

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Halls Gap — 16 May 2006

#### Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr P. L. Walsh

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officer: Dr P. Chen and Ms C. Tischler

#### Witness

Mr B. Clugston, chairman, Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome everyone, and before we start I want to also welcome the member for Ripon, Joe Helper, who is here today to speak to his constituents about attracting — and retaining — youth back to rural and regional Victoria.

Welcome also to Barry Clugston. Thank you very much for giving us your time today. I have a statement to read before we begin. 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 that evidence is granted immunity from judicial review. 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, hearing evidence today on retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Barry, could you please state your full name and address. If you are representing an organisation please tell us the name of that organisation.

**Mr CLUGSTON** — My name is Barry Robert Clugston and I live[ADDRESS REMOVED], Stawell. I am currently the chairman of Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water, commonly known as GWM Water. We cover a significant part of western Victoria in our geographic region of interest.

**The CHAIR** — Could you please make your preliminary comments for about 10 minutes and then we will have questions.

**Mr CLUGSTON** — Thank you very much for taking this initiative and making the effort to come out and talk to us. I know that some of you already live out here, but thank you for making the effort as a Parliament to come and get some more information and try to help us to solve this very serious dilemma. I took advantage, because I live just down the road not far from between here and Stawell, to come and have a look — I was not quite prepared to come and sit first up.

I have been personally interested in this subject for a very long time. One of the initiatives we got going to try to help cope with the loss of young people from our regions was the Wimmera leadership course. That is loosely based in Horsham but covers all of the Wimmera and actively helps train people, particularly young people, to take a leadership role and take the initiative in the sense of them being part of their own community in a more proactive way. That is, I think, in its fourth year. We have had some support from regional Victoria and, more latterly, the Department for Victorian Communities. That has been of significant assistance in keeping the program rolling along.

It was quite clearly recognised that young people were leaving this part of the world in fairly big numbers, but when we have done some analysis on some of our towns we have found that some towns seem to be devoid of young people and other towns cannot get enough to fulfil their employment options. Nhill, for example, is a town we cover and is considered to have full employment, but there are a lot of other towns where there is a school-aged group of young people and then there is a gap where a lot of young people depart to get academic training qualifications in a whole variety of ways. They want to see the bright lights of Melbourne and Ballarat, and some go well beyond that to Vancouver, Montreal, Paris, the US and all over the place.

I have commented before that we are an extremely good region to be supplying an enormous range of skills and resources to other parts of the world. Some of those people are coming back, but not in the numbers we would really like. One of the keys is allowing people to get skills and training, but we really need to be thinking about how we get them back to make use of those skills.

I know there are some young people coming back to farms, and that is great because it is very important. Once the father in the family gets a bit older there is no one to succeed him, so the young people make the hard decision to come back if they believe it is possible; but I do not believe that is happening as rapidly or is as widespread as it should be. That is tied up with economic decisions, of course. To me there is a whole range of decisions people need to make as to why they would depart in the first place, whether it is education, bright lights, getting away from the family, making a break from the community or simply peer pressure. In some of these small communities the peer pressure for young people can be quite enormous. I link this sort of thinking with the reliance on alcohol, good times, weekends, boredom and suicide. Suicide among young people is a very serious issue that we all face. Stitching all those areas together is part of growing up in a small community. But the peer pressure can also be

quite enormous for young people to face and put up with at a young age when they do not have their skills and resources to sustain it. Often they leave just simply because they want to get away and find a new life somewhere else.

**Mr INGRAM** — Barry, one of the things we are trying to do is to come up with some solutions, things that the government can do.

**Mr CLUGSTON** — You know all the problems; you want the solutions.

**Mr INGRAM** — I think just about all our witnesses can explain the problem, so have you any ideas about where we can go?

**Mr CLUGSTON** — There is probably a range of solutions. As an agency, one of the solutions we are actively trying to put in place is the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline. We are seriously thinking about that as an issue for the future. It is not simply saving water, on the one hand. That is part of it, but it really is about providing an infrastructure or support for a lot of our communities to be able to take some good decisions on where their business or their enterprise might lead them. That is a potential solution we are facing, particularly from here to the north. There is a pipeline of course that some of you will have heard of which we call the northern Mallee. That runs from Swan Hill out west to Walpeup and down as far as Patchewollock. That is already happening, and we are trying to link the rest of it up literally from Halls Gap to Patchewollock and Sea Lake. That is one very positive infrastructural support that we are putting in place.

The other thing I often think about is that a lot of us try to do things on our own when in reality we need a partnership between the shires, the various agencies, the Department for Victorian Communities, the DSE, the DPI, those sorts of agencies, and us as water catchment authorities. We all need to be coordinating more closely any job opportunities that can be put together in apprenticeships, training programs or any kind of support that we could give employers to help encourage young people to stay, because often it is an encouragement as opposed to a lack of jobs. I do not necessarily think that it is a lack of jobs in a lot of cases, as much as it is an encouragement to stay. As a water authority we have big trouble trying to attract a wide range of staffing skill levels to the region. For some years I thought that it must be the smallness — our biggest centre is Horsham; that is 14 000 to 15 000 — and maybe people do not want to go there. But then I talked to the people at Bendigo and Warrnambool and they have similar problems, in my eyes, so we are not alone in that sense.

Attracting people, I think we have to be very creative — using the Internet and even ringing people up who might be residing in Paris and might be happy to come back, who could fit in an engineer's role or an accountant or one of those skilled types of persons.

**Mr WALSH** — You said that some towns have it and some towns do not. We probably all know the reasons at Nhill — there are a couple of great entrepreneurs there with Lowan foods and Luv-a-Duck. Are there other towns, other examples? And how do we actually get those sorts of people to come to every town?

**Mr CLUGSTON** — It has to be a challenge down to local levels. That is where I think the shires and partnerships are very critical and crucial in making that work. Hopetoun, Rainbow, Dimboola and Rupanyup, for example — a lot of those towns that we could list off — are quite small towns in their own right, but they have had a larger population in the past, and it has been declining ever since. I suppose you could trace it from first settlement as far as their substantial population, and we have been declining ever since. I really think we need some policy to underpin a lot of this support for sustaining our smaller towns — for example, if we are putting enormous effort and dollars into sewerage, potable water and higher quality water into a lot of our towns, why are we doing that when the population is drifting away? What is the long-term future of some of those towns? That is policy support; it is all very well to happen in the first instance, but we also need a more targeted approach to sustain the population and expand it. There is a lot of potential there — a lot of land and a lot of potential.

**Mr WALSH** — Do you have some examples of policy that could be used to do that?

**Mr CLUGSTON** — You have caught me on the hop, Peter. An attitudinal thing, which is different from policy, is often how to respond to people who might be thinking about staying in a particular district — for example, transport is a problem for younger people. It can be really difficult in an area like this where we have a reasonable infrastructure with buses — some towns have taxis — but between towns is a problem; St Arnaud last night identified that. Weekends are a real dilemma for a lot of people, because without cars, or fewer cars, they

simply cannot move around to visit other centres or relations or whatever. So I think transport and communications are always identified as dilemmas.

It is outside the state realm, I understand, but I think there are probably ways we can support better communications systems between towns that will give people the enthusiasm to stay there. I have not really answered the question, I am sorry, Chair.

**The CHAIR** — That is fine. Is there anything further you would like to add, Barry?

**Mr CLUGSTON** — I will think of something on the way home, but I do not think so; thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR** — You are more than welcome to write a bit of a submission, or whatever it be, if you think of something else. If there is any need, you are quite welcome to do that.

**Mr CLUGSTON** — Thank you for the opportunity. I am not sure I extended your boundaries much.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for taking the time and coming here and giving us a submission. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You may correct any errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

**Mr CLUGSTON** — Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**