

# 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

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officers: Dr P. Chen, Ms C. Tischler

#### Witnesses

Mr S D McLoughlin, Student Union President, Monash University Gippsland Student Union (affirmed), and

Ms A D Kilby, Student Advocate and Support Coordinator, Monash University Gippsland Student Union (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — I welcome Sean and Aspen to the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence under oath or affirmation. I wish to advise that all evidence and submissions taken by this committee is taken under powers conferred on it by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act granted immunity from judicial review, but anything said outside the hearings of the committee is not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent member which is inquiring today into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Please state your full name and address and the name of the organization you are representing.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — My full name is Sean Daniel Mcloughlin. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Churchill, the organization I am representing is the Monash University Gippsland Student Union, based at the Gippsland campus.

**Ms KILBY** — My name is Aspen Danielle Kilby and I reside at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Traralgon and I also represent the Monash University Gippsland Student Union. My position there is as student advocate and support coordinator.

**The CHAIR** — Your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. If you could please provide us with your opening remarks for about 10 minutes or so and then committee members will have some questions for you following that.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — Thank you for the opportunity to come today and appear before the committee. Basically the student union at Monash Gippsland we have been around for 37 years and we primarily in the past represented the university students who are not necessarily but predominately are young people between the age group of 18 to 25. That has changed recently with the introduction of the Gippsland Education Precinct on the campus so we do represent now a more broader range of people including high school students, year 11 and 12 college students also apprentices from Gippsland Group Training and also TAFE students from Central Gippsland TAFE on the campus.

What we did with our submission rather than our organization putting forward it's views we decided to hold focus groups to discuss with the young people, because I myself I am 33 so I cannot really talk for young people any more. So 38 students took part and those 38 students consisted of university students on the campus, also Monash have a school of rural health at the old Moe Hospital. Also secondary school students and trade apprentices. An analysis of the raw data identified several themes.

Young people are leaving rural and regional areas in large numbers to pursue study and work opportunities not available to them locally in Latrobe Valley or Gippsland. Limited professional job opportunities are available in rural communities. People in rural communities were reportedly less tolerant of difference and ostracised those perceived to be different. Limited and costly public transport services are a major frustration to young people and a series of negative flow-on effects result from this lack of public transport. Also private transport is also of concern given the inflated cost of petrol and the attitudes of local police to young drivers.

In going through the focus groups with the young people they gave us some recommendations to address some of these concerns which we do have 13 of them. One of the recommendations was that the public transport service be extended within rural areas to enable young people to travel to and from work and also to promote the social activities necessary to retaining young people within the rural area. The Latrobe Valley consists of any large rural centres, Morwell, Traralgon, Moe et cetera but to get from one point to the other without a car is quite difficult especially if you are on a budget. University students also in the majority have been found to have between two to three part-time jobs while they are studying their degree.

Point 2 was consideration of a party bus, or a late night bus tailored to enhance young people's ability to engage in social activities at night time. We did have some feed back of some people going out and actually staying out on the streets until the next day until they could get a bus home or something like that.

Point 3 improvement of roads within rural areas to attract and retain more people in rural areas so at the start of each year we do try to stress to students be careful on the roads out there it is not like the city, there are a lot of other dangers, especially for young drivers and inexperienced drivers.

Point 4 support programs run within rural communities to enhance tolerance generally tolerance and sense of belonging for those from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, also that could extend to people from cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are excepted in small communities.

Point 5 funding allocated for the development and implementation of cultural activities and festivals within rural communities. One of the big festivals that has happened recently around the Latrobe Valley coincided with the Commonwealth Games and a live site that was quite popular and it went off very well with young people and the community at large.

Point 6 encourage the development of greater social, shopping and entertainment opportunities within rural communities.

Point 7 development of retraining options support to enable young people to stay in rural areas where there may not be sufficient positions they are trained for.

Point 8 recruitment of industry for more rural jobs in a range of occupations including professional positions.

Point 9 support programs to enhance young people's connections to the community. That could take the shape of volunteer work also helping out with different community engagement projects that have become quite popular and the way things seem to happen in our rural communities at the moment. A bunch of people get together to get something done and young people could tap into that force.

Point 10 development of programs to retain community link and friendships with young people who move to the metropolitan areas for their studies or work temporarily.

Point 11 increase police outreach youth work to engage young people with policy and negate negative stereotypes that there might be.

Point 12 examine levels of child care access within rural communities and to promote to young people to ensure those weighing this up as a factor in deciding where to live and aware of what is available.

Point 13 specific job creation programs to target employment for young people within rural areas.

To properly summarise some of the main points that were discussed that came out and this was pathways for young people that they can see a lifestyle in a rural community and see that they can be valuable parts of that community and that they can have gainful employment and also have a lifestyle so that they can remain. Part of that is public transport getting around. It is harder to live in a rural community because of that and pathways for professional jobs and also for trades. Aspen is there anything you would like to add?

**Ms KILBY** — I might expand a little bit on the research that was conducted amongst the group about why they were leaving rural areas and also the things that might attract them back. Now you have heard the recommendations, those are the strategies that we are proposing to combat these features but the things that we would really like to explore here is the depth of the problem currently is that we believe that it is very extensive and so that you can have an understanding of why young people are leaving.

Now of the students that we spoke to the majority had left or were going to leave rural areas, we found that quite concerning. Some of the groups that we talked to 100% of participants had left a rural area to engage in study opportunities. Of the high school students that we spoke to, probably 90% of those continued to leave the rural areas so that they could pursue study opportunities. Many of them did not see the value of studying in the local region even though there was a university just 20 metres across the road, so there are a variety of factors that are in play here.

One of course, is that young people want to explore and expand their horizons, we totally understand that. Of those young people who had already left the region and spent some time interstate or in Melbourne studying or pursuing work opportunities, many of them came back for a variety of reasons. That had to do with seeing regional areas as a good place to raise a family, that came across very strongly from the reports that we had. They saw rural areas as being very community minded and friendly areas, although the theme of intolerance did come out quite strongly, it was within this wider context of rural areas being very friendly and accepting. So for people who had a

demonstrable or an obvious difference, they found themselves targeted and discriminated against. But on the whole people were indicating that they felt quite accepted amongst these communities.

**Mr INGRAM** — Do you think that is because they are more identifiable in a regional area? I question whether it is intolerance or it is just that in a metropolitan area people do not know their neighbours. They are not necessarily identifiable and there might still be that intolerance or the reaction, but it is more obvious in the regional areas.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — Sure, I mean in a town like Churchill is only very small because of the university Churchill has an Islamic community. Islamic members of the community stand out and we were only talking about around the area where I live probably about five people, but they stand out. You have a campus of about 2,000 people and if those people are different sure they are going to stand out because it is a lot smaller. Unfortunately, to an individual that may be the decision that acts the decision to move to the city because they think I will just blend in, in the city, because I could go to a campus like Melbourne University where there is 45,000 people on the campus, I will be washed out.

**Ms KILBY** — I do agree that it is much easier for individuals to be singled out as they are different because it is a smaller rural community, but I also think that the level of discrimination is such that it can be called discrimination. The students reported things like being harassed verbally and in some instances being attacked physically and a variety of other measures which were intolerance and discrimination, rather than just a perception.

**The CHAIR** — Was that same sex attracted people mostly, or was it more so people from different cultural backgrounds?

**Ms KILBY** — It covered a range of different factors, certainly people who were gay, lesbian or transgendered reported feeling that way, also people from different ethnic backgrounds particularly reported that. People from different subcultures reported that, so people who perhaps identified as being a particular type of subculture, like people who were Goths or different type of people.

**The CHAIR** — Like punk people or that sort of thing?

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — Yes.

**Ms KILBY** — Public transport was definitely something else that came out very strongly in the focus group responses that we had. People were reporting a range of problems being the cost, the timeliness and timing of services, also the distance of bus stops, the availability. One student was in a town and they were saying they had to walk over 5 kilometres to get to the nearest bus stop, so they were not in a rural area, they were actually living in a town and they had to walk that far to access the nearest bus stop, which we found was quite surprising. But definitely the lack of services on the weekend were a major concern, particularly for those people who wanted to maintain a lifestyle in the regional area they found they could not get to work on time. There are no services before 9 o'clock, none at all. Those who wanted to come to the university or to other study venues, also could not get there before 9 o'clock.

The timing is really poor at the moment for V-Line service, which is the wider connectivity and also the local bus services and the two do not match up and they do not allow students to either get there before 9 o'clock or to leave shortly after 5 o'clock because the last service to Melbourne on a weekday is 5.20 something, which does not leave people time to get to the train station and then to return home to Melbourne.

**Mr INGRAM** — As an indication, one of the things that has come up fairly regularly through the committee hearings that we have had so far, is that those individuals who have some connection to a rural area, they may be metropolitan people who have studied at a country university or a regional university, or they come from a country area and study -- tend to be the ones that come back. We have had a fair number of young people coming back to country areas, raising families — in some of the hearings. Do you have an indication about what the percentage of people in the Monash Gippsland actually come from a metropolitan area or is it predominantly people from around the region that are going there?

**Ms KILBY** — I could give you a broad break down and that is that you probably have about 30% of local students, 20% international students, so the main students with travel, so we are talking about 40% to 45%.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — By local students we usually include people from Baw Baw Shire through to East Gippsland Shire.

**Mr INGRAM** — There has been some challenges at Monash Gippsland about the level of support from the hierarchy, if you like.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — For sure, sure.

**Mr INGRAM** — Considering the importance of getting people out to those regional universities for that experience to actually show that it is not a totally alien part of the world to come out here and we are attracting a lot of professionals who do that study. Do you have any comments on the level of support from metropolitan based organizations?

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — It is one of the amazing things that when a student and this includes international students, when they finish their time at Monash Gippsland it is usually in tears. They actually have a homesickness for campus. Now that might sound bizarre and a bit melodramatic, but they do, they express it in, I really miss the place, I miss Churchill and I miss the community. We do at Monash Gippsland have that problem of the university, I would like to use the term Clayton eccentric that decisions are made from Clayton where the main part of the university is. We have an engineering degree that got whittled down to a portion of it's former self. I do believe that Monash is starting to address these problems. There is a medical school that is coming to the campus, it has been a lot of hard work to get that to the campus. The truth is that for the campus to grow – because we have to look at the Gippsland campus and the scheme of other university campuses around Australia, that as the university sector has grown and more people have started to go to university in the past decade, numbers at the Gippsland campus have pretty much stayed static.

So one way of looking at it is, yes they have stayed static, another way of looking at it is it has actually gone backwards if the sector has moved forward and Gippsland has stayed static, then in effect it is actually going backwards. Part of that is courses that have been whittled down, or taken away from the campus. Psychology was taken away from the campus and it is coming back which is pleasing to hear. Bachelor of Sport and Outdoor Recreation, one of the biggest growth industries around, has been moved to the Peninsula campus. The perfect place to have a Bachelor of Sport and Outdoor Recreation in Gippsland. You are near East Gippsland, you are near mountains, you are near fantastic natural features, you are near areas to do watercraft, but the course has been moved.

Engineering as I mentioned before, Koori studies, there was a huge indigenous study unit at Gippsland and that has been whittled down to a shadow of it's former self. Basically to run a university campus effectively, there has to be course offerings there. There has to be offerings for people to have to come to Gippsland to get those courses and when they come here to Gippsland they see it is a great place – personally I cannot think of why I would go to another university campus, it has everything that – mind you I did grow up in Gippsland so I am biased but it has everything there, why would you go anywhere else? A lot of people when they come to our campus see that.

**Ms KILBY** — Perhaps another observation which might address some of the questions also. Metropolitan based students tend to come to the campus and while there they are supported quite well while they are at the campus, there are no incentives for them to stay in the longer term and they do tend to return on weekends and even during the week, so it is very temporary that they come to the rural areas and they return as soon as they can.

**Mr INGRAM** — One of the comments that has been raised is that there is a perception that you get a lesser education from a regional campus and it has also been put that some regional campuses you can actually get into the same course with a lesser entry score. You can comment on that if you like, but I would also like any ideas that you might have that we, as a community, can make recommendations to actually overturn that stigma – because that is not necessarily a healthy thing for those regional campuses in the longer term.

**Mr McLOUGHLIN** — It is actually quite incorrect. I think that the entry scores at Monash Gippsland might be one or two points lower than getting into Clayton.

**Ms KILBY** — Sorry to interrupt, but they are actually consistent across all of the campuses now, so you would have the same entry score in Arts at Clayton as you do in Gippsland.

**Mr McLOUGLIN** — Also the Gippsland campus does put out a high number of post graduate people that have come through the system and then go on to study and research. For a campus of it's size and you whittle that down by numbers and it is interesting to see the people that go on. It really is an unfair stigma and I would suggest that LaTrobe and Bendigo would be about the same. The University of Ballarat is a fantastic campus as well and if we go across Australia, the University of New England at Armidale is also a great campus. Maybe it is a bit of marketing on behalf of the city campuses.

**Mr INGRAM** — That is good, thank you very much.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for giving us your time and ideas. You will receive a copy of the transcript in two weeks' time or so. You may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

**Witnesses withdrew.**