

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 C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr P. L. Walsh

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 R. Campling, chief executive officer, Yarriambiack Shire Council (sworn).

The CHAIR — Thank you for your attendance today. Under the powers conferred 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 all evidence taken, including submissions, 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, hearing evidence today.

Could you please provide your full name and address, the name of the organisation you represent and your position within that organisation.

Mr CAMPLING — My name is Ray Campling. I am the chief executive officer of the Yarriambiack Shire Council. My residential address [ADDRESS REMOVED] Warracknabeal.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ray. Could you please keep your comments to about 10 minutes and after that there will be time for some questions.

Mr CAMPLING — I assume that what I am going to say today you have probably heard repeatedly, but it will be from our local government perspective, and I trust that whatever I say will be relevant. I would have liked to spend a bit more time preparing, but it is a hideous time of year with council plans, budgets and so forth. I will read from the notes that I have prepared.

The issue of retaining young people in rural towns or regional youth/migration exodus is a dilemma and challenge that has been discussed and analysed for several decades, not only in Australia but in the entire Western civilisation. I commend and congratulate the committee on pursuing this matter and I appreciate the opportunity of coming to speak to you today.

Some of my comments and observations relate to my experience and challenges in being a youth recreation officer in the 1980s in Canberra, Queanbeyan, Perth and Portland. My recent conversations with young people in Yarriambiack shire indicates that there has been very little change over the past 20-plus years. I am buoyed by the fact that 'actual' youth have been incorporated or invited to provide these perspectives to this inquiry.

I think we are all fully aware of the various reasons why young men and women leave their rural environments — principally to pursue further education and employment opportunities, but also for the adventure and associated challenges and experiences. Life in small rural and remote areas in general is quite safe, insular, predictable and quite often simply boring, with limited opportunities. Additionally, everyone knows everyone. There is very little mystery or intrigue.

Young people acknowledge that leaving home provides additional opportunities and challenges, more independence, new and different boundaries, new experiences and different cultures. Unfortunately at present rural Australia is being perceived as bleak. Regional communities are viewed as being backward, dying and unsustainable. I believe that the Provincial Victoria campaign is addressing this to some extent; however, there is still a long way to go.

The ongoing regional youth exodus clearly represents another sign of economic and social decline. In recent times rural and remote areas have lost banks, post offices, government services, schools, hospital beds and doctors. These concerns, combined with our worst drought in recorded history, have not created a particularly attractive or appealing scenario for our disenchanted younger population. The impact of the present drought has not only had a devastating impact on the farming and business sector, it has also impacted severely on the general community and most sadly on the fabric of rural communities. The leaving-home experience is no longer simply based on, as in previous years, or associated with marriage, securing a job and buying a home. Instead for many young people leaving home now seems to mark the beginning of a period of independent, non-family living in which they can be alone with their mates or friends in a lifestyle and environment quite different from what they have experienced while living at home or from what they will experience when they eventually marry or form de facto relationships and eventually if they choose to commence their own families.

Contemporary anxieties about young people leaving their regional homes is not new. Youth migration can also be viewed as a threat to the rural economy in the sense that it can lead to a depletion of both rural skilled and unskilled labour, and as a consequence increase the financial rate burden on the remaining population. With people leaving, populations decrease, but we still need to provide roads, footpaths and sporting facilities et cetera.

As a consequence of that, with no rate capping unfortunately rates are increased. As you would expect, small municipalities like ours are highly reliant on rates and grants. As a consequence of that, I commend my council for appointing a grants officer to help community volunteers, who are flat out doing their own work, and assist them with formulating their grants. When you look now, a lot of grants are formulated by professional business organisations, and it makes it fairly prohibitive for a lot of the volunteers who do not have that time.

This, combined with an ever-increasing ageing population, also creates a significant drain on our highly dependent voluntary services. Just off that, about our volunteers, our council would have to find another \$1 million because they look after swimming pools, the footy ovals, halls et cetera at a discounted rate that unfortunately we cannot undertake.

The continuing youth exodus is progressively impacting on our rural sustainability and realistically needs to be addressed if we are to remain viable. Leaving home is simply not just a natural progression into adulthood, but rather a decision about identity and lifestyle, and for some a rejection of the limited roles and responsibilities which are available at home or in the region.

As you would appreciate, generally the most talented and creative members of our community are lost to the cities, popular coastal areas, tourist centres and also overseas. In recent times we have been constantly hearing about the renewal gap, the difference between required funds for asset renewal — that is, reconstruction or rehabilitation — and the amount which is currently allocated for these types of work. Hence it is the actual shortfall of funds required to renew assets before they fail. This applies to all assets.

At present we have another gap in a significant asset — the human social gap. We consider our community members to be our greatest resource and asset, because they are enthusiastic, community resourceful, resilient and innovative. But presently we have a significant gap, particularly in the 18-30 age group. What I find quite intriguing is that quite a few of the single people in the 18-24 age group still come home on the weekend to play their footy and their netball and to visit friends and family. Realistically that is basically due to wanting to enjoy the two worlds: the excitement, diversity and independence of living in the city or living away; and the comfort of home, family and friends. Speaking to a lot of the kids, I do not think coming home on the weekend is due to the match payments that Warracknabeal and Minyip–Murtoa are presently paying!

I am personally divided on the matter of youth migration and exoduses. I believe that is a matter of choice and personal development, as is staying at home in the rural environment. I suppose some of the kids see there is a stigma in staying at home. It is as though they failed or whatever, but it is a matter of choice, and I think those kids need to be encouraged that their abilities and services are required at home. I may be optimistic, but I am an advocate for circular migration, but circular migration does need viable ongoing support and assistance to be a reality. Basically circular migration is kids going away, getting skilled and educated and hopefully coming back at some time down the track.

It is quite easy to identify problems and concerns that contribute to youth migration. It is easy to say that we should provide jobs for our young people to entice them back. A recent state government survey identified that 600 000 people, or 21 per cent of Melbourne's population, would be happy to relocate to rural Victoria if they could access appropriate and modern services — hospitals, education, housing, sporting and recreational facilities and employment opportunities.

Interestingly enough, from speaking to the kids, they are exactly the same requirements and guarantees that the kids or the people in the 18-30 age group need to entice them back to rural Victoria. They must have opportunities to utilise their newly acquired skills and experience. They must also have suitable housing, appropriate schools to educate their children — or potential children — and be able to have their children in their local hostels and not at hostels 3 or 4 hours or 400 or 500 kilometres away. They want to have their kids near their families, and so forth.

Although no ABS data or statistics are presently available, there is definitely a trend of young people in the late-20s to mid-30s age bracket returning to the rural sector — basically a form of circular migration — to be close to their families and friends and to raise their families in a more relaxed, safer and tranquil environment. We have noticed that in particular.

Also, in rural zones a lot of the people — and I am not being detrimental to the people in the western suburbs of Melbourne — are capitalising on our cheaper housing opportunities. As a consequence there is difficulty for younger kids who want to come back. There are virtually nil renting and buying opportunities, although council has

been successful with federal grants. We are doing a study on housing surveys and we are presently looking at, particularly in the smaller towns, widows and the widowers in big four-bedroom houses combining, providing units and then making houses available for the younger people or business people to come to town.

I believe that we can possibly offer a variety of incentives and subsidies for our younger people — and this list is not overly exciting or innovative; they are just suggestions I have put together quickly.

We could establish subsidies for new businesses and enterprises. We could have more traineeships or apprenticeships with greater employee support and assistance. At present council endeavours to take an apprentice a year or a trainee a year, but the subsidy only is available for one year and there is a further two years, which is fairly cost-prohibitive to councils.

We could discount commodities and make their cost equivalent to those obtainable in the major cities, like petrol, food, clothing — basically anything and everything.

We could subsidise live entertainment. In the Wimmera area I was fairly fortunate. We secured at Natimuk the Triple J concert. A lot of the Wimmera councils are heavily involved with it. It was just amazing to speak to the kids who saw the council and the business houses join together to undertake this major project. It is something the council can work with, but it was interesting that the kids said it is cost-prohibitive for them to go down to Melbourne and pay \$90 or \$150 to see a band. There is the cost of going down there and the cost of coming back.

Some of them felt the city was pretty intimidating and quite eerie, and some declined to go there. It is quite amazing how they identified having live bands and AFL games. Speaking to the community up at Mildura recently, there was the game Essendon and Richmond played and the impact it had on the community, not just as a consequence of the game occurring, but having that ability to see that quality of entertainment.

There is the issue of the provision of more hospitals, kindergartens, regional universities, housing, transportation, better roads and better footpaths, because unfortunately in our community 60 per cent of our operating costs go into roads and footpaths because we are in an area in excess of 7000 square kilometres, and we maintain in excess of 5000 kilometres of roads. When you look at some of the metropolitan councils that maintain only 39 kilometres, it is pretty daunting for us, and unfortunately to some extent we may be looked upon as a council that only provides rates, rubbish collection and roads.

Additionally, we could provide tertiary-level scholarships — some sort of guarantee. We could sponsor kids to go to university, which would guarantee that they come back for a couple of years. I do not know how realistic that is.

There is the issue of access to the information super highway — wireless technology, greater broadband width and better mobile phone coverage.

Obviously these are only a few suggestions, and none of them is particularly new, exciting or innovative. To address the youth exodus concern will require a collective and probably a collaborative approach from the three spheres of government, the private sector and individuals. At the end of the day it is imperative that young people's perspectives, needs, wants and requirements are taken into consideration.

As I said, this is not new. Looking back, in the early 1900s there was a youth exodus from Tasmania to the mainland, and it is still going on. You only have to look across the world to the Canadian and English experience. Realistically it is a dilemma, and I do not have any ways of solving it. If I had, I would probably be a multimillionaire. Listening to the kids, talking to the kids, as I said, not a lot has changed in the 20 years since I was a youth worker or recreation officer.

I probably got that said under the 7 minutes! That is from the council's perspective. I believe tomorrow you will be addressed by our youth worker.

It is a dilemma, it is frustrating, but conversely there are a lot of positives associated with it, particularly if you can implement some sort of migratory process. It is tremendous that kids go away and get the opportunity to get educated, new skills and new experiences and particularly the adventures of living out of a rural area. Not being detrimental to rural Victoria, I love it; it is a matter of choice that I live and work in rural Victoria. I grew up Canberra and it is basically a big bush town, very insular like a lot of the towns. Having worked in the Parramattas and the Newcastles and so forth, it is a matter of choice.

I believe the young generation needs to avail itself of that choice to come back and to pursue their opportunities. As I said, there is an excitement in living and working in town away from your parents and meeting different people, different cultures, different smells, different tastes but eventually it would be good to bring those skills and opportunities back. Realistically we have to have the housing, the opportunities and that similar to what the kids in the metropolitan area experience.

One of the big things we are looking at in our council and other similar small municipalities is sustainability and a continually ageing population. I assume like all small municipalities, our population over the age of 60 represents in excess of 30 per cent of our population. As a consequence, we need to put those services into the ageing population and youth. It is a difficult situation, but, as I said, it requires a collaborative approach from all sectors. I am not sure if that is what the committee wished to hear but that is my interpretation.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr MITCHELL — Are young people encouraged into leadership roles in the community through the council?

Mr CAMPLING — We have endeavoured to get things like youth councils and so forth. We have recently become more heavily involved with career nights and career opportunities and so forth. We could probably do more with the leadership. I think council and local government more generally is probably not good at advertising our responsibilities and roles. I think a lot of people are aware that council is the place where you pay your rates or go when the next-door neighbour is whingeing or a pothole suddenly forms in front of your front yard or whatever but we offer in excess of 60 services.

I think that is where we have to go through the schools and educate people on what council does provide and the opportunities. It is surprising when you go and address youth committees and so forth that they are not aware of the services provided by council in servicing meals on wheels and how to incorporate the young people into voluntary activities, because we are struggling to provide people to deliver books to the elderly, meals on wheels. We are progressively getting better at that but I think it is more relationships in cooperation with the schools and young people. We are an approachable organisation and the worst we can say is, 'No', but our first option is, 'Yes, how can we do that? How can we assist them?'

Mr WALSH — Your focus as I read it was on the economic activity and growing employment opportunities in Warracknabeal and in Yarriambiack in general. Say you were Premier for a day and you had one wish: what would you actually want that would deliver the biggest bang to do that?

Mr McQUILTEN — Probably a redistribution, in your case.

Mr CAMPLING — That is a good question, I would appreciate that opportunity.

Mr WALSH — You are welcome. You are Premier for a day — —

Mr McQUILTEN — Or Prime Minister.

Mr WALSH — Or Prime Minister — no, Premier because we deal with the state. We have to make recommendations to the state government.

Mr CAMPLING — Is this specifically related to youth?

Mr WALSH — No, something which will grow the community which will then hopefully make it more attractive for youth to be there.

Mr CAMPLING — I would like to see more incentives and opportunities for business development and growth. I think those opportunities can be cascaded down to the younger people. The present planning scheme is causing a bit of a dilemma to our council in rezoning and so forth. That is a big question. It is a question I would like to see presented to the young people to ascertain their precise needs. I would not mind discussing it with them. What I would propose or what I think is coming from a person who is a year away from his 50th birthday, and I might be out of touch.

I think my wish would be an injection of substantial resources and incomes to provide housing and business opportunities. It is a difficult question but the reality is we need those boosts. Even if it was to provide the scholarships and opportunities for the kids to go down to the big smoke and be away for a couple of years to learn and experience, I would like to see more relevant opportunities provided.

Mr WALSH — Just for the record, do you want to elaborate on the troubles you are having with planning and getting that economic development?

Mr CAMPLING — We are endeavouring to establish industrial estates and so forth and there are restrictions associated with that in consideration to identifying land and whether it is commercial or housing or so forth. It is a bit restrictive and it is becoming quite daunting compared to what we previously were able to undertake and promote reasonably well. It is becoming more difficult.

It was recently identified that Australia's legislation in regard to bureaucracy and red tape is phenomenal compared to other countries. It is pretty intimidating for new businesses to be initiated or established because of the paperwork required — just the simple rezoning of the land and so forth. This is something we will need to discuss with Mr Hulls. It probably has to be more flexible and more relevant. We appreciate that farms are growing in size and the numbers of farmers are reducing. There are a lot of dilemmas associated with initiating businesses and the permit processes to get a business established.

Mr INGRAM — A large portion of the young people are moving away for tertiary education or higher paid job opportunities or different employment opportunities. What are the industries within your area that would attract those people who have gone to university for a tertiary degree? Is there much of that sort of industry within your council which would attract someone back?

Mr CAMPLING — Basically half our businesses are related to the grain industry — I think we provide in excess of 25 per cent of the grain to Victoria. Predominantly it is farming and grain associated. However, I think there is an opportunity for more innovative businesses. We look at Clynes Foods and Clynes Constructions which was recently awarded the judges' award at the Wimmera Business Awards. They have incorporated dried fruit and grape production. They have outlets in Mildura and Wentworth and the grapes are brought down to Warracknabeal and processed and distributed through supermarkets. They have recently undertaken supply to international markets in Germany and so forth.

Realistically when you look at the location of Warracknabeal, it is only 3½ hours from Melbourne. There are opportunities there and the cheapness of production there, the cheapness of purchasing land et cetera, although obviously there are planning scheme complications. Clynes has identified that if it would have been cost prohibitive to establish the market in Melbourne but they can locate appropriate and innovative businesses there, and the access to Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney is quite reasonable.

Mr INGRAM — What sort of employee numbers do they have? What sort of skills do those sorts of businesses need?

Mr CAMPLING — Presently they are employing in the vicinity of 20 people. Hopefully that will progress. Some of that is unskilled labour but obviously there are engineering aspects associated with that. Clynes Foods basically complements Clynes Constructions which undertakes the majority of the road construction works in our shire, Balranald shire and Mildura. They have diversified knowing the location and the opportunities associated with that.

If only we could instil into Melbourne businesses and through the Wimmera Development Association that regional Victoria is not backward and that there are opportunities there and so forth. It is obliquely being promoted at the moment as a consequence of the significant drought we are going through. That is why I think it imperative that local government, state and federal governments and the local development associations promote country Victorian positively. Recently I was speaking to police inspectors, who say that the lower crime levels there need to be promoted to attract people. In the villages you can go out after dark and walk your dog in the park and so forth. Those are the positives that local government is not particularly good at promoting. I do not think regional Victoria is good at promoting the positive aspects, including the benefits of living in a country environment.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, and you may correct any errors but may not change matters of substance. Again thank you for coming along.

Mr CAMPLING — Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity. I wish you all the best, and hopefully something positive will come out of it.

Witness withdrew.