

Submission to:

Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities

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Hope !! That's what regional Victoria – and young people in particular – need most hope

Comment made recently in a planning discussion on regional development strategy.

There are many reasons why regional Victorians – collectively and individually – should be hopeful of their futures but this is not a widely-shared view and it needs strong and positive action to make it real for people. I therefore welcome the opportunity to make input to this Inquiry.

Disclaimer: I have many years of experience in education, regional and economic development and resource management in central and northern Victoria. While my submission draws extensively on that experience, the opinions expressed should not be attributed to any of the organisations I have been or am currently involved with – they are my own.

My personal experience is also pertinent. I completed all of my schooling in regional Victoria, before moving to Melbourne to pursue post-school education. That was 45 years ago. I 'returned' 15 years later and have been employed and actively engaged in regional matters for the subsequent 30 years.

Terms of Reference:

- 1 identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain or leave the rural communities in which they reside;
- 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 completion of study, travel or other fixed or short term activities in other places, and
- 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.

Comment:

- 1 The Terms of Reference are extremely limited and unlikely to yield ready strategies to redress the concerns which they address.
- 2 References 1 and 2 essentially boil down to the *lack of opportunities* as perceived by young people, and actually, existing in rural and regional Victoria.

I had intended to submit comment on the long-term run-down of rural and regional communities, much of which has been documented in previous inquiries and government reports over many years, for example *Three Times Less Likely* – the prospects for rural students to complete secondary education, and *The Last Crop* – a report during a time of agricultural downturn when the loss of young people was identified as the final blow for rural Victoria. These reports were many years ago and of course rural and regional Victoria has not collapsed or ‘gone out of business’. But there has been significant and inexorable decline across small towns. This decline has, in the short-term, fed the growth of regional centres, but still the overall percentages of young people continues to decline, as shown by DSE population projections. The age composition of these projections does not tell the full story either. Levels of educational qualification, health status and welfare dependency levels are all indicators of the lack of opportunity in regional Victoria – as too are the difficulties of attracting professionals and management staff to support and lead the economic opportunities that do exist in regional Victoria.

Instead of attempting a more comprehensive survey of the issues mentioned, I refer the Inquiry to Mission Australia’s report, *Rural and Regional Australia: change, challenge and capacity*, released in March 2006. This report summarises (*again*) the issues facing the sectors of the communities which the current Inquiry is examining. Its further strength is that it takes a positive “*capitals*” approach in analysing the economic, institutional, social, human and natural capital of rural and regional Australia. I commend the report to the Inquiry.

- 3 The lack of opportunities in rural and regional Victoria apply not just for young people but across all age groups. Attempting to develop strategies for a rapidly diminishing sector of the community out of context of the whole community is doomed to failure. Young people looking for a long term future career and lifestyle will look for substance in the social, institutional and economic infrastructure of the community just as much as will older people.

- 4 It is of some interest to me that the Terms of Reference focus only on retaining or seeking the return of young people to rural towns and communities. There is no reference to attracting young people from metropolitan Victoria to rural Victoria. This absence implies a defeatist ‘feel’ to the Inquiry. Almost as if we need to be seen to be doing something (however late) about the loss of young rural people, but we really don’t believe that rural Victoria has enough to offer to attract young people from other backgrounds.

5 So, what is the motivation for this Inquiry ? The heartfelt cry of rural communities over decades against the loss of their young people seems, at this stage when the die is well and truly cast, too late and an insufficient reason for the Inquiry. Is there a broader, possibly ill-defined, rationale based on an unease about the consequences of a continuing drift of young people to the metropolitan and coastal regions ? If Melbourne continues to grow (by some estimates a further 1,000,000 people in the next 30 years) what will be the social, economic and environmental (where's the water coming from ?) consequences ? And what will be left in rural Victoria ? A landscape deserted over great distances, with those remaining towns and communities struggling to field a football team or netball team, with declining participation in Landcare and depending on much older people to support the CFA Unit ? (and note that, while netball teams need fewer players than a football team, it is young women that are more likely to complete their secondary education and leave). The trend for vacant houses in rural communities to be filled by welfare families will offset some of the decline, but with its own consequences. The likely situation resulting from inaction or fiddling around the edges will be far more complex and depressing than this bare scenario, and it will be hugely exacerbated by rising fuel and transport costs.

I introduced this submission with a claim that there are reasons for hope in rural Victoria, but, to this point, I have been fairly negative.

6 As I see the situation, nothing will change without major policy change.

We need to ask the question:

do we want a viable non-metro/non-coastal population ?

If the answer is 'yes', then we need strong policies in place to ensure this happens.

Currently, there is a 'policy' of balanced state development and various programs operating out of State and Australian Government departments. Collectively these are a pretty weak, uncoordinated and vague assemblage of measures without any overall guiding policy and commitment. These measures also tend to benefit regional centres far more than rural communities. At best they provide some (in my opinion, inadequate) response when government is challenged about its rural policy – and, in their minimal outcome, they keep more bureaucrats busy in regional centres, Melbourne and Canberra.

The next question is:

are we, as a broader community and government, willing to commit to a policy framework strong enough to offer rural Victoria the hope it so badly needs and the commitment to delivering on a viable inland community ?

7 A strong policy statement committing government (ideally at State and Australian levels) to *building* a viable rural community would send the message that will yield the outcomes sought by Reference 3, and a lot more.

The obvious 'big payoff' of a real commitment to rural communities would be the opportunity for significant economic reform through the amalgamation of local government in rural regions. Municipal amalgamation in Victoria was an outstanding success for regional centres such as Ballarat and Bendigo, but far less so for the broad acre municipalities, many of which are still struggling. Of course, there will be huge suspicion against any initiative that is perceived to be 'forced' amalgamation, but a genuine rural development program that responds to rural priorities, such as the retention of young people, building real and sustainable opportunities and which addresses the town/community level (below the current municipal level) of social organisation is likely to be acceptable. Such a policy would offer a positive challenge to rural communities and

their local governments to achieve the outcomes they represent so strongly – they must be part of the solution and not expect that it will be done for them. The ‘clincher’ for such an initiative would be if it included a real commitment to relocating services and opportunities away from Melbourne to rural areas. The knee-jerk to this is, ‘oh, it’s just too hard’. I don’t accept this – and how much harder will it be to deal with an additional million people in Melbourne and a non-viable rural community? Many areas of rural Victoria have the basic infrastructure to build on – and many towns along the Murray have reliable water supplies: is it beyond political wit to encourage population growth where there is adequate basic long-term life support. The escalating cost of watering Melbourne into the future is at best reactive action – it is not leadership. If the worst projections for climate change come to pass, what then for Melbourne and the coast in 2030 or 2070, the years on which CSIRO bases its projections?

8 One element of a real and effective ‘rural policy’ would be the provision of higher education in rural centres, particularly if we want to achieve outcomes for young people. Again we might say ‘too hard’, but why? Relatively small cities in the Midwest of the United States have major universities. And why are the overwhelming number of university places in metropolitan Melbourne – or, for that matter, the only two agriculture courses? It would be a zero recurrent cost option for government to relocate university places into rural Victoria and provide a major driver for population movement. Equity is also part of the argument and, as I’ve said in another context: *Compare the choices open to a youngster from Swan Hill wanting to study a course only available in Melbourne – find \$15-20,000 to relocate or defer – with those of an eastern suburbs school-leaver living at home who has a choice of universities readily accessible by public transport.*

9 (During the past three years I have been involved in a bold and visionary project where a rural community of some 25-30,00 people has sought to take control of its future and has developed far-reaching strategies, including those relevant to young people. The project has sought reasonable levels of support from government, but has been given an incredible run-around by bureaucrats, whose inability – or unwillingness – to see the potential of the project beggars belief. The extent of support offered by the current system is limited to responsible departments offering only project-sized support for components that ‘fit’ into existing programs, together with an unhealthy undercurrent of wanting to control/micro-manage these fragmented elements, to the detriment of the very powerful total concept offered by the community.

Note that I am assisting this project in a voluntary capacity, and do not actually live in the community. It is the most remarkable initiative on such a scale that I have seen.)

In conclusion:

I believe that a strong rural development policy, with real commitment to implementation would provide the hope rural people need, which will yield prosperity for that sector and the wider economy and, over the longer-term, deliver handsomely for government at all levels. Now is the opportunity to engage with, and work in partnership with, the resilience that still exists in most rural communities to achieve good outcomes.

It is not possible to address the issues of young rural people in isolation of the total community and a coherent state-wide/national population-development strategy. Current policy and programs are not working.

Unless there is real leadership by government, the issues under review in this Inquiry will worsen at an accelerating pace, with obvious impacts on the rural sector plus the additional problems arising as a consequence of the drift of population (at all age levels) to Melbourne and the coast.

Thankyou for the opportunity to make this submission, which I would be pleased to discuss further with the Inquiry.