

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Donald — 17 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr P. L. Walsh

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Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic
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Witnesses

Mr J. McEwen (sworn); and
Ms L. Adams (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Lauren and Jim. Under the powers conferred on it 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 also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, and our membership includes an Independent member of Parliament. T we are hearing evidence on our inquiry into retaining young people in and attracting young people back to rural towns and communities in Victoria. Before we begin, could you please state your full name and address and then take an oath or affirmation?

Mr McEWEN — My name is James McEwen. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Donald. I am on a rural property. I am representing young farming people.

Ms ADAMS — My name is Lauren Adams. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED]. I am studying at university at the moment, but that is the address I call home.

The CHAIR — Please make your presentation for approximately 10 minutes, and then we will have some question for you.

Ms ADAMS — I am studying at the university in Bendigo at the moment. I am doing a bachelor of education course. I have a few ideas that I thought might be helpful to keep people here. Originally I decided to go away to study because to become a teacher you need to travel away. I have brought some ideas that possibly could work. The main reason people leave is because of employment. More people are leaving because there is not enough work in Donald. I think apprenticeships and certificates of training are a good way; my brother is doing an apprenticeship at the moment, and it has kept him in the town. It provides a service for the town as well.

One thing is that not many people know what jobs you can do apprenticeships within. The *VTAC Guide*, which is available through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, has information about universities and TAFEs that have particular courses and where they are. If you could provide something like that for apprenticeships and certificates of training as well, people could become more aware of where they could do apprenticeships. Rather than having to go away to study, they could actually stay in their rural town, train to become qualified in an area and not have to move away.

A lot of people would do an apprenticeship if they had a chance and they knew where to do it, in what areas. Maybe workplaces could be encouraged, maybe through funding, to take on apprentices. I know that apprentices do get bonuses throughout their training for tools. If they are diesel mechanics they get a tool wage. Maybe if those sorts of wages were given to businesses as well they might be more encouraged to take on apprentices and certificate students, to people who want to undertake these ways of training. Also, I know that the apprentice wage is not very high, especially if someone is leaving school at 17 and has to move out of home. There are bills to pay and loans for cars that have to be repaid. They might need the a car to get to work. The wage is not very high, so an idea would be to increase it. A wage of \$6.20 an hour is not very much for a 17-year-old to do their first year as a diesel mechanic, even if they are living at home. To encourage them to get into many jobs you might need just a little bit more.

You talked about a guide to how to get into these jobs. You could probably promote this among career guidance counsellors. They emphasise going to university; possibly they could emphasise TAFE, apprenticeships and certificates of training. As I said before, with education a lot of people go away to study. I think the reason a lot of them go away is because they have to. Studying by correspondence would be a really good way to be able to complete a course while staying in your home town. At La Trobe a lot of programs are already set up within the computer system to allow me to look at notes. With assignments we have to do, we are able to chat to the lecturers through a program where you and other students can put up your ideas. Something like that would allow students to stay at home, to work in their rural town and to study at the same time. I can post assignments away. The same could probably go for people who are studying by correspondence. They could have their work postmarked for the day so that assignments were still being handed in, and they would be able to get the lecture notes.

Maybe there could be something to encourage a move in tertiary education from not just attending classes but to learning through correspondence. There is the Internet, and it is accessible by a lot of people. The community house in Donald has it, and anyone can access it, which I think is a great way to learn. It would keep more people in the

town — being able to study but still remaining at home. Also, people cannot afford to move away, which I think would be another reason for them to take up a job. If they were educated here, they would be more inclined to stay here and then offer their services once they had completed study.

Another factor is lifestyle. People move away because they obviously have to study or look for work, but on returning they often look for the same things they can get in, for example, Bendigo. Can they attend footy clubs? Are there functions for them to go to? They are the things that people enjoy in life, and they look for them. As a pre-service teacher in Bendigo, I know that a lot of people have moved to Bendigo to study, and at the end of the year they are not looking to move away. They will be looking for jobs in Bendigo. Maybe they could be provided with a reason to leave, such as funding them to help relocate. Perhaps they could be given a bonus if they move to a rural town — something that encourages them to move away. A lot of people will not get a job in teaching because they are not willing to move away from Bendigo. Maybe towns could promote what they have going for them. I have seen the Swan Hill ads — what you can do in Swan Hill.

This could possibly be done. I am not sure how it would work, but if there are job applications, say, for the primary school, they could also put with the job application what the town has to offer them, so they might be more inclined to say, 'This town does have things that I am interested in. There are clubs that I can join' — things like that. We need something to offer them so they can see that it is a good place. I know from living in Donald that rural towns can be a lot of fun, but a lot of people do not have this knowledge. They expect it to be sort of dull and boring with not many things to do, but in fact it can be quite the opposite. So I think it could be something to promote the town that way, and probably through advertisements as well. I thought that maybe it could be done through promoting the town and jobs together.

Another idea was the Birchip Bachelors and Spinsters Ball. Having events that could possibly promote young people getting together might give them the incentive to come back to small towns and stay in the area. There could be things like that that they would be encouraged to attend. They are most of my ideas that I have gone through.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Lauren; that is great.

Mr McEWEN — I would like to take a little bit of a different approach and just explain my story. I was the classic student who really did not fit into the education system too well. When I left school at year 9 I did a farming apprenticeship on a classic family farm model, so it was a four-year farming apprenticeship here at Charlton, which was fantastic. When I completed that, I was obviously quite eager to explore the big, bad world, so I took off and travelled around Australia for a bit.

What was interesting about that experience was that while I was drawn to the family farm and the family farm model, it was always a challenge. My father was trying to run the farm. It was growing in size, and there were all the issues and the logistical challenges of being on the farm. In the period when I came back and gave him a bit of a hand for a bit longer, I met and fell in love with my wife. Unfortunately at the time the farm was not in a position to be able to support us, so we decided that in the best interests of all parties we would move to Melbourne. My wife was able to transfer her work there, and I was able to pick up a job in Melbourne driving trucks.

At this stage I was around 23, and I was reintroduced to education. I discovered an incredible love for the area of sales and marketing and pursued a diploma in the marketing world — and my whole world opened up. It was not so much that the education system failed me here, but I was a typical guy who was not quite ready for an education. With the diploma that I studied I also followed a sales career path, which took me through a terrific network of corporate industries and businesses, and I focused on the world of IT. Although I had had a very limited formal education, I worked my way through the maze into a high-end corporate sales role. Again that was fantastic.

We had a little family, the classic family. Bringing the family up in a Melbourne suburban environment was a challenge, because my corporate career was taking me to Sydney, and the lifestyle was seeing my time as being split from the family. It also became very evident that the lifestyle in Melbourne — and you have probably all experienced it and probably see it every day — was just a constant rat race that is about chasing each other's tails. The cost of living and everything else continues to grow further.

My wife is actually from Warracknabeal, a township not far from here, and we always had the intention of relocating back to a rural environment. But it is the classic story: when you have children you settle into a routine very quickly, and before you know it 10 years goes past. About 12 years in, to tell you where we were up to, we decided that for the sake of the family we would look at returning home. Although our kids were born in the city,

they really loved the country lifestyle, and we always loved coming back home. Again it was the classic family farm model. My father was getting on and really struggling to maintain the basic issues in managing the farm. Life has a funny way of coming around sometimes, so the decision to look at returning home was put back on the table. The issue of returning home was fraught with a lot of issues and discussions on how that was going to work. One was that the lifestyle we were living in Melbourne was at the other end of the spectrum when compared to living in a rural environment.

Another one of the issues was that in the 12 years we had been away we had lost some of our contacts within the Donald community, although we did know that there was a solid foundation here and that the infrastructure was quite good. We toyed with the idea of going to other places throughout Australia to relocate, but we always came back to Donald, because the infrastructure from an education point of view and the basic elements of a good country community were here. So we decided that we would come back here. We were quite amazed, when we actually made the move, to be embraced by the community. They really got behind us and encouraged us to be here and to get involved. It was as if they had never seen a young person come back.

That was all nice. The kids fitted into the school system very quickly. Our kids are the classic sporting kids — they love sport — and Donald is geared to that environment. My wife fitted back into the school system very nicely and all of those things were good. I had to fit back into working under the family farm model.

One of the big things I have learnt — and this is my third year at home — is that my story is not unique. There are a lot of people like me who have left the country to seek employment but have found it very hard to come back into a family farm model. I would encourage you, if this is a genuine opportunity, to really look at ways of keeping young people here and to look at young people in general. We need to look at ways of helping family succession plans to work. There is a lot of lip-service paid to that idea, but I have worked in some pretty amazing environments, and the biggest challenge I have had is coming back to work within a family succession plan. There are a lot of people whose cases are similar to mine. There are the arguments and the frustrations of working with the older generation and coming back in with new ideas and all those things that make the world go around — and that has some real big hairs all over it!

With respect to the groups we have in Donald from a farming point of view, obviously the VFF is a very vocal and political earpiece. Support from that sort of group is obviously fundamental. Lauren touched on the significance of apprenticeships and the idea of really promoting what we are on about as a country town and the services we can provide. The biggest thing we have in the country is the freedom of being able to go out and enjoy the fresh air. One of the things we found in Melbourne was that — I am not sure if you like the term ‘police state’ — every time you turned around there was always someone trying to tell you what you could not do. In the country, it is the other side of that. That is my position on that.

Mr MITCHELL — What sort of visibility do young people have in the community? Is there general respect for young people in the community around here?

Mr McEWEN — From my position I would say yes, certainly. The whole culture, particularly in a central town like Donald, is geared towards young people and the sporting side of it. The issue we have with young people who do not quite fit into the sporting side of things is that there is a void there that we have to be very careful about. The school system certainly drums in a very strong and healthy respect element, but it is interesting.

Ms ADAMS — I would have to agree with you.

Mr MITCHELL — Are young people encouraged to take up leadership roles in the community, not just in sport but in other things?

Ms ADAMS — There is the youth group which organises FReeZA events, not just in Donald but in surrounding towns such as Birchip, Wycheproof and Charlton. They are all encouraged to get involved. They organise functions and activities that young people can do. These occur at Christmas time, when McDonald’s has the \$10 000 promotion. They get involved in activities like that. The Donald 2000 has a Guy Fawkes night, and the youth group gets involved in it. There is also the Donald performing arts, which young people are encouraged to get involved in as well. There are the brownies, the girl guides and the scouts, so there are things other than sporting events that young people are encouraged to get involved in.

Mr McEWEN — Just to add to what Lauren said, certainly the other thing in this town, and in a lot of other towns, is that the church has put a huge emphasis on trying to provide environments for young people so they can feel part of something positive.

The CHAIR — Do you think all young people see these activities and the way the community is trying to involve them and make them feel valued? Or do you feel they may be missing the mark with some?

Ms ADAMS — I think you will always miss a few people. There are some who will just want to leave the town: there will always be some people who cannot wait to get out of here. But I think the majority see these efforts and get involved. There are a lot of people who get involved in the youth groups, in sporting activities and in the girl guides. They see them as opportunities to do things for the community. People will be left out, and that is just nature. Some people do not want to get involved in these types of things. What they want is somewhere else like Melbourne, Ballarat or Bendigo — bigger places — to access what they are looking for.

Mr McEWEN — Just to add to that, you have to be careful with the age groups we are talking about. We are talking about young teenagers, and there is terrific infrastructure to support a lot of that; but when you go on from that 15-to-18-year-old age group, you start getting into some challenges with young adult and their attitudes and all the things that go with that. I guess we are no different from a lot of towns, in that alcohol and binge drinking are big issues that we have to be careful with. We certainly desperately require ideas and infrastructure to support the message that that is not a healthy proposition. We are a typical town, in that alcohol and all those things are part of our culture, but that has to be managed and looked after. Do you see that in other towns you have been to?

Mr MITCHELL — It is your Friday night at the pub type of thing.

Mr McEWEN — Yes, that is interesting one. The football scene is a classic two-sides-of-the-sword approach. On one side it is fantastic and captures young people's enthusiasm for sport — there is nothing like a team sport — but on the other side there is the culture of drinking and the culture of mucking around. There is nothing new in that. It has been around for donkey's years, but it seems to be becoming more relevant. I guess I might be getting to that stage in my life where I am starting — —

Mr MITCHELL — Starting to join the old club.

Mr McEWEN — Yes!

Mr WALSH — Can we go back to the succession planning issue? You said there needs to be more help. Have you got any ideas about what sort of help it needs? The challenge has always been that until some people start to do it, they do not want to talk about it. How can government try to help?

Mr McEWEN — I am not sure. I am living the scene right at the moment, and right at the moment I would like to be able to access experienced people without it costing an arm and a leg. There are a thousand options. I can go to a legal firm, and it will give me all that legal advice, and I can go to an accountant, and they will charge me a fortune for their advice. There has to be someone in between that who says, 'Hey, this is what we specialise in'. If you want to, you could wrap it into the role of a rural counsellor per se, who could be there and be part of a, to use the term, mentorship and say, 'I understand. We have been through this. There are thousands of stories like that. Let us step in and help you go through the maze of options'.

The classic thing about a family farm succession plan — and it is interesting — is that there are dynamics that are common right across the board, but the individual personalities and the individual needs and wants of those personalities make it a unique challenge. What works for me is going to work very differently for someone else. Using Lauren's family as an example, Lauren's brother talked about doing a farm apprenticeship. That is a solid foundation, but they also have the family farm model, as well, that fits into that. One day perhaps he may want to move into that as a skilled person. Their family has to think, 'How do we plan for that now? How do we work towards that?'. Likewise in my own case, the support that we need is — —

I will back this up a little bit. With the classic family farm — and again, I think I am right in saying this — their whole world, their super and their whole future finances are tied to the land. It is not as if you are planning in a corporate world that has a super fund for the individual. You are talking about the critical pressures and the financial elements which are tied to that land.

Mr MITCHELL — It is capital based, not cash.

Mr McEWEN — Yes. So you are talking about the older generation saying, ‘All right, you go and play with my super fund’. That changes all sorts of financial things. In terms of how you can help, I do not know. I would like some answers tomorrow; that would be great.

Mr WALSH — We have come to you for the answers.

The CHAIR — Should the mode of delivery be through the VFF or something along those lines?

Mr McEWEN — Certainly the VFF is a very powerful organisation, and the ear of government that it has means there is a great network there.

Mr INGRAM — It is more of a rural counsellor, isn't it?

Mr WALSH — There have been succession workshops and so on, but until someone is actively in it, like you have been, most people do not think about it. You seem to be more interested in one-on-one counselling, mediation and guidance.

Mr McEWEN — Yes, absolutely.

Ms ADAMS — And even discussing the other options you can take. I know some farmers are finding it hard to survive, so it could be about looking at other options so they can keep running. My brother is doing an apprenticeship as a diesel mechanic only because that is a secure job for him. He might want to take over our family farm afterwards, and our farm has been set up for him, but he can continue and it will provide him with enough money to survive. It can be about providing options and ideas on how they can continue. A lot of farms are now becoming bigger, so smaller farms are not able to survive. Maybe it could be about helping them to provide different opportunities to keep the farm going. We have gone into an intensive piggery at our place to help us survive. As Jim said, you can then come back to something that is worth coming back to. Maybe it could be about looking at it from that point of view as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submissions and for sharing your thoughts and ideas and stories with us today. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, and you may correct errors but not change matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.