

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Donald — 17 May 2006

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Witnesses

Ms D. Williams, correspondence secretary (affirmed); and

Ms B. E. Alday, committee member (affirmed), Advance Sea Lake Incorporated.

The CHAIR — Welcome everybody. I have a brief 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 under 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 also wish to advise witnesses 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, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining and attracting back young people to rural towns and communities.

Before we begin, Bronwen and Debra-Jane, could you please state your full name and address and if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if so the name of that organisation and your positions within it, and then please take the oath or affirmation.

Ms ALDAY — I am Bronwen Elizabeth Alday. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Sea Lake. I am representing Advance Sea Lake and I am a committee member.

Ms WILLIAMS — I am Debra-Jane Williams of [ADDRESS REMOVED] Sea Lake, Victoria. I am the correspondence secretary of Advance Sea Lake Incorporated.

The CHAIR — Can you please provide us with your evidence. If you try to keep it to around 10 minutes we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms WILLIAMS — We are here representing Advance Sea Lake Incorporated. It is an incorporated body that represents and coordinates various community groups and committees in order to provide direction to the Sea Lake township. We work with the Buloke Shire Council. We recently contributed to the Buloke shire's strategic plan and highlighted the two main areas of ongoing concern for Sea Lake. One was attracting and retaining people with a particular focus on youth and young families; and two was housing — both rental and properties for purchase within the township. I am basically going to tell my story.

Both my husband and I grew up in rural towns. At the age of 17 my husband left Sea Lake to live in Melbourne, where he had secured an apprenticeship. Sea Lake is 400 kilometres from Melbourne. At the end of year 12 I left Sunraysia to live in Adelaide, where I went to university. Mildura is about 400 kilometres from Adelaide. We did not know each other then, but we had a similar set of circumstances to deal with.

As 17 to 18-year-olds we accepted that in order to enter the next stage of our lives we would leave home. For us that did not mean moving to a place down the road or across town; it meant that we would leave home and never return in the same way. We would leave behind the familiar places, the friends and family life; we would board with family, friends or find someone to rent with. We would learn about finances, budgeting bills and living. We would start in the new place doing new things on a daily basis — a very steep learning curve that at times would seem daunting. We would travel home as frequently as we could manage it, using public transport or travelling as P-platers for the 800-kilometre round trip, often just for a weekend with family and friends.

The positives were primarily that we learned to develop living skills and independence. We got to learn and experience so many different ways of doing things and looking at the world that we would not have got by staying within a small, familiar population. And of course we gained careers. Our families went through a lot of changes in those years, too. Financially they supported us in any way they could. They worried about our safety and security. Living away from home and frequently travelling long distances are not things that make parents feel comfortable. Their family life changed too. They no longer had this dependent child living with them, who they had nurtured and raised for 17-plus years.

By the time we had reached our 20s we were no longer studying. We were free to move back to the country, but we did not — things had changed. We had met each other and settled in Melbourne. We were using our new job skills and exploring our earning capacity. We had made new friends and our urban surroundings were no longer strange.

In Sea Lake the population was dwindling. There were not many people in our age group left living in the area. This decline in population continues. According to official census data, there were only 943 people living in Sea Lake in 1981. Twenty years later in 2001 there were only 638. On top of that the population is ageing. In 1981 there were 233 people aged between 18 and 34, whereas in 2001 only half that number remained — and that was 115. The only population that saw an increase in that 20-year span was the 60-plus age group.

So we ended up still living in Melbourne, now with a family of our own. We wanted our children to experience life in the country; it was just a matter of when. When do you give up your job? When do you give up your lifestyle to move to the country, and why would we? For us the decision was made two years ago when my father-in-law got ill. My husband spent more time in Sea Lake than he did at home. He travelled up and back in a day, 800 kilometres, to try to be in two places at once. It was time for us to move.

The children were only just starting school and were pleased to discover that Sea Lake is well equipped for schooling. We would give up the convenience of 24-hour shopping centres, a selection of indoor heated pools close to home, our new network of friends and our jobs. In exchange we would gain time with the children's grandparents, new and renewed friendships, a close-knit community, fun sporting opportunities and a different, relaxed lifestyle.

I had never lived in such a small town so far — 70-plus kilometres — from the comfort and conveniences I had grown used to. But the change is not so hard. The town was familiar and we were automatically accepted as we were not strangers; we had a connection with the place. I have since seen another family move into this town, without any family ties, and they too were welcomed very warmly.

One of my jobs felt only ripples from the move. I can do it anywhere as long as I have access to high-speed Internet, a phone and a fax. My other job was teaching at TAFE and, rather than travelling to Swan Hill to seek work, I created a job for myself by approaching Swinburne TAFE to partner with me to offer a certificate level training in office skills in Sea Lake. Tyrrell College was pleased to help by allowing me to use their computers of an evening. I am pleased to say that after almost 18 months, 15 adult students completed the certificate last night. I plan to offer the course again next year. My husband is enjoying a relaxed pace, picking up occasional work, managing our investments and building us a family home in Sea Lake. As I am reducing my workload soon, he may have to travel a bit more to pick up work, but we will deal with that as it occurs.

Do I have regrets or concerns about moving? Yes, but they are mine, and it cannot be changed. My daughter is in an age group with inexplicably few girls. At the district's school sports day there were 7 girls in her age group, whereas in my son's age group, which is a year younger, there were more than 20 boys. This affects many aspects of her life — from school, to dance, to netball, to socialising — but there is nothing we can do to change this and it is not a reason to move away.

I was doing some consulting work in Melbourne every six weeks or so last year, but I stopped when I fell pregnant as the public transport journey was too much to cope with. I was doing it over two days, travelling down and travelling back. The distance is what bothers me the most about living in the country. Justifying the cost of petrol in order to do something just for fun 100 kilometres away is quite difficult. Getting to Melbourne to catch a flight or go to a wedding or have a baby — these are things that are not taken lightly and they impact on our lives.

As a parent I worry about the future we are offering our children by living in the country. Are we limiting their options? Yes, in some ways we are. If we were living in a larger town we would go swimming more often, and my daughter would like to continue doing gymnastics. These things are not impossible as they are available in Swan Hill, but that is 74 kilometres away, and they are not readily accessible, as getting there costs time and petrol money. If we were in an urban area, my son would have access to the extension classes he needs, as he has been identified as an advanced reader. He probably would get this at a larger school. The school he is at now is focused on helping struggling students, but the more advanced ones do not receive any additional attention. I am sure it is simply a matter of time, resources and staff.

Will the high school offer my children the subjects they want or that are required to pursue their chosen career? Hopefully, with advances in remote access to study, the future of education will be positive. Already the possibilities to study remotely are being explored. Remote access to learning should be embraced and supported by rural areas. There are many times when the student does not need to be physically sitting in a classroom in order to participate in the class. They can learn at their own pace or participate in online discussion groups, contact lecturers online to chat, and pick up and hand in work from their desktop. I believe this is occurring in high schools already and tertiary institutions. It is a way to increase the number of students who can access a subject and to increase the variety of subjects a student can study. The TAFE subjects I taught are ideal to take out of the classroom. All they require is a PC and a workbook, but I believe it needs to be more than giving the students the resources; it is the support and interaction that enhances the learning, even if it is electronic support rather than face to face.

Already as a tertiary teacher I can access PC drives, email and resources on Swinburne's computer network from my PC at home. I can lodge my class notes and handouts on a system that the students then have to access, and I can monitor how and when they access it. I found a little bit of a blurb from Swinburne's off-campus courses that I will just read:

Off Campus is a mode of study in which students are not required to attend classes on campus and aims to provide greater flexibility to students who want a choice in where, when and how they would like to learn. It has previously been referred to as:

distance learning

flexible learning

correspondence studies.

Swinburne TAFE's off-campus centre works closely with the various teaching departments to offer students a broader range of learning options such as:

paper-based, and/or

online delivery.

Reasons why student may decide to study via the off-campus centre go beyond living in a remote area. Some students may prefer the independence and anonymity it offers, others are working part or full time and it may be the only viable path to higher qualifications designed for students who wish to study without having to attend courses on campus. It aims to provide greater flexibility for students in terms of where, when and how they learn.

The Swinburne TAFE off-campus centre delivers TAFE courses only. Open Universities Australia is another option. Open Universities Australia is a flexible way to study towards a university degree when you cannot study on campus. They remove many barriers to university education, including distance, time, qualifications and cost. They offer a way of studying that is more convenient, flexible and efficient. You study when you want, from any location in Australia or overseas. It is a flexible way to get a university education, designed for people who do not have the time or desire to study on campus.

In all likelihood my children will do some form of tertiary education. Maybe my generation will not experience the abrupt change when one of our children decides to commence tertiary study. Maybe they will be able to reside at home to do the bulk of their studies and do block study away from home as needed. I would like to imagine that the changes will occur in the next 10 years, which will alleviate some of the dilemmas of leaving a country town in order to get an education.

Unfortunately I cannot see a solution to the problem of young people needing to leave in order to get a career. A country town, by the very nature of its size, cannot possibly hope to offer the range of careers that are needed.

In conclusion I will say that at some stage in the next 5 to 10 years, my family will need to address a lot of these issues. It is feasible that we will move our family back to a large urban area in order to offer our children the flexibility, scope and opportunities that they may not have living in the country.

Ms ALDAY — My story is a bit different to Jane's. I have not actually returned to the country. I grew up in Geelong, went to Aquinas College in Ballarat, studied teaching and moved to Sea Lake, my first job, and met and married a farmer — a stereotype, I know. My husband is someone who has moved away and come back. A lot of the people I work with in my teaching career are the same; they have moved away, studied and come back.

For me, what attracted me to living in a country town, and what has attracted a lot of other people, especially a lot of women, is that they return for a partner. It is a really big attraction. Often it is something that is out of their control. They are in love, and their partner is tied to a farm, tied to a job in a rural industry and that is why they return.

Sea Lake has been blessed in many ways by having these people with their professions in nursing, in teaching — in other careers as well, but mainly nursing and teaching; they are the two biggest employers in the town — coming back. Those people have added a lot. For me the attractions of living in a small town is that the community support is huge. Often everyone knows your business, but that is a positive and a negative. There is a lot of support when anything goes wrong, when there is a bad year on the farm. Often everyone is in the same situation, and that is something you do not often get in a larger area; people do not seem to have that understanding.

Another big attraction for me in Sea Lake is there are a lot of young people there as well. It is not a town that feels like it is dying, because a lot of people of Jane's and my age have moved back. I work at the Catholic primary school, and everyone there is under the age of 40 — the whole staff. That is great — a really good feeling. For me, one of the issues with being in a rural town is education. I would like to do further study in the area of education. I would like to eventually do my masters, but I need to now look at how I am going to access that education. It is the same if you would like to do that in nursing; it is the same if you would like to do it in any other career that you have chosen. I am sticking with the two stereotypes — teaching and nursing — because, like I said, they are the biggest employers. It is something that influences a lot of people. If you are going to study, you need to look at things like, as Jane was saying, Open Learning and those sorts of things.

We were just talking on the way up, and a big thing that we have noticed with young people returning is a lot of the teachers at our local prep to 12 college grew up in the area and have returned. We have found that they are the ones who went to university in Ballarat or Bendigo. The rural universities seem to be the ones that feed back into the country, and if the government is serious about addressing getting people back, it probably needs to be addressing funding those universities the best it can and making them the most accessible. We seem to find the people who go to Melbourne are the ones who stay in Melbourne, and that has a lot to do with the courses they are studying as well. If you are going to do ophthalmology, it is very hard to practise that in Sea Lake. But it is a credit to our local high school that a lot of the people there come out wanting to become teachers. That is a credit to the staff at the high school. What worries me is I have got a daughter who is two, and I do not want her to think that is the only option she has got because that is all she sees around — people in those professions.

Living in Sea Lake has been a very positive experience for me. We have our issues. My husband is a farmer, and he does not always find it a positive thing. He works on his own and works with his father, who is a lot older. He finds that really hard. It is very isolating for him. We do not have any other farm help except for my mother-in-law and me, but often we do not count. That is very isolating, and he is affected by things out of his control, like world commodity prices, the price of fuel and other issues like that. But at the same time he can go to the footy or down to the pub, and there are other people in the same situation. So there are places that they can debrief and receive that support.

Mr WALSH — The issue of housing is coming up everywhere we go. It is a hard question. If you were Premier for a day, what would you do to fix it?

Ms ALDAY — It would be nice if someone came into the town with \$20 000 and bought a few Swanbuild homes from Swan Hill, prefab ones, invested in the town, sold them off, made a nice profit and bought a few more, but I think finding someone with the initial capital to build houses in the first place has been a struggle for us as a committee. We have looked at Robinvale and how they have addressed the problem.

Ms WILLIAMS — Ouyen is doing something similar with housing.

Ms ALDAY — Ouyen is doing something similar, but in the first place you have got to come up with someone or a group of people willing to put in \$10 000 each and look at it as an investment.

Mr WALSH — How much do you think you would need to get started?

Ms WILLIAMS — Land is probably not an issue, because land is nice and cheap.

Mr WALSH — Land is not the issue. Yes, I am aware of that.

Ms WILLIAMS — It is just getting the foundations, getting probably the first two places built and then, on spec, I think you would actually be able to sell from that. The main problem we have is that the majority of the houses, particularly in the town, are lived in by a single person, and there is no incentive for them to move, not like in the city, where you can say, 'I am going to sell the family home and I will move into a smaller place and free up some capital'. It does not work that way. In Sea Lake there is nowhere to move to, and there is just not that much of a changeover in price. If you went to somewhere smaller, you would not get that much of a difference from your \$60 000 house to your \$40 000 unit — if there was a \$40 000 unit, which there is not. That also means that then people on farms find that the family tradition of moving through the houses does not work either, because there is nowhere for the older family within the farm to move to in the town, and therefore there is nowhere for the younger family to move into the homestead, so to speak, on the farm. So there is just no real movement of real estate within the town. Ideally even if we had something like what I think Charlton did — I do not know if it is actually referred

to as a retirement village type set-up where you have small, self-contained, single or two-people units people can move into, thus freeing up the family home so that families can move into the town.

Ms ALDAY — It is a real issue. The principal of the school I teach in has moved down from Mildura. She is here for 12 months as an acting principal and has come down with her husband and three children. In the first term they had nowhere to live in Sea Lake. They were commuting from Swan Hill to Sea Lake every day. There was just not a house — nothing for a family. There were three-bedroom houses but, like Jane said, they were lived in by one person. The houses are there. There is just not access to them as a rental property or even to purchase. They eventually ended up moving out to a house on a farm, so they are now living 30ks out of Sea Lake, which is closer than 74. There was just nothing, and it was a really big issue.

Ms WILLIAMS — It is not even necessarily building big family homes. It is more building the smaller units to allow that flowthrough of people to transfer down, if you like, so that then families have somewhere to move into.

The CHAIR — You would see that as a major block for people moving back to Sea Lake?

Ms WILLIAMS — Yes.

The CHAIR — They get there as a teacher, a principal or whatever else and they cannot actually get a place to live.

Ms WILLIAMS — Yes. We are renting a place at the moment while we are building a house in Sea Lake. I certainly would not want to stay in the rented property any longer than I have to, because it is not particularly nice. It was what we found was available at the time that we needed it. I spoke to a woman whose husband was particularly ill and was living with care in Sea Lake. She had nowhere to move to off the farm and into town to be closer to him. That situation comes up frequently.

The CHAIR — Jane and Bronwen, thank you very much. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks. You can correct any errors but do not change matters of substance. Thank you very much for coming up today.

Witnesses withdrew.