

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

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Witnesses

Ms D Robinson, Community Representative (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome Diane. 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.

Ms ROBINSON — Diane Robinson from Alberton and this submission is actually based on my own views and observations during the 20 years I have lived and worked in the small Gippsland Community of Alberton. It is also based on hearing from other members of that community in my role as a member of this community, an outside person entering this community – I came from England in 1985, an Australian family, a family farm, a wife, a mother, a daughter in law and member of many community groups including Women on Farms, Awia, Parents groups, Adult Learning, Farmer Support Group and also my position as a Counsellor and Educator working with farming families and rural people.

The factors that I believe influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they live. The biggest influence on a young person occurs during their growing and the people who have the greatest influence on children are their parents and close family members. In many instances within rural or farming families this is even greater than their city based cousins, they live in more isolated surroundings not having as much contact with others as a child brought up in a suburban situation.

The next biggest influence on children and teenagers are the kindergartens, primary and secondary schools they attend, the teachers within these schools and the bodies that run the education system. Again parents have a high degree of influence being able to choose the education systems they send their children to, but within many rural communities, there is a much reduced choice with often only one option of school. Children are then influenced by other factors in their lives, such as friends, mentors, clubs and groups they are a part of such as sports clubs, music groups et cetera. Also a factor of influence is television and the media, this I believe is a significant influence as it not only influences the children themselves, but more importantly their parents and the other major people in their lives are greatly influenced by what they see and hear in the media and on television.

How do these factors influence young people to stay or leave? Young people are highly influenced by what their parents tell them and the values and beliefs that are instilled into them as they are growing up. Coming to country Victoria 20 years ago I often heard and still hear the farming community proudly proclaiming how they encouraged their children to the city to get a better education and enhance their career prospects. These same farmers are also telling their children how difficult life is on the farm and in the country and how much more opportunity there is in the city. At their local education system there was also the attitude that the students who are academic and wish to go to university be given more support to achieve this than those who were only returning to the farm.

The education system was changed 15 or so years ago also, closing down the technical schools and promoting that students stay on until year 12 in order to gain the qualifications that will ensure they are able to go to tertiary education. Apprenticeships were discouraged and those students who are not academic are looked upon as somehow lesser than those who achieve high VCE scores. I feel there is a culture within Australia that qualifications other than those achieved through university are of lesser value and that the people who do not have a degree are of a lower value than those who gain a degree or higher. This is reinforced in the secondary education system where VCE is seen as the most important and other learning methods such as VCAL and VET are not encouraged and recognised as highly.

Our local newspapers show the students who are high achievers in this field and picture them so that their families and the wider community can be proud of them. This is bound to influence the youngsters that are growing up in our small communities they will want to aspire to become well known also. Young people also wish to please their parents and if they see and hear their parents congratulating those who have achieved from going to the city and at the same time bemoaning how difficult it is in the life they have chosen they are more likely to go to the city. Farmers and rural communities have always had to deal with difficult times and tough conditions, as have those

who have built the towns and cities of Australia, but in the past Australia owed much of its economy to the farming sector. This made farmers proud of what they were doing and the rest of the population looked to them with pride.

As I see it in the last 40-50 years with the boom in other areas especially technology others have become the famous especially with the rise of television, those who are seen on the television are the ones who young people wish to become. Rural people who are tradespeople and sole proprietors or small business owners are not given much exposure and young people see the big business and large organizations as the most valued, and therefore, those that they wish to join. This seems exciting to them and will give them the new experiences they wish for.

I believe it is important for young people to be able to take opportunities to expand their horizons and leaving home to travel and explore the world are good ways to do this. But I believe, it is also important for parents to encourage their children to come back to the communities they were brought up in and to bring their own children up in them. To being this we as parents must accept more responsibility and promote to our young people the good things about living in the country and be supportive of our children who wish to come back into our communities. We must be as proud of these children as we are of our children who achieve in other ways such as in the corporate field, but it is not enough to feel pride we must also tell them how proud we are of them and show that pride and respect for them. Australian culture, and English does not encourage families to give praise, as farmers we are quick to tell our young people what they have done wrong, but we do not praise them and thank them for what they have done right. It is much easier to say we are proud of those who live away from us to those around us, not so easy to say to the ones who live with and speak to every day.

Farmers also tend to put themselves down, through a lack of self-esteem and do not promote themselves their neighbours or their community, talking about the negative rather than the positive of where they live and work. There is also a culture within Australia, that in estate planning all children must be treated equally and within the farming community this is causing people to leave the farm and community as farm ownership is no longer automatically transferred from one generation to the next. The children who have left the farm and built their lives away, believe they are entitled to an equal share as those who stayed on and continued farming. This again has led to the current owners of the farming enterprise encouraging their children to leave as they know there is not enough to divide up and supply an income for their children. This along with the fact that people are living longer and needing more to keep them in their old age has meant that farmers are continuing to farm themselves until an older age and not addressing the issue of succession planning and bringing the younger generation into the farm.

Young people who may have the desire to come back on to the family farm, who have travelled or studied will be less likely to take up this option knowing that they must give equal shares to their siblings who have continued to live away from the farm, yet these things are often not discussed within the family as there is no help to work through these issues. Those that do return to the family farm to continue and make sacrifices of living in a small community where their family does not have the opportunity of their city cousins are too often rewarded by having to be the major care giver of their parents and then having to buy out their siblings in order to continue to run the farm. During the last 50 years Australians have come to believe that success is measured in only monetary terms, people aspire to be rich and have material assets.

Strategies to increase the amount of young people who will return to our rural communities. The first strategy I believe comes from us the parents of the young people, we must promote the good things about living and working in the country. Encourage the children who show interest in farming, rural business and trades. Congratulate those who take up these options and recognise what they are giving to us now and into the future. This also involves encouraging those young people to go out and do their exploring and adventuring while assuring them that we will help them when they wish to return and allow them into the family farm to build it up for themselves and the future of their family.

To be able to do this many of the present day farmers need help and training in this area, to be able to plan for the future that ensures the continuation of family business and support to enable them to take the steps to do this. Our schools can continue this by promoting trades and other avenues for young people, by bringing back the technical schools. The state government is beginning this and it needs to be increased. Schools could have awards for those who have achieved in trade areas as well as those who achieve academically.

Within the media especially in the city if we could promote the country and farmers and the good things they do. How Australian farming is among the best in the world and how farmers care about their stock, the environment

and the future of Australia. We need help to stand up to the likes of PETA who can do so much damage to the image of farming working on the ignorance of city people to the way farming is done.

In conclusion I believe the greatest influence on young people are their parents and the contacts they have while growing up such as schools and community. The factors that influence young people in deciding whether to return to rural communities in mid life also hinge around the family and community members to whom they are returning to. Strategies to increase the number returning involve building the esteem of the people who are already in the community making them proud of themselves and their communities so that they become the best promoters of their districts. Then to help them promote rural Australia as a place to be proud to live in that the people who are seen as the heroes in our society enjoy and live in. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Diane thank you very much. Diane you have brought up an issue which we also had come up in Donald and that was from a young person who had returned to the farm and he spoke about the issues around succession planning, dialogue within the family discussions about how it would happen and the problems he is facing now because that was not done. I would be interested to know about any programs that provide help and training for farmers to ensure that they are doing that and thinking about these issues. Have you got any ideas about how programs could be best delivered and by whom?

Ms ROBINSON — Speaking from personal experience I have actually set up a business to do this, so as a counsellor and facilitator for those family meetings in order that the families can discuss these issues, sit them around a table and so they can discuss them with respect to each other and it is very important to have an outside person, an independent outside person there to actually facilitate that.

The CHAIR — Do you do that when the people are young?

Ms ROBINSON — Often not because young people that come back on the farm do not actually understand that these issues are going to arise. It is often until they are in their fifties that they do and so I am often not rung up. I suppose it depends what you call young people, I still call young people those in their forties. So the sooner we can actually get into those family meetings and get those – it would be lovely to have those family meetings taking place as the young people are coming back on to the farm rather than wait until what happens at the moment is when, for instance, one of the parents dies or something like that, and these issues are actually discussed until then.

The CHAIR — Diane thank you very much for your submissions and you will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time and you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew