

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Benalla — 11 April 2006

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield

Mr R. G. Mitchell

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Mr C. Ingram

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Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

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Witness

Ms C. Marriott (sworn).

The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee including submissions is under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act granted immunity from judicial review. I wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today in the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Would you please state your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing today?

Ms MARRIOT — Catherine Marriott; I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Goomalibee, which is an area just west of Benalla.

The CHAIR — Please provide us with your opening remarks and then we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms MARRIOT — All right. It is really hard when you are talking by yourself, you do not know where to start, because it is a topic that I am really passionate about. When your Executive Officer, Lilian, asked me if I was interested in doing this, although I am a member of Australian Women in Agriculture I am not actually representing Australian Women in Agriculture; but I suppose as a woman in particular we are particularly interested in what is happening with the demographics in the country and whether the questions that are being asked actually have some relevance to the concerns that I as a person have.

I have four children who have all chosen to study agriculture in all its forms, not because they are going to inherit or necessarily own a farm but are interested in a career choice of agriculture as a career. Obviously by that very definition they probably have also chosen to live in the country or certainly be affiliated with the country, because the things that they value they feel they can interpret through the careers they have chosen.

I spoke at some length to my daughter, who is 25 and currently working in Brisbane as a nutritionist. I suppose some of the main things that influence young people — certainly as she stated — are economics, what is available in the town and whether you have a lifestyle choice by going to the suburbs or to a much bigger regional centre. She also looked at the future and at the opportunity that she may or may not have to raise her children on the farm. She is also potentially looking at what sort of life it is going to be, certainly in rural Victoria if not rural Australia. Those were the main things.

There is also the fact that social life may be limited by the choice of staying in the country. That was a potential concern and an issue that as a young person she would have thought about. It is quite a hard to move from being a young person who is a 'child of' to being an independent and making your own choices. That step is quite a big one. For some young people who choose to stay in the country, those issues are very much a basis of their choice, in that if they leave they are stepping right outside a comfort zone.

There are other factors of some interest about whether young people remain or whether they leave. As I understand it — I looked at some of the figures a few years ago — there is a dropout rate of up to 30 per cent among country young people who go to tertiary institutions in capital cities. I am not sure if my figures are right today. That figure is from my memory, and is based on my perception and the knowledge I have of some people who have done extraordinarily well at their year 12 studies and have then gone to Melbourne. In Melbourne they have been extraordinarily disappointed, frustrated, lonely and depressed — those issues.

Mr MITCHELL — Would a lot of that be due to social issues, because they have suddenly been pulled out of their environment and put into something that is totally different? Do you think that has some sort of effect?

Ms MARRIOTT — I think it is the loneliness. My son went to Melbourne and got quite depressed, certainly for up to 12 months, because the difference between the care of a community and a feeling of belonging to a community and the feeling of going to, say, Melbourne was something that he found extraordinarily difficult to accommodate in his own mind. It took him 12 months to get over that. I would have to say that this is an extraordinarily outgoing and adaptable young man who had lived away from home for three years prior to going to Melbourne, but it was just this feeling. I know of two other children that this happened to who just excelled for their TER. They went to Melbourne and have been in a total mess for the last two years.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a massive cultural shift.

Ms MARRIOTT — Massive. When I was first looking at the issue it was seen to be cool to go to Melbourne, but I think now there is a real knowledge that there are some alternatives and that they are not uncool. One of the greatest ways we could achieve a result — there are a few of them — would be to have a common first year, somewhat based on the American college system. So many of the courses that young people study in tertiary institutions at all levels have a common first year or a year that could be made common. If you chose to do some science or applied science-based thing, you could study subjects — even for medicine, physio or any of those higher requirement ones — for the first year at a Shepparton, a Wangaratta, a Wodonga or from a town like Benalla. The arts could also be the same thing, and engineering could be similar as well.

Mr MITCHELL — Like a transitional thing?

Ms MARRIOTT — Yes — like the feeling of, ‘I am now free. I am out of this system. I am moving to another system, but I still have the security of the things that are here. Mum and Dad are still there’. Another thing is that the cost of moving to a lot of the colleges as an alternative is prohibitive for young people. Maybe there is a way we can subsidise college fees in the bigger cities through scholarships, either at a state, local or combined level. I think there is a lot of opportunity for state and local government to work more closely together on issues like that, encouraging the knowledge that although education is important, we actually have choices in how we can achieve it. I find these questions quite tricky, because I keep going off on a tangent. I am sorry about that.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a big web, isn't it? Everything is connected; that is the thing.

Ms MARRIOTT — It is. I will duck down to question 3, which is about developing strategies, and that is what I am best at. I am good at visualising what is going to happen and seeing where you might be going. Firstly, the local area should offer a child or a young person an acknowledgment of the fact that they have grown up in that area. At the end of year 12 young people should be told, ‘This is the thing that this town thanks you for, your contribution. This is what you have done for this area’, so that a young person — whatever their career choice or wherever they are going — is aware of the fact that their contribution has been an important one.

The other thing is creating the opportunity for young people to have some part of their HECS paid for by the town, state — or whatever — if they return to an area or perhaps even an equivalent area for a couple of years. Benalla might say, ‘We will pay 20 per cent of your HECS if you agree to come back for the two or three years after you have finished’, like the old government education studentships — the ‘We will help you if you help us’ sort of thing — because young people have the continuity and the knowledge.

I think we have a perception that we need young people to come back, but I do not know that that is the answer per se. We need people to come back who have a vision of change and a vision for the future. The fact that we encourage our local ones back is really just acknowledging the fact that they have a knowledge of what the town was like. They have a view of where they have been, what they have done and what they have achieved, and they can perhaps apply that better to where they have come from. But maintaining the status quo and having young people back for that reason alone is not valid and not good. Change is so rapid and so important, and becoming increasingly so, that they need to come back with the vigour and vision of their own time, not what has gone before. A balance of the old, the middle and the young needs to be maintained, because without that balance it has no structure and nothing to bank itself on.

But if we do not have the young who have their living to do in the future, we are missing out. It does not necessarily need to be the young who have lived there, but certainly young people who have a vision for change.

Scholarship schemes would add to the opportunity for young people to feel as though they would like to come back because they have got a reason to do it. Economics is a serious issue with young people. With HECS fees alone, young people are looking at a minimum of probably \$20 000, and they have to pay that off.

My lot do look at how much they are going to earn. If the job interests them and there are two or three on offer, they will pick the one that has the — —

Mr MITCHELL — Remuneration?

Ms MARRIOTT — Probably the interest and the economic return are on a par, I would say.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a big load to carry. You are going out to your first job and you have a \$50 000 loan strapped on your shoulders

Ms MARRIOTT — That is right.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a difficult way to start off when you are probably trying to look for a house or set up your family and do that sort of thing.

Ms MARRIOTT — The other thing, of course, is that generation Y, these young ones who are finishing uni now, are very much homebodies anyway. But again we have to bring in the vision of what it is they are now coming home to. The old thing of coming home to the country to work in agriculture is actually really not an issue now. I think there is a clear understanding that there is much greater need than agriculture; if you go to the country you do not do agriculture necessarily. The family farm has changed to the point where you actually would more likely — certainly within 2 hours of Melbourne — have a career and a lifestyle property, which is putting quite a different demographic on the situation.

I see a place where young people will in turn come for that reason; that they will enjoy the opportunities that growing up in the country has shown them and they will wish to show their children that — or a percentage will. I think that will happen increasingly also because of the pressures of living in town, where, if you are very business orientated, it is an important necessity, but if you are not, there are a lot of other ways to achieve quality of life. I think that, again, could be put forward as an alternative, and I think people are realising that for themselves. I think the main thing with the young is an awareness that tomorrow is their time and now is our time — but they are living for tomorrow.

I do not know if there are any questions that anybody has. I am sure there are lots, really. I am quite happy to answer them.

Mr HARDMAN — You have given us a few ideas; that is good.

Ms MARRIOTT — I think the main thing is the fact that communities are structured of various points, and as long as we have something to offer, young people will return, but if we do not — — I think it is something which state and local need to work at together. I have to say that. I think it is not something which can be done by one singular entity. There is one other thing that I would really, really look forward to. State government in the country has very much a perception of being elected from the city and the suburbs — which is in fact reality — and if there were some ability to contribute at a state level to some of the issues of achieving the balance in rural communities, then there will be much greater equity in state government, because at the moment you do wonder, living in the country, about what is the value — where the value is.

Mr INGRAM — Just a point of clarification on your comments about HECS. If we delivered that to those skills, those jobs that we have trouble attracting to country areas — I have had a look at a similar type of proposal, which basically says things like we have trouble getting engineers, we have trouble getting planners, we have trouble getting doctors and other health professionals — for those young people who qualified in those areas to have less HECS debt to pay off would be a fairly large incentive for some of those students who have recently qualified to move to country areas. Is that the sort of idea you are talking about? In my view, that would have to be state and federal government funded.

Ms MARRIOTT — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — To fill gaps where we do not have the skills in country areas.

Ms MARRIOTT — I think that I would have to look at it much harder and have a lot more knowledge at my fingertips, Craig, but in essence it sounds very good. The other thing I would contribute to that also is the fact that we actually do not know what careers are likely to arise in the next 10 years anyway. I mean, the changes are going to be immense. Particularly, the change in rural areas is going to be immense, and hence bringing those young people back who are going to be relevant to the changing needs is going to be important. So how you deliver that I do not know, but certainly in essence, yes, I would agree with that.

Mr INGRAM — Do you think we are doing enough to develop young leaders in country areas?

Ms MARRIOTT — No, in a word. I actually ran a leadership program for 12 months, and I suspect out of 29 people — and two-thirds of them were young, certainly aged 35 or so, maybe up to 40, what you would call the vigorous, vibrant age; like you lot: out there, with it! — there was one who actually showed the initiative to get up and do something when I challenged them. It distressed me. When I offered some alternatives and some change that was needed in this particular program, that was seen as such a threat by the people who were in charge, who owned it, that it was frightening. I think the powerbroking that goes on in smaller communities is potentially one of the most destructive things, and I think you get it all over, but I think in small communities it can be more destructive because you just do not have the choice.

Mr INGRAM — Powerbroking as in partisan political powerbroking or mainstream mafia powerbroking, or just — —

Ms MARRIOTT — No, nothing to do with it; just people sitting in chairs that do not fit them any more because they do not know what else to do. It gives them a sense of power. I think that is an issue, and I think the more middle-aged and young people we can attract who have talent, the more challenges there will be to that. I think there are opportunities to acknowledge that there are institutions and organisations that have existed over time that may not fill the needs of today, and they should change; they should step aside and change or be happy gradually diminishing to the point where the role they play still suits the older generation. But there should be the opportunity, like the phoenix, to arise from the ashes with the energy to come out for the next generation.

Mr INGRAM — On that comment, do you see a correlation between those areas that are quicker to adapt and embrace younger people within their organisational structures and those areas that are going ahead economically and are more vibrant and those areas which are more staid in the industries which are developed there?

Ms MARRIOTT — I think so. I think probably in the larger ones — like if you take a regional centre — there are opportunities to actually get economic gains from going to those places because they are big enough to sustain a much bigger choice of people. I think the energy and the expertise that survive and do well in those towns have to, by their very nature, be stronger than what you can achieve in a smaller area. It does not mean that the smaller area does not play a significant role in the lives of some, but you would not necessarily expect that a very strong leader would come out of a smaller area, except if it just happens that that is his vision and his passion. The other thing is that in a smaller area he also has got the baggage to cart with all those egos that are still sitting their maintaining the status quo — which is to me frightening. I find that the most stultifying thing that country offers — it is that feeling that change is a threat, not an opportunity.

The CHAIR — The challenge is ahead.

Ms MARRIOTT — Absolutely. Now it is up to you blokes.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Cath. Thank you for giving us your time again today. You will get a copy of the transcript.

Ms MARRIOTT — Well, I hope it replied to what you were looking for.

The CHAIR — Yes, certainly. And you will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, and you may correct any typos but not matters of substance.

Ms MARRIOTT — Thank you for listening.

Committee adjourned.