

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Bairnsdale — 23 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

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Witness

Mr Steve Baxter, Youth Worker representing Mallacoota District Health & Support Services and Chairperson of the East Gippsland Youth Workers Network (affirmed).

Mr Phillip Counsel, Community Development Officer representing Mallacoota District Health & Support Services and East Gippsland TAFE Coordinator for Mallacoota and the East Gippsland Shire Council Coordinator for Mallacoota (affirmed)

The CHAIR — Welcome. Steve and Phillip. I have to read through this statement because you were not here before. 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. 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 country Victoria. Welcome, Sally and John and everybody who has come along today. Could you please state your full name and address and, if you are representing an organization,

Mr BAXTER — My name is Steven Thomas Baxter, I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Mallacoota.

Mr COUNSEL — My name is Philip Charles Counsel

Mr BAXTER — We are both here representing Mallacoota District Health and Support Services

Mr COUNSEL — I actually have a bit of a dual role. I also am the East Gippsland TAFE coordinator for Mallacoota and the East Gippsland Shire Council coordinator for Mallacoota, as well as Community Development Worker for Mallacoota District Health Support Services.

Mr BAXTER — I am also chairperson of the East Gippsland Youth Workers Network.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along today. If you could please give us your statements for about 10 minutes altogether and then we will have some time for questions following that.

Mr BAXTER — Thank you. I just want to start with a written statement that I have prepared. I have worked in the youth and recreation and tourism field for the last 26 years on and off and I worked at local state, national and international levels and with both government and non government agencies. I would just like to make a broad context statement to start with just out of my observations over those years as a youth worker and sticking within that field.

As a professional in the youth field over the last 26 years, it is my observation and assertion that young people of this generation are living in and going through a transition, a paradigm shift. The new paradigm I believe has been brought about by the technological age and has affected the values, expectations, social condition and behaviour, communications and marketing interface and the political and economic intrusions and requirements on society from the macro to the micro. Whilst this paradigm shift affects everyone, it is those people under the age of 30 that have experienced this shift, without the temperance of former value systems, which is pre 1980 and with few comparisons to the former more manual ways of life.

Young people's expectation of time, access to information and technology to make life easier and more convenient, of entertainment and recreation, of communication and accessibility of food and it's convenience, of relationships and families and their own futures are all significantly different now. They have not lived without PCs, mobile phones, videos and DVDs, microwave ovens and the enormous range of convenience foods which contribute to the lifestyles of the vast majority of these young people in very significant ways. If electricity finished tomorrow, I doubt that many would have the life skills to be able to survive it. Rural young people are not immune from this paradigm shift, although living in a rural community and in a community environment does afford them exposure to a more conservative and value rich set of social expectations.

This paradigm shift has resulted in a generation of young people being exposed to an unprecedented amount of choice, an increased amount of rights, coupled with a dramatically reduced amount of responsibilities and consequences. A reduced amount of parental guidance, confused and shifting values, a lack of respect for property and other people and a world where at least, or a good proportion of their daily interactions happen in a virtual reality of cyberspace, whether that be mobiles, television or computers et cetera. Along side this there has been no fundamental shift or change on a comparative scale to the philosophies and methodologies underpinning the way we work with, educate and engage young people and so many of the values and life skills that were once fundamental in the upbringing of young people, are now not seen as relevant or applicable in the world that the young people are living in.

The absence of access to managed risk for this generation of young people, brought about largely by the imposition of public liability, and its associated costs, has resulted in an ever increasing amount of dangerous and destructive risk taking behaviour, being carried out unsupervised and at the expense of other people, communities and society as a whole. As young people are naturally risk takers, particularly males, not to be able to safely experience risky activities and find out their own limitations in a calculated way under the supervision of trained instructors, will result in the increased number of casualties, a reduction in the number of risk takers in business, and our future entrepreneurs depend on that, and society generally, and a poorer state of mental and physical health all around.

The greatest inequity for young people in rural settings is their isolation. It is the highest priority for young people who I have contact with, to be able to meet other young people from other places and going to the city is a sure way of dealing with this issue. We need to find a way to value and reward these young people from rural towns in a way that will compel them to want to return after they have gained what they need to, and become what they want to, and contribute to the sustainability of rural living in rural communities.

Without incentives, without purpose, without recognition or acclaim, without employment and equal educational opportunities and without addressing some of the fundamental issues such as isolation, then we will continue to see our young people go off to the cities. Without significant investment and attitudinal change from the government and the communities themselves, then we not only disadvantage the young people, but we also disadvantage the rural sector and society as a whole as they will have so much less to contribute.

The CHAIR — Thanks Steve.

Mr COUNSEL — I haven't prepared a statement. The guidelines for this were only dropped on my desk on Friday when I had almost completed this process. I base my submission on consultations with various young people and organizations who work with young people in Mallacoota. Those include the manager of WorkWays Mallacoota, the manager of Mallacoota District Health and Support Service, the President of Mallacoota and District Business and Tourism Association, Mallacoota's Youth Worker, Steve, the Vice Principal of Mallacoota, P-12 and various people within the town including young people.

As the Community Development worker coordinating the MDHSS Youth Participation Access Program Coota Connections, which is a life skills and mentoring program involving the up-skilling and mentoring of young people moving away from Mallacoota to independent city living, gives me invaluable personal insight into some of the issues facing young people living in Mallacoota. Also my dual role as the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE Coordinator and East Gippsland Shire Council coordinator for Mallacoota provides additional insight into these issues.

Young people leave rural towns and communities due to a lack of opportunities. The lack of opportunities are varied but all impact on a young person's desire to leave the familiar surroundings of their small towns. These opportunities are related to the lack of access to employment, transport, training and education, members of the opposite sex, sporting facilities and recreation. There is also a general desire to be part of something different. Call it the lure of the bright lights, a fulfilment of one's dreams, a feeling that they are missing out on something of a part of risk taking behaviour that is associated with teenage years. This desire is a natural progression of growing and learning based on a sense of hope and a need and expectation that great opportunities will come their way.

Rural towns and communities more often than not do not offer a sense of hope or provide great expectations and opportunities for young people. This is particularly relevant when small towns are put into the broader perspective of the wider competitive world that is the 21st century, where the marketplace dominates our world. Young people simply do not want to miss out.

Only policy changes can have lasting and profound effects on the exodus of young people from rural towns and communities. The extent of these policy changes are dependent on how much value governments place on rural towns and communities and on young people's place in them. I have sort of broken this up into various sections, employment, training, education, community building, capacity building, community strengthening, sporting and recreation and life skills and mentoring. I could go on but I think you have got a copy of my submission there, but that was basically the opening.

The CHAIR — Yes, we have got a copy of that, thank you. Could you tell us some of the things as a community youth worker in Mallacoota district that you are actually doing at the moment, that you think will

actually make a difference to young people feeling valued and worthwhile and wanting to come back into the district.

Mr BAXTER — Part of what this statement is talking about is that 20 years ago it was much easier to engage young people. There was nowhere near the amount of choice that young people have now to entertain themselves. If you go and ask a random sample of kids that live halfway between a regional centre and a remote rural town, quite a lot of them will say they have got plenty to do. They have got homework, they have got chores, they have got a social life, they have got their computer, their DVDs, their CD's, their girlfriend boyfriend, their time is pretty well taxed and choosing to have time out with that does not mean they, also have their sports and their social activities, should have access to that. Their time is pretty taxed and generally speaking the young people living in Mallacoota in particular, they have an expectation that they are leaving town by the time they finish school, whenever that may be, whether it is year 10, 11, 12 they are supported and encouraged to finish year 12.

Some kids just do not fit into school, and particularly males. The education system is based around girls way of learning, technical schools do not happen any more, and boys learn with their hands. So engaging males to stay until the end of year 12, unless they are academically minded and doing that well, they can be a bit of trouble. Finding things to engage them is very difficult. They do not see any reward coming into them. The world is set up, or their world around them, the one that's promoted to them is that you get reward for effort and so, there is a vast decrease in the recruitment and the utilisation of volunteers because you cannot get kids to volunteer. What is in it for me is their first question. If your answer, is you will have a great experience, or you will be able to play with the knobs and buttons or whatever that is, it is not necessarily seen to them as being, or does not equate to a valuable experience that they may be able to grow some job out of, or further experience and so forth. It is you are asking me for my time, I want something in return or I will reserve the right to get up and leave when something more interesting presents itself, even if that is halfway through the job.

While 20 years ago I used to work in recruiting, training and utilizing volunteers through the YMCA, the scout movement and those sorts of institutions, which predominantly exist in the city, but the same sorts of methodologies could be transposed to the country except you just cannot get the kids interested in doing that sort of stuff. Most of youth funding is based on youth participation in the decision making process to design the project in the first place getting the kids to come together to have a meeting first of all, is just not interesting. But if you do manage to get them to have a meeting to talk about a project that they may be interested in, or gather the ideas about what would you like to do, the overwhelming answer in asking the question what do you want to do, is I don't know.

Secondly, if you engage in a conversation about what the possibilities might be, they tend to be things that they see in the media as things that would excite them and they are usually big, pretty extraordinarily difficult to organize, and cost an enormous amount of money and would take an enormous number of people to put on. The young people do not have the skills to do that themselves so basically you are going to be turning around to the community and saying right everyone the kids want to do this, let us all get together and put it on for them. Unfortunately, those skills are not being built up from a young age and so their expectations are: feed it to me. Tell me when it is ready, if I am not busy I will turn up, I will eat some and I will let you know how it goes. I am not trying to sound cynical here, it is just very much that there has been a shift.

I got started when I was 14 as a volunteer at the local YMCA and I had an absolute ball and I met lots of people and did constructive purposeful things. I went places, met people, became important and became responsible for things and it just does not happen any more. It might happen in pockets and to a much lesser degree but when you are talking about the overall young people being engaged, it is really, really difficult. That is why I refer in this opening statement to the fact that we as a profession, youth work field, we have never really stood back and had a look at the fact that young people, we are still using the same methodology and wondering why are they are not coming. Why are they not turning up and why can they not see the value in this. The young people are busily observing, interacting, constructing, becoming really good at interfacing with technology in many ways.

Moving on to careers, and making choices about careers. At 16 when you are at school people start talking about jobs you want to do and so forth. Even if you are living surrounded by an enormous number of experiences in the city, it is a difficult thing to come up with at 16, what life experience have you got to make choices about what career do I want. What interests me, well girls interest me, computers interest me, TV all sorts of glamorous and exciting things that I engage in my social life and out of school life. What I engage with at school is what I have to do. Mum and Dad want me to do that, the teachers say I have to do that. They are not choosing to go to school and

be engaged, in the majority of cases. It is a thing that they have to do and to get my freedom I have to get to year 12 because everyone says I won't have a chance unless I have got my VCE and so on. But at the same time then at the age of 16 I have to choose a career path. What are you going to do when I get to university? I do not know, what university is really?

It is totally different, alien type of education system to the one they have been engaged in so far which is in some way imposed on them, then they have to choose at university. They have got to discipline themselves to turn up for classes and pass them at a certain level and it all hits them at once. When you leave a country town, which is more or less, as it was said before, a right of passage that kids work towards, my freedom, my independence, my own ability to make decisions, even though I really do not know what the consequences of making a bad one are yet. That is a transition moving from rural to city living. It is a transition that most adults would have a great deal of challenge doing for the first time, let alone young people who don't have the life experience, and have no knowledge of the sorts of traps and dangers that lay waiting for them.

There is no preparation in secondary school for them to deal with that and so while there is a majority proportion that do make it, the one's that have support and can afford to fall down once or twice and still get up and push through and make it, there is a significant proportion of young people and there are no statistics to back this up, but I would hedge my bet at around about 30% that just do not make it for one reason or another. If they do not make it while all their peers make it, and the expectations of their peers, their parents, their relatives, all the people that they left in the country town, is that they should make it, then they can come back, even though it is not their fault. It is just that the odds were stacked against them.

They will come back with their self esteem shattered. They will not want to engage with anybody because of that shame, that embarrassment, the guilt that may be associated with it. While there are many barriers to accessing benefits, career advice and all sorts of things, they are not really interested in engaging anyway and there are quite a lot of young people that come back to the country. They manage to find a house to rent, or move in with someone, they lock the door for six months and they find a way of dealing with their own personal pain about that. You can go in there with all the consoling and benefits that you could possibly offer, and they will not want to know about it because it is just a wall of pain. I tried that once, I know what that is like, I am not going back there again.

We have developed a pilot program in Mallacoota around life skills and mentoring to try and skill up the kids before they leave school to make this transition to have some independent adult support and while kids have relatively strong relationships with their parents, there is no guarantee they have two strong parents, or one strong parent, or that they want to engage in that relationship. So we are looking at providing an independent adult as a mentor to help them get through that transition phase, and Phil has been brought on board to coordinate and run that program.

Mr INGRAM — Can I ask a quick question to Phil. First of all, I think in relation to your presentation, it needs to be put in context to where Mallacoota sits in the landscape, the distance from services and the size of that population and what it might be, because that gives the context around where you are coming from. My question is around your comments about the delivery of TAFE and the difficulty of delivering TAFE to particularly very small communities with very limited teachers, just the cost of doing that. But also the ideas like small town apprenticeships.

Mr COUNSEL — Can I just quickly respond to Ben's question prior to that. A couple of things we are doing to engage young people is that we have actually got young people on our life skills mentoring committee. There are key stake holders involved, and four of the key stake holders are young people actually helping us to inform and guide the process of running our life skills and mentoring programs. Some of the other things we are doing are actually running the life skills and mentoring programs for young people. We did a needs analysis of young people that have previously made that transition to independent living and that needs analysis was based on their experiences. We are constantly, as part of my TAFE work, asking young people what courses they would like to see run in Mallacoota. So we are trying to get the information from young people so we can service their needs. So that is just a couple of the ways we are doing things.

The TAFE system, first of all Mallacoota where are we? We are about 235, 240 kilometres east of Bairnsdale. There is no access to public transport. We are a town of approximately 1300 people and that fluctuates a little bit, they tell me up to nearly 10,000 at Christmas time, but basically the stable population is about 1300. As the TAFE coordinator now I have great difficulty running courses there because some of the obligations, the economic

obligations if you like, the financial obligations of TAFE, put many courses beyond the reach of local students. By the time you add travel costs, accommodation costs for tutors and trainers, a lot of the courses are not possible to run, simply because the cost becomes too high and the numbers of people interested in doing that course in the first place in a small town, are not great enough. It is problematic running courses in Mallacoota.

One of the things we did last year we actually sourced some money under the CRISP program, Community Regional Industry Skills Program, and we actually ran a Certificate 4 in assessment and workplace training in Mallacoota through that CRISP funding. The idea was, or rather what we did was, we actually surveyed the local community and asked them what their skill shortages were. So we went to businesses, training organizations, anybody that dealt with the population at large and asked them what they believe their skill shortages were in Mallacoota.

We accessed previous numbers from courses that have been run in Mallacoota. We accessed our course inquiries folder and we prioritised a list of areas where we deemed there were skill shortages in Mallacoota. Then we advertised for the local community members who had skills and experience qualifications in those areas, to apply to do the Certificate 4 in assessment and workplace training. So basically we matched the shortages with the personnel, ran the course for 12 applicants and we are hoping to use those people as local trainers. So that will reduce the cost to the local community of running those courses. So hopefully we can start running a few more courses which better suit the needs of our local community. That is one of the plans that we have actually put in place.

We are just about to run the certificate 2 in horticulture using one of those graduates from the certificate for assessment of workplace training. So hopefully that will be starting in the second half of this year. We have also had some inquiries about running a children's services course. Now these courses basically have never run before in Mallacoota. We are starting to make very small inroads into addressing some of the issues, but of course they are not specifically aimed at young people. I think in my submission I actually made some comments about apprentices and I spoke to the manager of WorkWays and she basically said we need more support for local businesses, employers that want to take on apprentices, so we can retain people to do their apprenticeship in Mallacoota.

With regard to student contact hours, I would see there should be better funding for profile, what we call profile. Funded hours to run courses in more remote communities so that courses become and education and training become more accessible. That would also apply to flexibly delivered courses, the old correspondence courses. More innovation in those areas, more resources to organizations like East Gippsland Institute of TAFE to develop more flexible courses, particularly in places in Mallacoota. 235 kilometres is a long way to drive to a class.

Mr INGRAM — There is not much in between. How many businesses in Mallacoota do you think you have got the capacity financially to employ a year round apprentice?

Mr COUNSEL — At a guess it might be a dozen.

Mr INGRAM — If you have got to share, how far away would the next employer who could share that apprentice be?

Mr BAXTER — A long way depending on how you look at it. It depends on what the apprentice is doing.

Mr INGRAM — Orbost would be the closest and probably Bairnsdale.

Mr COUNSEL — That would be right. There's quite a decent service industry in Mallacoota, that services the summer seasonal population, so you have got people who look after properties. They might do general maintenance, garden maintenance, general property maintenance, there is a boating businesses, there is a welding businesses, garage, the B & Bs, the pub, restaurants, the golf course.

Mr INGRAM — It would be one apprentice each at the most.

Mr COUNSEL — Yes.

The CHAIR — Steve and Phil thank you very much for coming along, 240 kilometres, your evidence has been taken and in about two weeks time you will receive a copy of the transcript and you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Mr COUNSEL — Can I make one final comment. As a community development worker I see a lot of merit for small communities like Mallacoota in having a community strengthening type approach. If we had a community strengthening project or worker that was funded for Mallacoota, that person would be able to facilitate a process identifying the needs of the local community and servicing those needs through accessing funding opportunities. When you are working, like Steve and I are, working for small organizations, our workloads are quite heavy, we don't have the opportunity and the time to be able to source funding opportunities. If we had an independent worker that is looking after the needs of the community and able to source the funding, if you are looking at sustainable opportunities, then they benefit the whole community and not only young people. More of those types of projects I think are absolutely essential for places like Mallacoota, rather than the government just throwing money bucket after bucket of money at the community, do the one off, fund that community development worker in a community strengthening project and see what can be made out of it.

Mr BAXTER — Just to add to that, there are 51 community committees in Mallacoota, they do not all talk to each other and quite often they just fight each other for funding and do not have anyone employed to be able to seek out funding and if there was someone in place, as Phil's suggesting, a community development worker, who could source funding and help to coordinate and assist those groups to attain their own funding, to address their own needs within the community, it would not only strengthen the community to have more control over it, but also streamline some of the efforts that are going in to the community.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much

Witnesses withdrew.