

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Alexandra — 12 April 2006

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Mr J. Settle, principal, Kilmore International School (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, and 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 also 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, including an Independent member, and our inquiry is into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please provide your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your position in that organisation?

Mr SETTLE — My name is John Murray Settle. I am the principal of the Kilmore International School, interestingly enough in Kilmore, although plenty of people ask me, 'Where is that?' when I say that, particularly if I am interstate or overseas.

I actually responded positively to the invitation I received to attend this hearing today for a number of reasons and I chose to come to Alexandra because interestingly enough it is the town of my birth. I was born in Alexandra in 1954, and I have lived in a number of towns in Victoria which include Yea, Avoca and Benalla until the start of my secondary schooling which was done in Melbourne.

I am currently a resident of Woodend in the Macedon Ranges shire and work in Kilmore in Mitchell shire. Principally the reasons for moving around those areas are naturally enough connected mainly with my father's employment and the different changes that occurred there.

When I looked at the terms of reference that you have set out, the first thing that occurred to me was to consider whether the 'remain' or 'return' were sort of equally weighted, and then the concept of whether you particularly wanted youth to return to their rural town or community or to any rural town and community, which seemed to have a sort of relevance to my own personal experience.

The second thing that struck me of course was there is a worldwide trend towards urbanisation. You could say in the last 200 years that has been a story of human history. I will probably have to say that I think that to some extent that trend is irresistible. I have just come back from a Futures conference in Brisbane last week, looking at trends in international education in the next 10 or 20 years and certainly one of the strong points emphasised there was the likelihood that the trend towards young people moving into an urban environment is one which is going to continue. I suppose in a sense that means there will be some inability about the demise of some rural towns, and it may be some rural towns deserve to suffer a demise.

In my own situation at the Kilmore International School I am in my eighth year as head of that school. When I started there in 1999 there were some 120 students at the school, approximately 30 of whom were from the local community and the remainder from a variety of overseas destinations. The school population is now just over 400, and we have moved in the last few years from a position of roughly one-third local students and two-thirds overseas, which has an economical funding component to it which I am happy to discuss with you, to a situation where we are almost fifty-fifty at the moment.

We have just under 200 students from the local area. When I say 'the local area', that would include perimeters of Yea, north of Seymour, over to Macedon and then going down to Craigieburn and so on. It is the case at the moment I feel — without wishing to gloat — that we have a number of families actually moving into the area for their children to attend Kilmore International School.

It is clear to me that one of the reasons for that is the quality of educational provision that is typical of the school and specifically that relates to us being a unique provider in the sense that we are the only school in Australia that provides International Baccalaureate to the exclusion of all other certificates or diplomas at the final two years of secondary education. So all of those students — and we have total of I think 126 year 12 students this year, a bit over 100 year 11s — study the International Baccalaureate.

It is clear to me that that particular curriculum provision, if you like, has a very clear and outstanding global or internationalist perspective. It is that and a number of other factors that I believe are what local families want, particularly those who I would regard as inspirational in terms of their own young folk certainly in and around Kilmore, but it almost inevitably leads as well to tertiary study. By contrast with the figures that we have just been

looking at, it was immediately clear to me that my school is not represented in that particular diagram that was presented.

We would regard it as a failure if we did not have a university offer for every one of our graduating students in year 12. We have been able to maintain that as part of a marketing exercise and also as part of the agreement we enter into with the families — that we will obtain at least one university offer. It is important not from a position of smugness or anything but to recognise that we regard ourselves as a university preparation college and hence we do not attract certain people.

It is certainly the case that success in the IB will lead students in the immediate future out of the local community and for students progressing to tertiary education — which is somewhere about 97 per cent, or more, of students at my school — and they will go to tertiary education, seeking the type of qualification that is going to lead to a higher income for them; hence in one sense there is less likelihood of a return to probably any rural community at least in the short term.

I might mention in terms of the presenter a couple of spots ago that one of our students last year, Lauren McKenzie, is currently a scholarship student in agriculture science at the University of Melbourne for which she required an ENTER in the order of 70. Her enter was a bit over 95, so she was an interesting exception to that information provided earlier.

One of the interesting points of comparison which might not be enormously relevant to you concerns discussions I was having with the Chinese vice-minister of education in Brisbane last week. She was giving a presentation trying to look at the last seven or eight years in the history of the People's Republic of China where in excess of 1 million students in the secondary or tertiary age range — in the age range of about 16 to 20 — have left the People's Republic of China and the return rate of those is under a quarter at the moment.

That is the sort of international point of comparison with what might be happening in some local communities here. Obviously what that the Chinese government is trying to do at the moment is offer a range of tax incentives for their students to actually return to China to enjoy the sort of high incomes that they are able to get perhaps in Europe or the USA by virtue of tax breaks and so on.

But coming perhaps more particularly back to the focus of your inquiry today, I ask myself, 'Why would you want to return to a rural community?'. It is clear to me from the demographics of the families who send their kids to our school that one of the reasons is the whole question of land and housing affordability. Both where I live and work are in that sort of 45 to 60 minutes driving time from the Melbourne CBD but although both Kilmore and Woodend are areas that are experiencing a sort of crazy leapfrogging of housing prices, it is still the case that that is a real factor for many local families.

The overall concept that appeals to me is what I generally call the umbrella concept of the quality of life. I reckon I would be chucking in a bit of an advertising slogan in there; something along the lines of 'Come and live in a real community'. I have lived in a real community for all of my adult life, a couple of different ones as it happens. In my case, and the case of my wife, we live in a small rural town specifically from the point of view of raising a young family, and we look at those quality-of-life issues that pertain to that very thing. Maybe there is a cycle there; maybe in a few years time when he is a late teenager my son will be moving into Melbourne and maybe coming back to a local community later.

Just talking to kids, as I have done now in education for nearly 30 years, the factors that influence the choice to remain or to return seem to be some or all of the following. Some are quite specific and some are relatively general. One of them is the quality of education itself. I was quite interested to listen to the presentation about Dookie, and I am enormously thankful that the University of Melbourne's attempt to more or less withdraw from rural education, which has been partially successful, was not entirely successful a year or two ago.

I would look at particular institutions whose performance I have noted and one would be La Trobe University in Bendigo which I see as a university in a regional setting that manages to retain a very high level of country kids because of special provision it makes for Victorian country students — that is, pastoral care structures, class sizes and so on. Many of our local kids have gone overseas or to Melbourne or Sydney or so on. But a number of the kids who perhaps have not done that sort of stellar performance for which my school is noted find La Trobe University in Bendigo a very comfortable place to pursue a tertiary education.

One of the factors that is enormously relevant in the town of Kilmore is the whole question of IT and telecommunications generally — broadband access or whatever. If that is not adequate over the next 10 to 20 years, I see that as a disastrous situation. I am not familiar with you, John, but I know you by reputation; and you, Ben, by acquaintance; I know you are well versed in some of the ways in which local communities have suffered the squeeze over the last decade or so.

I dealt with an instance of that this morning. I have just hired two teachers, a husband and wife with a couple of young kids who are British citizens who want to take up permanent residence in Australia. They have come from Hong Kong with two kids. They whipped down to the local medical centre to get themselves a local GP and were told that would not happen because its lists were full. You would have exactly the same thing if you moved into the town of Woodend. Unless you are an established resident there of some standing, you will not get to see a doctor who has been in the town for some time. I consider the provision of some of those basic services to be absolutely vital.

The other thing which might seem a bit odd but I am very strong on is sport and the role of sport in the local community. It is very clear to me both from my son's experience but more generally as well that the local cricket club and the local footy club deserve every encouragement they can get. One of the barometers of vibrancy or health in local communities is how the local country footy club is going. In Woodend both of those are doing particularly well. In Kilmore there is actually quite a decline, perhaps similar to the decline in prowess of the Assumption College football teams. The bonding, networking and mateship — I am using my own examples — and netball clubs and so on are often linked in, bring kids back into local communities. Two of my nephews in their early 20s who live and work in the city come back to Woodend every weekend to play for the local team. That has got to be enhancing the chances that at some stage they are going to relocate. It is the peers, network and the connectedness of the young people when they build up friendships through that type of organisation — these are their potential colleagues, friends and obviously partners, though I do not want to go into that area of problems of partnering for young people.

It is clear that if you talk in strict dollar terms, employment opportunities tend to remain limited in a local town. In some ways — and terrific work has been done by a previous speaker — there is probably not an enormous amount you can do about that. If I am talking to a kid about his career prospects — and I travel quite a bit overseas — and I am giving him examples of kids from the Kilmore International School who have just graduated from Imperial College London or the London School of Economics whose graduate starting salaries are higher than my current salary, there is not much good talking to him about working in the local supermarket or something like that.

I also think there is quite a potential to tap into young people's, if you like, moral obligation — that is, they want to be putting something back into the community that has produced them, perhaps the same community or another one.

In terms of strategies there is probably a range of tax and other financial incentives. You can look at things like bonded scholarships in medicine to try to address the shortage of rural doctors and things like that. One of the things that occurred to me in the early hours this morning is some sort of extension of the first-home buyer's scheme that actually had a rural focus to it, so maybe you would get a few grand more, which seems counter-intuitive if your house is going to cost less, to have people moving into rural communities with a little bit of extra help there.

It is clear that some successful rural communities have been successful because of diversification of employment opportunities perhaps away from traditional areas. You might look at some of the new types of agriculture, new IT areas and so on. It is interesting to hear a 30 second anecdote. I went to this weird thing in Mitchell Shire — I cannot remember if you were there, Ben, a year or two ago. They were trying to get this tourist promotion, 'Come and live in Mitchell'. For God's sake, no one wants to live in Mitchell; who wants to even visit the place? It has about two decent wineries and nowhere to stay. I got into quite a lot of trouble that day. If you compare the branding of, say, Tasmanian agriculture with the way in which we might conceive of agriculture today, whether it is an area of study — the whole green thing from Tassie — they are not going to import bananas and so on. It is just something that occurred to me.

I think there is probably room to push a bit into further development of regional cities. People talk about Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and so on. I do not have a lot of statistics to back this up, but I honestly reckon we could do a little bit more in terms of the concept of rural hubs, if you like. You cannot have, as the fellow from Melbourne

University was saying, a rural university in 20 different spots around Victoria. Instead of having it in 3 or 4, or with Warrnambool perhaps 5 or 6, you might be able to go up to 8 or 10 by pushing a couple of extra not just in terms of education provision but perhaps even so more generally.

I will stop there. That is what I have said. You have probably gathered — Ben well knows this, but I will skite for about 15 seconds — that Kilmore International School, as I said, is a school of about 400 kids at the moment. In the last two years somewhere in the vicinity of 80 or 90 per cent of year 12 students get a TER in the 99 bracket. Many of those students are overseas students, but not all of them are. In the sense we are pulling a lot of really able kids through. We have had a local Kilmore resident, a female, get a 45 in the IB, which is a maximum score of 99.95, and students getting into the 40s, which puts you in the top 1 per cent of students. I think that is a pretty good thing.

We are quite well known in the local area and almost unknown outside of it. In some ways that suits us, because we do not really want to get too much bigger. We have grown from just over 100 to about 400 in the nearly eight years that I have been associated with the school, and we are very careful with our notion of growing a business at the right pace so that the whole thing does not go belly up at some stage. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

The CHAIR — John, thank you very much for coming in and talking with us today about the experiences that you have had. It has been quite good to get your ideas, because you have obviously put a lot of thought into what makes it attractive for young people to come back to rural and regional areas. Do you have any questions, Craig?

Mr INGRAM — It was a good presentation. Thank you.

The CHAIR — I suppose there is really nothing more I can ask. The country football and netball report which our committee did is over there. Please take a copy. It will reinforce a lot of your thoughts about country sport and how important it is in keeping young people and communities together.

Mr SETTLE — It would be remiss of me, Ben, if I did not say before I left that I would love to talk to you some time about the fact that that dreadful secondary school that you guys have put up in Wallan has decided to take exclusive use of the basketball stadium there, thus squeezing out another local school, albeit an independent school. We are going to get squeezed at the moment, so I would love to talk to you about some muscle there.

Mr INGRAM — Following up on that and your comment about football, netball and other sports, one of the things that has come through in this inquiry is that sport is very well catered for in most rural areas. What seems to be coming through from young people is that other more social activities are not catered for in most rural areas. That is something that young people have a need for, and it would maybe keep them more connected to their community.

Mr SETTLE — The only thing I would say about that is there is sport and sport; there are sporting clubs and clubs. If you are involved in a local sporting club it means that maybe you train, maybe you do not, or you go for 1 hour or 2 hours a week. That is one thing, but if that sporting club, or collection of clubs, also has a social focus, that is another thing. Clubs that develop more than just 'come and play sport with us' can be quite successful in that way. Sport is not the be-all and end-all. You have only got to come to my school to see that sport is basically a social pastime, a recreation. We are not trying to beat the world at footy or something like that.

Mr INGRAM — It is just a point that has come through.

The CHAIR — Again, our report reinforces that. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.