

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Yarram — 24 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

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

Snr Constable D F Yodgee, Yarram Police (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome Damian and thank you for joining us today. 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, and 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 committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organization you represent today, position within that organization and take the oath or affirmation.

Snr Constable YODGEE — My name is Damian Francis Yodgee and I am senior constable of Police and I am currently stationed Yarram Police Station. I am also the President of the Yarram Youth Group, which will have some relevance to this inquiry. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Yarram.

The CHAIR — Thanks Damian if you can please provide us with the evidence for about 10 minutes and then we will have some questions for you following that.

Snr Constable YODGEE — Good morning Honourable Members and welcome to Yarram. You may wonder why a 40 year old father would be so interested in this topic. I have a stake in this as my children are growing, approaching the stage, that within a decade or so I will be making the decision of whether I leave Yarram and go back to Melbourne to provide further education and provide employment for my children.

I am in a position where due to my employment I can readily change, if I want to transfer back to Melbourne I can, but a lot of people in this are cannot. On hearing of the inquiry I spoke to several young people in Yarram to get their views on their future. I will not use their surnames, I will just use their first names. Scott who I have known for 10 years -- before I do that, did everyone get my CV?

The CHAIR — Yes, we have the information here.

Snr Constable YODGEE — I will just explain that I have been a Constable of Police here for about 10 years so I have had an opportunity to see several generations go through, find employment and so on. Scott who I have known for about 10 years is around 19 years old now, virtually told me unless you want to work in the Mill or a diary you had to get out of Yarram. Scott is currently trying very hard to get in the Australian Army at this moment, and I believe he is up to the last stages. Scott went through school here and he needs a job where he can get about and have some discipline, and this is his way of getting out of town and actually getting some meaningful employment.

Mr INGRAM — What is his qualification? What sort of school?

Snr Constable YODGEE — Scott went to the local school and I would not say that he was a top rating student, but he needed assistance going through school and he left at an early age. Gary is another young person who I have known since he was quite young, and he obtained a job as an apprentice builder and carpenter and he was later put off when the job was completed. Quite often if there is a large job coming along they put on extra employees, and as the jobs finish there is no work for them, so you get put off. Now he is interested in trying to complete his apprenticeship, but to go to trade school you have to go over the Valley, which means petrol, accommodation and he is finding it difficult doing that. Just making ends meet and being able to get over the Valley to complete his apprenticeship at school, while he is looking for further employment, can be quite a daunting task. He also pointed out in regard to his unemployment that to fulfil those requirements he has to state that he is going to trade school, but to get to trade school you have to buy petrol and you have to look after yourself.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a chicken and egg thing?

Snr Constable YODGEE — Yes. I also spoke to a father and his two sons, and I have known this father and both his sons since I arrived and he is very concerned. One of his sons is nearing the end of his school life and the other who went to school in Yarram had to leave the area. He is very concerned about the future for his son leaving school. The older son could not manage himself in Yarram, he could not find work as a result of that they become bored and they start getting into trouble and he eventually left for Melbourne to make a clean break. He is

now working driving a delivery vehicle, supporting himself. The father is very concerned about the lack of trade and technical subjects available in Yarram.

It would have been around about 15 to 20 years ago that I have seen a lot of the technical trades went out of the schools. I went to a technical school myself and I actually enjoyed the benefits of learning the different trades and having an opportunity to select one of those trades. With this I see a common trend in young people leaving the township of Yarram. Yarram in the past we have lost the milk factory, several timber mills, we have lost the local council, so we have lost a lot of employment there, I think it is around 100 jobs there. We lost Won Wron Prison, we had a reduction in staff in DSC. I will just explain that the Officiaries offices have gone and they have been relocated to larger regional areas. It seems to be a trend to centralise everything, let us bring everything under one roof, why pay for this, this and here. But unfortunately that reflects on the smaller towns.

Many staff have been moved to larger regional areas, for example, Telstra. We also lost Telstra and SEC were here as well. Large construction jobs, like the offshore oil rigs during the seventies, they employed a lot of people and that was a huge influx in the town. When all the construction stopped we lost all the jobs and lost the money. One thing that was pointed out when I was talking to the local pharmacist this morning, who is a member of the Traders Organization, or the Chamber of Commerce in town and he pointed out that something that I am going to point out later – there is only so much trade available in town.

Now to point to something like the banks, in most rural areas, you start to lose the banks and people detect a problem. In Yarram we have actually managed to keep most of our banks but the problem is the banks are downsizing their staff and they are actually not putting in managers, they are only putting in staff to work the counter and a loans manager or a manger comes down once a week. So hence we have lost a family, we have lost the kids that are going to school and we have lost all the available income. One of my neighbours his son recently completed an apprenticeship in town and he had to move to Albury to find work. Yarram is a small town in a large rural area. It is largely remote than larger regional areas. There is little public transport, there is about 650 households in the town with a little over 2,000 people. Around 2,000 people in the outlying areas and the town has only got so much money.

We have no rail here, no major highway like a trucking route, like the Princes Highway. We have no cheap energy or mining resources. The town relies on a milk cheque and forestry and government to a small scale. The young families like my own spend most of their income within the township which creates better employment. However, due to the housing situation many families who move on, are replaced by retirees from Melbourne who come down to retire, cheap housing, spend their superannuation. Elderly people although they spend probably a lot more in say medical, health, home help and those sorts of areas, they do not tend to spend as young families do.

Like most small towns everyone seems to know what you are doing, or what you intend to do before yourself. Craig you would know about this, living in Orbost, probably Ballarat to a smaller degree, but as a Police Officer I often remind young families that people know what they are doing around town and there seems to be less privacy here in regard to that and I remind them that that actually reflects on them later on. In Melbourne when I was a young fella I was one amongst say 4 million now, it was probably a bit less then. But here you are one amongst 2,000 and future employers know what the young are doing and they will vet them on their personal knowledge.

I will just go into some of the aspects that I think may be you need. Just a couple of points which may assist, they are probably points that you have heard before and they have been bandied around town for quite a time. To retain young people in the country you need to retain government infrastructure in the smaller rural areas. We also need to provide incentives to manufacturers to relocate to the bush and provide employment. The education system needs to provide for education and technical support within the township. If this cannot be provided then transport and technical skills within the township need to be provided. Just to expand on that one. Just the simple things like being able to get their machinery tickets, chainsaw tickets, safety tickets, these are all things if the kids can go and get it, then they can go to an employer and say, you do not have to put me through these courses, I have already got them. It makes it a lot easier.

Agricultural and forestry type colleges that is one thing that has been suggested around town for a long time. Provide training and incentives for young people to remain on the farm. I believe from when I was younger there was an agricultural college up somewhere between Melbourne and Ballarat that way, my father tried to put me in it when I was younger but I objected, something like that it would be good, it could employ teachers and an incentive for people to stay on the farm. In addition to this, the recreational opportunities and the comfort of the town needs

to be addressed and that is probably with my work I come into it, providing opportunities and recreational exploits for young people to do it actually makes a town more attractive to families to move down here. In Melbourne when I was growing up if I wanted to go for a swim in a heated pool say, I had a choice of three or four. I could just jump on my bike and ride to them. If I wanted to go bowling or wanted to go to the pictures or anything like that, I would just jump on a train or a bus – you cannot do that here although there are a lot of advantages in the country, there are also a lot of disadvantages.

Improving the lifestyle in a small town that would go a long way to attracting business and into the area. So thank you coming to Yarram and thank you for your interest in this important topic. I will take some questions.

Mr MITCHELL — Not from being around here, what are the sporting associations like? Football, netball, those sorts of things?

Snr Constable YODGEE — Football is a very big thing in town, a lot of kids play football. There are two main teams from Yarram and there is the obvious rivalry between the two. Football is a very important part and it has got a lot of discipline, keeps them fit and it keeps occupied. But not all the kids want to play football and there are a certain spectrum that do not wish to play. The girls have got netball as well, badminton is very popular they have quite a big following of badminton. My children play badminton, basketball as well, so the sporting side of things is very well covered as far as teams and the usual football, netball, badminton, tennis we have quite good tennis courts. Young people do a lot of shooting at school, they can get their junior licences in shotgun, so those things are covered.

Mr INGRAM — Other activities outside sporting is a bit limited though?

Snr Constable YODGEE — It is limited, you cannot get out of town, it is a bit insular unless you can do it in town or in the area, you are restricted by your location. I will give you an example. We took a group of young people to Melbourne as a bit of reward for their efforts with the FReeZA concerts – I actually run the FReeZA concerts in Yarram and they do a very good job and as a reward we took them to Melbourne and we went and visited a recording studio and afterwards we took them ten pin bowling, go-karting, and a few other things. Now just to do that, we had to put down \$1,000 bond for the bus, it cost us \$300 for the bus. It cost us for food and to keep them going during the day, that was another couple of hundred, so the whole process can become very expensive. As soon as they saw the ten-pin bowling and the go karts their eyes just opened up they had a great time.

Mr INGRAM — Do you believe young people who grow up in the area have the understanding or the confidence when they go to Melbourne? I know in other areas particularly some of the private schools where the year 9 students actually take them for lengthy camps in the Metropolitan area, so they actually understand how to get around independently on the bus system, how to actually to fit in if they do leave the area to go to university. Do you think that is a problem down here where young people may not necessarily have that confidence when they do leave school and go to university?

Snr Constable YODGEE — That is a very good point, they should be able to go to Melbourne and be able to blend in and be able to get around and the only way to do that is to take them there and to let them do it. I understand that there are a number of camps that do give help in Melbourne. They need to be able to get up there more and be able to see what is available to them. Myself, growing up in Melbourne, as soon as I go back I can just click back into Melbourne mode and I am right.

Mr INGRAM — Where did you grow up?

Snr Constable YODGEE — I grew up in Box Hill and that is one thing that probably country kids cannot do. It is a different lifestyle, it is a great place to bring up your children, but they might just lose their edge, that advantage that Melbourne kids have got when they go to university. It only lasts a little while, they will get used to it.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you think young kids are encouraged in a leadership role to come forward and develop positions and have that sort of leadership role?

Snr Constable YODGEE — In football we have developed leadership in sports. At schools they have the house captains and certain leadership things there. Through the FReeZA committee we put one of the young people in charge and then we have set it up in a way that they make the decisions on everything and virtually I make sure

that they do not do something that is going to get out of control or get themselves in trouble, I am sort of like a back stop for them. So there is but there is a scope to increase that, and we are aspiring to get some leadership roles is good.

Mr MITCHELL — Is there a proper mentor program that works with the businesses in town?

Snr Constable YODGEE — We have discussed mentoring programs, but the trouble is that there is a lot of discussing about it, but it is hard to get off the ground.

The CHAIR — Damian, thank you very much for taking the time today and talking to the young people and gathering the evidence before you came, it is very much appreciated. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time, you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew