

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Benalla — 11 April 2006

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Mr J. Brown, chairman, Champions of the Bush (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome. I will not again read through the whole blurb I read at the beginning of today.

Mr BROWN — Certainly, I heard all that.

The CHAIR — Please provide your full name and address and the organisation you are representing today.

Mr BROWN — My name is John Graham Brown. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Milawa, north-eastern Victoria. I am here today here today as chairman of Brown Brothers Milawa Vineyard, the wine company, but more importantly under the banner of Champions of the Bush, which I also chair at the present time.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along today. Your evidence is being taken down and will become public evidence in due course so if you could prove please provide us with your statement, then we might have some questions for you following that.

Mr BROWN — Thank you. The Champions of the Bush that I am representing today is a group of successful rural business people who came together about five years ago because of the concern they had for the image the bush has in the eyes of city people and the effect that that has in discouraging people from relocating from the city to the bush for business, for living or any social purposes. Because we were so concerned about that we got together and put a bit of money in to see if we could do something about that.

I suppose it is relevant in this context that many people who would think of relocating from the city to the bush would be put off by the image the bush carries which is heavily impacted by news about fires and floods, dust, grasshoppers, poverty and things like that. Those of us who live in the bush do not believe it is true, because it just happens to be reported that way in the media. We wanted to do something about turning that around so we have taken a couple of initiatives. The young people would be caught up in that scenario just as much as the general population we would like to attract to the bush.

In my paper I have made some points about what the Champions of the Bush is all about. I move to the next stage. I would have to say that the initiatives of the government at the present time are really positive towards getting a shift of population to the bush and that is really helping. You would be well aware of the sea change and the tree change initiatives that have taken place that Trevor Budge talks about. There is another consultant who has done work for the federal government on population shifts throughout Australia, and they show a deficit patch for rural Australia of young people. I am sure that you have those reports somewhere in your files already.

But the sea changes and tree changes are really positive. Caught up in that is a movement of significant numbers of young professional people from the city to the bush, tradespeople too, to carry out the building projects that are going on and the professions to support that. I think that is part of that economic shift towards the bush that is really positive.

Of course the government has recently undertaken, I suppose in the last two years, their Provincial Victoria campaign which is promoting a better image of the bush. It actually came along about two years after the Champions of the Bush started promoting the benefits of living in the bush through a 'Back to the bush' campaign that we began to run on Labor Day weekend each year when we were encouraging rural people to invite their business friends or their cousins or relatives from the city to come up to the bush for the weekend and showcase the good things that we had to offer, to try to turn around the negative image, so the Provincial Victoria campaign has come in over the top with much more force than our campaign. It makes ours look rather unimportant, but we were very supportive and we thought it was an absolutely excellent initiative.

More recently, in November last year, the government announced the Moving Forward suite of programs which is the biggest expenditure that has ever been put towards rural Victoria to date, to foster growth and development and support infrastructure development in rural Victoria. We think it is extremely positive too, and we are very complimentary of those programs. They will go some way towards retrieving some of the young people who have been lost to the bush but I do not do not think it is going to change things around very quickly. That is going to take a considerable time, and when young people are considering whether to remain and work and live in the bush or go to the city, there is a whole suite of things they will look at. They will compare the whole package of what is on offer in the city with what is on offer where they happen to be in the bush and vice versa. To address that I have listed 11 items in (2) of my submission.

I want to go back to paragraph 1 on page 4 of my submission. The factors that influence young people to leave or remain in the bush also includes the globalisation of society today. Parents of young people really see it as important for them to go to university, but it was not so important with my generation or later generations, but it is important now. Parents see the need to send their kids off to university and to enjoy the more global experience, the worldly experience that has to offer, compared with the more isolated universities in rural towns.

I think it is important kids do that so they understand the world scheme of things because on the world map Melbourne is quite small and it is often a stepping stone for them to go offshore and see what is on offer offshore. It is against that that we in the bush are competing with to try and attract young people back. There is all the excitement, glamour, big lights with a wide variety of jobs which is like a big magnet.

I will not go through the points I have listed under paragraph 2 in detail but I will comment on one or two of them. I think there are 11 points but under 'employment', These days kids do not take a job for life like we did when we were young people. They use the job as a stepping stone for the next job — they are all upwardly mobile and looking at the next step, which means they do not stay in the employment of one company for long. In the companies that the Champions of the Bush represent we have a constant turnover of young people, with them coming and going all the time, and there is no a point in trying to stop that. There is actually great benefit for the careers of those kids to move on to other businesses and learn other ways of doing things, and they become much more worthy employees as a result of that.

I see the workplace continuing to have a changing population. You will not see people coming and working at one place for the whole of their lives. We find that young people stay for four or five years and unless they can step up the ladder in the organisation — it is pretty pointy at the top and there is not room for everybody — they have to move out and it is important that the employer sees the need for that and help those people move out so they can expand their careers with the possibility later down the track they will come back to that organisation at a higher level with the necessary skills to achieve the tasks.

Housing obviously is necessary for kids who wish to relocate to the bush. Housing comes in many different forms, whether as a family group or an individual. They may only intend staying a short while and intend to rent or stay in the region for the rest of their lives, in which case they may buy a property in the farmlands somewhere and bring up their children there.

While talking about children, they will need schooling and education, and sporting facilities for themselves and their kids. Lifestyle opportunities are becoming more and more important as people move from the city out into the bush — people with families often take up farming lots of 40 acres or so having horses, some cattle and sheep. It is a changing environment.

When people are looking to move from the city to the bush after completing their university studies they are looking at communities that have the right cultural mix to suit their own particular needs. That might be heavy in the arts or include certain sporting facilities — something like that. Communications is a 'must have' for young people. They cannot communicate without their broadband and Internet. It really needs to be broadband because without that, communication is far too slow. A lot of places in the bush still do not have broadband, so I think one of the top priorities is to get broadband rolled out as quickly as possible to keep the young ones who are there from going simply because they cannot communicate properly.

Mr MITCHELL — There is a very good parliamentary committee doing an inquiry into that at the moment.

Mr BROWN — We will have a bash at that, too. These young people will need access to Melbourne because they have made friends there during their university years and will have got used to the culture, sporting facilities and arts that you find in the cities. They will need to move up and down the highway quickly so they will choose locations where there is good road infrastructure, and naturally there will be a group of young people who have grown up in a region who have a natural affinity to go back to the region. I certainly share that and I have had the privilege of being able to do that. If you are targeting a group of people who have gone to the city to bring them back in a campaign of some sort it would be wise to target those people first because it would be the more productive area to work on.

They will be looking for clubs and associations that are aligned to their own particular interests, whether that be in the arts, sports or various activities they have outside of work. They will be looking for a vibrant community. When

people move they will not want to go to a town that has no future but to a town that is going somewhere and which has good jobs, good employers and a whole suite of good facilities.

When they are making the decision to relocate they will be comparing the circumstances they are in now with what they are considering going to. If the area they are considering going to does not stack up, they will not do it and stay where they are. It is a bigger picture and I am supportive of building regional economies as strongly as possible so services can be there for young people. That is why I believe the Provincial Victoria and the Moving Forward campaigns are on the right track. There probably needs to be more of it if there is a desire for that to happen more quickly.

I move now to paragraph 3 of my presentation. The Champions of the Bush — because of the image we think there is for the bush — have had a campaign to get people to spend a holiday in the bush and learn a bit more about it. We could increase the campaign if more funding was available. We have limited funding, as everyone does. We have kicked in \$10 000 from each business that is used to support these campaigns and try to leverage that with other people's assistance. If the government thought it worthwhile to give us more assistance, that would be helpful.

There was assistance to us in the first year of our campaign to the extent of \$40 000, which made quite a difference, but that has dropped off and we would be really pleased if that came back again. It would provide a situation where there was a pull-through from the Provincial Victoria campaign run in Melbourne. It is trying to push people out of the city whereas our campaign is trying to pull people from the other end and make them welcome when they arrive.

The Champions of the Bush have also noted a lack of work being done on infrastructure projects of a smaller nature. It seems that the superannuation companies and the like, when they invest in infrastructure, are only interested in jobs worth \$50 million or more. Below that it becomes uneconomic for them, so there are a lot of infrastructure jobs sitting around on wish lists of councils and the like in rural areas that are only worth \$20 million or \$30 million; they have slipped under the notice.

The Champions of the Bush have an executive officer who is a specialist in economic development, and he is trying to find ways and means of pulling together infrastructure projects of a smaller nature, whether by packaging them up or getting some sort of tax relief to get them over the barrier so they become interesting investment prospects for superannuation companies or other investment organisations. I have included a recommendation for government assistance in creating viable infrastructure project packages to offer investors. That is an option to help build an economic community that will make rural towns more attractive.

Leadership is a pet topic of mine. I think with the advent of many young people moving to the city the cream of our leadership potential has been taken out of the bush leaving us with a real deficit in that area of people who will take up an issue and run with it for the betterment of the community. Leadership vacancies occur in sporting jobs, Landcare groups or in councils.

There is a lack of strength in that area and we tend to get second-rate people on many occasions, so there is a real need to build the leadership capacity of the remaining people through two different types of programs: one is a community leadership program for people who might take up roles as councillors, politicians or in the sporting fields; there is another field in running businesses. A lot of business leaders have got there really by default. They have started off as small businesses, often as tradesmen, but have never really developed good leadership skills as their businesses have grown which has meant their businesses sometimes flounder through the lack of good leadership as opposed to good management, which are two different things in my mind.

So there are two groups now going in our area that I think have real potential to do that. They are struggling a bit financially to keep going, but there has been some recent help coming out of the Moving Forward campaign. The business group that has been started is called the Victorian Regional and Executive Group, and it was initiated in Wangaratta. Wodonga people caught wind of it and they asked for one to be set up there, so one is going there now. Another one began in Horsham, and there is now one in Bendigo. There are four being run under that banner. That is with the idea of increasing those people's leadership skills in business to make the businesses really good places to work in instead of places where you do not want to turn up on Monday morning. So I am recommending support in that area if that is possible.

Another thing I think is important is making young people aware — they are being educated in the cities probably, in universities — of the good jobs that exist in the bush. I know of one activity that is happening in the Western District: university people in their second last and last years are taken on a bus trip out to the Wimmera and are shown around businesses out there. They come back wide eyed at the good jobs and their variety out in the bush. They are totally unaware of them until they get out there and have a look. That is nurtured by the people out in that area. I think that is a really good program that could perhaps be extended across Victoria.

I have mentioned broadband access and local affinity, and I have made some recommendations according to those. That is the second point of recommendation I have included that I would like to put forward.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that, because we are looking for recommendations that we could make to government. For you to put all that effort into giving us some assistance is very helpful and very worthwhile. Thank you very much.

Mr INGRAM — On leadership, if you like, training programs or group programs which promote leadership in business and within the community — there are a number of those operating that do not necessarily operate on the younger people. What sort of time line are you looking at? Are you looking at secondary school to get youth leadership programs going or are you saying after the young people leave school? That is when most of those young people have already left to go to university in Melbourne or somewhere like that. I would just like to know exactly what you are talking about.

Mr BROWN — The leadership programs I am talking about specifically are for more mature people, who then provide the environment for young people to move into that is positive, where there are good sporting activities or Landcare activities going where young people can get involved and participate. There is also a need for leadership to be taught in schools. That is happening, but maybe it could be lifted. What concerns me is the leadership that is drawn away from the rural community by the better, more natural leaders of the younger community moving off to Melbourne and leaving us with a deficit.

I have not been involved in the scope for picking up the young people who remain and taking them forward. It is true that the community leadership programs we have got going have a predominance of older people — although I have to say there is a councillor, a young lady in the Rural City of Wangaratta, who was elected to council at the age of 23 after having participated in the Alpine Valleys community leadership program. That is indication, on a sample of one, that it can be effective. Out of the same program we have now had two female mayors in north-eastern Victoria. I would think the leadership program has helped those people get up. It makes them better leaders and makes for a better environment for everybody when you have good leaders at senior level as well as at junior level.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about your major provincials like Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo? To a certain extent they would pinch young people from our areas and the towns around there. Do you think the campaigns you are talking about, Back to the Bush and the state's provincial one, encompass those people? Or does there need to be a specific message for those ones saying 'Don't go to Melbourne' and so on. The same effect is had on small country towns by Geelong for major reasons and to a lesser extent Ballarat and Bendigo.

Mr BROWN — The picture in my mind is that they are like big magnets, and the bigger the population centre, the bigger the magnet to pull young people away. To get them back again we have to attract them by an equally strong magnet. We have different things to sell in the bush, different offerings — lifestyle, fresh air, no traffic lights or road rage and things like that. They are things we can sell to make the bush look a sensible alternative place to be.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You do not think the financial city programs can be encompassed under the program you are talking about?

Mr BROWN — Under the schools programs?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Under the current programs, the provincial programs and the program that you run on Labor Day weekends? I am talking about the issue of the large provincials. I am asking whether there need to be specific programs for major provincial cities.

Mr BROWN — I think the major provincial cities are part of the problem. They make their own economy and will grow by default. It is the small ones that need help.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I think you have misunderstood me.

Mr BROWN — Sorry, my hearing is not very good.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Let me put it this way: I think the major provincials are not as big an issue as Melbourne, but they certainly have an impact on small country towns. Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo draw people from towns. Geelong draws people from Meredith, Foxhow or Pomberneet North, to name some of the small towns. My question originally was: do you think the statewide campaign about back to provincial Victoria and the publicity campaign you run about promoting the bush can be targeted at those provincial centres or do they need specific ones for Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo to get people to go back to their country towns?

Mr BROWN — It would help I think, because if you picture those three largest cities, it is really the same scenario there as with Melbourne, isn't it? If you want to get people to move out of there and back to the smaller regional towns, then the campaign is relevant there just as it is in Melbourne. In truth you are probably targeting the right population too, because more rural people would be going to those centres as well. There would be a lot of people whose parents would choose to send them to those cities rather than the big city because of the drug problems and so on that are perceived to be there.

Mr MITCHELL — Just with Champions of the Bush, have you got any specific programs that focus on attracting businesses out of Melbourne towards regional centres like Benalla, Wangaratta and those sorts of things that encourage the young ones to stay? I know that Alpine shire has got 1.3 per cent population growth. Mansfield is up at nearly 4 per cent population growth, which is just above the state average. How can the government help attract businesses to come out to regional areas? What is done at the logistics centre just out of Wodonga to encourage people to stay, are you looking at that specifically?

Mr BROWN — Only through our Back to the Bush program. We are a quite a small organisation with only about 10 members, and there is a limit to the amount of things we could do. We decided to focus on Back to the Bush, where we would hope to get potential investors out to the bush — that is one of the aims of our program — and showcase what we have to offer and encourage them to make an investment there. We also encourage people just to come and live there and find jobs that already exist. We do not have one specifically for attracting and targeting particular businesses and bringing them to the bush. That would be worthy, but you would have to find the right businesses where there is an affinity in what they do. Some businesses, like a winery, belong in the bush because they need to be near their raw material supply; other businesses need to be either near their markets or sources of supply to be really efficient and competitive. It is pretty hard to find businesses you can relocate easily.

Mr INGRAM — To follow up from that, you are all successful businesses; they are good businesses in those country areas. One of the challenges in keeping young people in rural areas is making sure there are high-paid or reasonably well-paid jobs so there is something to attract and keep them after they have got their qualifications and so on. What can government do to assist businesses like yours to develop and make sure you stay strong in those areas and offer those well-paid jobs, and are there any blockages that you currently see or are there any incentives that government could give, without actually giving a handout, but making sure that businesses are as successful as their metropolitan counterparts?

Mr BROWN — Successful businesses are run by successful leaders and I think building successful leadership is probably the best thing that can be done — building the leadership skills of the leaders of those businesses. That is not just the CEO at the top, it is the senior management and supervisory skills. If a leadership note could be brought into that management style, it would make those businesses a lot more effective. If you look at successful businesses, usually the CEO has got excellent leadership skills and he chooses people to work with him that have similar skills, similar traits. I think there is a deficit of those skills in the community and the bush.

Mr MITCHELL — Are you finding that people who come back are heading towards larger towns when they come back into the bush areas? Are they moving into places like Wangaratta or Benalla as opposed to Thoona or Goorambat or any of those sorts of places?

Mr BROWN — In answer to that I would say that they are moving to the bigger centres, but there is lots of satellite living going on now around those bigger centres where there are small subdivisions. In the township of Milawa, where I live, there are subdivisions, but they are pretty much Wangaratta employees who live in those centres. I do not think we are just looking at the CBD part of those centres. We are looking at perhaps even a 50-kilometre radius around them. People do not seem to mind travelling a lot these days. We are often amazed that people we employ who come from the city to work for us are prepared to travel from Wodonga and Albury or Benalla, where it is half or three-quarters of an hour's driving. They tell us that if they live in the city they have got an hour and a quarter's drive anyway to get to work usually, but here they are driving in pristine conditions instead of through traffic lights and road rage.

Mr MITCHELL — Yes, I think the average now is 45 to 60 minutes travel. If you put an arc of an hour's travel around Milawa, you have got some fantastic places to live there.

Mr BROWN — Yes. We have got a good lifestyle to offer here. I think that is one of the things that is being promoted in the Provincial Victoria campaign, and they should concentrate on that too.

The CHAIR — That was fantastic. We have gone over time, but just one quick question: who do you think should be driving these things at a local level — the leadership programs, attracting youth and employing the youth's leadership skills?

Mr BROWN — What happens now is that the natural leaders of the area drive them, the people who really want to make a difference are the ones who get up and get them set up and going, but there are not enough of us. I suppose those of us who take a leadership role in our communities find we are burdened down with the jobs we are being asked to do, and it would be good if we could share it around more with more competent leaders in other areas.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, John.

Mr BROWN — My pleasure. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.