investment in the bush, both personally and financially, and are committed to sustainable regional development.

We share a common concern that society currently undervalues the contributions made to the wealth of our nation by the 30 percent of Australians who live outside metropolitan areas.

We intend to be positive, not to whinge and whine about discrimination, hardship or whatever handicaps we might face. We believe that regional Australia has a lot going for it in terms of economic potential. Our objectives are:

- To instil pride in regional Australia
- To elevate and stimulate policy debate on regional issues
- To improve the infrastructure and human capital of regional Australia
- To influence government policies that effect employment opportunities in regional Australia
- To improve communications among member companies and organisations
- To promote economic growth in country Australia.

We have agreed on the following endeavour, on a not-for-profit basis:

- Expand membership to 20 companies and organisations across all states
- Promote a Regional Infrastructure Investment initiative
- Tackle negative stereotypes of regional Australia via a “Back To The Bush” campaign
- Network with other organisations focused on regional policy development.

**Issues overview:**

The broader population issues relating to regional and provincial Australia would be well known to the Committee through work done by Dr Craig Shepherd of National Economics and others. The demographic changes occurring in country Victoria are also well documented by Trevor Budge of TBA Planners P/L. The smaller communities in the Bush are less reliant upon primary industry, and many services have been aggregated to the provincial centres. Whilst many of our young people leave the Bush for education, jobs, and the “bright lights” in the capital cities, many young professionals are moving into country areas in pursuit of a “Sea or Tree Change” lifestyle for themselves and their families. Many find employment or establish new businesses, linked to this demographic shift phenomenon. A third “Tee Change” group of mainly retirees and empty nesters seeking leisure and climate attractions is additionally creating work opportunities for young professionals in hospitality, tourism, aged care, and financial planning etc.

While these population shifts are undoubtedly somewhat balancing the drift of young people to the city it is unlikely to redress the accumulated loss over recent decades.

These are not the only issues effecting the migration of young people, but we will confine this submission within the three topics of Terms of Reference of this Inquiry.

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

In an increasingly “globalised” world of trade, communications and travel, coupled with increasing family prosperity there is a commensurate increase in the aspirations and capacity of parents to give their children a university education. For many parents the “metro” environment is considered a more comprehensive environment to prepare young people for the rigours ahead than the more isolated regional institutions. These metro based student youths make lasting friendships in their new environment, and come to expect the availability of the cultural and social aspects of those surroundings. There are also more, and diverse, job opportunities close at hand.

For those with high career aspirations and accustomed to high speed internet and the close proximity of peers and net work opportunities it is difficult to forsake those benefits for the rural environment.

Modern communications, particularly the internet, has exposed young people to worldly opportunities more than ever before and this also whets their appetite to be an active part of it.

Those young people who do not have the opportunity of a metro education tend to make their social lives and careers where they grew up. Not having experienced the metro environment there is less desire to be a part of it. Nevertheless, some do make the migration in search of jobs and the “bright lights”.

**2. Identify and examine 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.**

Factors taken into consideration include:

**a. Employment**

There would need to be suitable employment, generally within the skills base held, in the rural environment that attracts similar remuneration to the city based offerings. If there is a partner then that person would also need to be able to find suitable employment.

The quality of potential work places would be evaluated for their employee relations record, their working conditions, and the permanency of the enterprise.

## **b. Housing.**

Available accommodation is essential with the style required varying between individuals. Some may require units whereas for others a family home would be necessary. Included in the choice to be made would be the location, the standard of the property and proximity to work, shops, schools, and sporting amenities. Housing on larger rural blocks is becoming increasingly in demand.

## **c. Schooling/education.**

For young couples there is the consideration of raising a family in which case the quality and location of schooling is important. Ongoing education needs to be provided for changing work place skills requirements and for ongoing personal development whether it be business based or for the arts, sporting and/or leisure pursuits.

## **d. Sporting facilities.**

Australia is a sporting nation, whether it be participative or in an observing role. Young people considering migrating would seek to find facilities for the sport of their passion. Sporting facilities for their children would also be important. The range of sports is wide and most can be found in metro localities. There is less variety to choose from in rural communities.

## **e. Lifestyle opportunities.**

Commensurate with increasing affluence there is an expectation of "lifestyle opportunities". These might include restaurants, shopping facilities, day trip destinations, golf courses, snow fields and water ways. The high pressure city life style may well be a strong driver. Young people may desire to quit the traffic, the road rage, the poor air quality, the drug scene, and the lack of open space for a more peaceful rural environment.

## **f. Cultural**

For some the richness of cultural offerings in the target community would be evaluated. This might include the various arts, and their organisations. If the young people are of off-shore derivation there may also be a desire to settle where there are others of similar nationality.

## **g. Communications**

Modern communication is a "must have". Young people simply cannot function well at work or at home without broadband internet access.

#### **h. Road access to Melbourne**

Given that many potential migrants from the city to the regional areas will have acquired many friends and allegiances in the city, and have developed some favourite city based activities they will wish to return frequently. Good roads will be part of their choice of location.

#### **h. Local affinity.**

People have a natural affinity for the place where they spent their childhood. If the above criteria are met then these are the most likely young people to return to a specific regional location.

#### **i. Clubs and associations.**

Many people wish to be members of clubs or associations for social engagement and for community involvement.

#### **j. Economic circumstances.**

People considering relocating would place considerable importance on the economic status of the area. A vibrant economy with population growth and increasing job availability would be highly preferred.

In making the decision to relocate then the regional offering will be compared with their existing metro city based circumstances.

### **3. 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 factors listed above are the features one would expect to find more prominently in the larger regional towns and cities. The larger the community, the more of the criteria that are likely to be satisfied. The current State Governments Provincial Victoria campaign is aimed at encouraging metro based people to relocate to the "provincial" areas to live, work, and invest. There has also been a new round of funding to support rural communities in variety of ways through the "Moving Forward" statement. These are important steps in the right direction to maintain and improve the liveability of the towns.

**Recommendation: Support ongoing government programs that lead to increasing the populations of regional centres and enhance their infrastructure facilities.**

## **Rural perceptions**

The Champions of the Bush are concerned at the negative images of “the bush” as projected in the media. All too frequently we see dramatic reports of fires, floods, drought and poverty. These images are endorsed when farmer organisations “cry poor” in an endeavour to attract government funding when circumstances are difficult.

These images **must** negatively influence young people when considering relocating.

The Champions of the Bush see a need to promote a positive image for the “bush” and do this actively by promoting the existence of successful business, good jobs, and excellent lifestyle. On Labour Day week end in March each year a “Back to the Bush” campaign is mounted to encourage rural residents to invite their city based friends, associates and business partners to visit while the benefits of rural living are show cased.

This activity provides “pull through” for the city based Provincial Victoria campaign.

**Recommendation: Greater resourcing of the Back to the Bush campaign.**

## **Rural infrastructure projects.**

The Champions of the Bush also note the difficulty in attracting infrastructure development funding for projects of less than \$50m cost in rural areas. Small scale projects are inefficient for the major funding organisations such as the superannuation funds. There are numerous infrastructure projects on rural “wish lists” that have the potential to enhance the economy and liveability of rural towns. Better infrastructure would make rural towns more attractive to both retain and recover young people to their areas as well as creating rural employment. The Champions of the Bush are investigating the possibility of innovative funding schemes to package up for investor interest.

**Recommendation: Government assistance in creating viable infrastructure project packages for offer to investors.**

## **Leadership.**

The migration of young people to Melbourne for their education takes from the regions some of the most talented leadership potential.

Leadership in a community creates a more vibrant community which deals with change more effectively. Excellence in leadership enhances local government performance, clubs and organisations, and business performance. All important factors in the migration decision.

There never seem to be enough skilled leaders to take on the many roles. LeadOn Australia is a youth leadership initiative that seems worthy.

The now near defunct Young Farmers organisation was valuable in its day. Government funded youth worker/supervisors provided support and guidance to young rural people.

Two types of leadership development organisations are in existence to help build leadership capacity. They are Community Leadership and Business Leadership development programs.

The "Moving Forward" statement contains new funding to enhance the offering of these bodies

**Recommendation: Promote and support leadership development at a higher level and seek a Young Farmers Club equivalent that provides for the aspirations of the youth of today.**

### **Career potential awareness.**

Anecdotal indications are that city based students have very limited awareness of the existence, location and nature of regional jobs. An initiative that has been undertaken for some years in the Western District is reported to have merit. It involves an excursion from a Melbourne based university over several days which exposes the students to a broad range of businesses and regional circumstances. The process is said to have a profoundly positive response from the students.

**Recommendation: Take the "career potential awareness" process across regional Victoria and involve students from all Melbourne based universities.**

### **Broadband access**

As stated, for young people fast internet access is an imperative! In order for them to deliver their skills at the highest level it must be provided.

**Recommendation: Roll out broadband as fast as possible.**

### **Local affinity**

There is potential to leverage the natural desires of people to return to the place of their up bringing.

**Recommendation: Target young people who have initially relocated to the city in any campaign to have a return migration.**

Summary:

The Inquiry Committee's three Terms of Reference focus upon identifying and examining factors, and developing strategies. Champions of the Bush commends this initiative, and seeks your consideration of the observations and recommendations raised in this submission:

1. Support ongoing government programs that lead to increasing the populations of regional centres and enhance their infrastructure facilities.
2. Greater resourcing of the Back to the Bush campaign.
3. Government assistance in creating viable infrastructure project packages for offer to investors.
4. Promote and support leadership development at a higher level and seek a Young Farmers Club equivalent (e.g. the LeadOn program) that provides for the aspirations of the youth of today.
5. Take the "career potential awareness" process across regional Victoria and involve students from all Melbourne based universities.
6. Roll out broadband as fast as possible.
7. Target young people who have initially relocated to the city for any campaign to have a return migration.

Our member companies stand ready to add value to these proposals, and work with the Government for their implementation in the Bush.

**John G Brown AO**

Chairman

April 2006