

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Warrnambool – 10 March 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Mr M. J. Harrison, General Manager, Hampden Football Netball League (sworn); and

Mr N. J. Facey, Executive Member (sworn); and

Mr I. F. Murrell, President (sworn), Western Border Football League.

The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise everybody present that at these hearings all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution 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.

Welcome, and thank you very much for giving us your time today. Could you give us your name, your address and whether you are attending in your private capacity or as part of the Western Border Football League, just for the purposes of the transcript.

Mr FACEY — Norman James Facey. I am from Millicent in South Australia. I have been part of the Western Border Football League since formation, and I am on the executive of the Western Border Football League as outgoing president.

Mr MURRELL — Ivan Frederick Murrell, 203 Henty Street, Casterton. I am current president of the Western Border Football League, this year for the first time.

Mr HARRISON — Michael John Harrison, newly appointed general manager of the Hampden Football Netball League. I have been involved in football around this area for nearly 25 years. I live just up the road at 71 Liebig Street, Warrnambool, where I run my business. I also like football. That is why I got back into it again this year at the Hampden Football Netball League executive level.

The CHAIR — Have you worked out how you are going to do this?

Mr MURRELL — We have prepared a sheet, which I believe everyone has a copy of. It is just an overview to give you an idea of our situation, with the Western Border Football League being formed in an amalgamation that took place 40 years ago. At present we have a 10-team competition. We are perhaps a little bit amateurish in our approach in that everyone in our organisation of the executive of seven is virtually a voluntary operator. We have a chief executive officer and secretary who is paid an honorarium which is not high, of \$8000. We do not have premises of our own. We operate most of our meetings in rooms in the township of Casterton, and that is where the delegates regularly meet. Basically delegates meet four times a year. The members of the executive are independent of clubs but naturally in earlier times we all had experience in football and business. That is basically our set-up.

We come here with a positive view. We realise, of course, there are problems in football. We know exactly what they are, and I believe that I have tabulated a few of those issues. If I could just go through them, and if you have any questions you might ask them afterwards. We know where the problems are, but we are maintaining a positive view. We believe that football is a necessary part of our life and an important part of country life, and we are going out there with a positive attitude that we will maintain our league as a strong entity within our community. We have neighbouring leagues around us. We have Mininera, which is in the plains country on the east side of Hamilton. We have the South-West, which is basically the area from Portland through to Cavendish. They are the two competitions here. We also meet in with the Kowree-Narracoorte Football League, which takes in Edenhope-Apsley across the border. Then we have the Mid-South-East. So in reality we have the senior or major league — whichever way you would like to place it — and we have our four neighbouring leagues around. Quite close we have the Hampden Football Netball League. We believe that we have a good relationship with all those organisations through the Western Region and the South-East Affiliated Leagues. We are in contact with those people. They are in probably much the same situation as we are. They run boards, with a president, and they are very much in a volunteer situation.

Our structure takes in the two teams from Hamilton — Hamilton and Hamilton Imperials — Casterton, Heywood and Portland, a four-man gang of teams of North, South, East and West, and Millicent. We are very supportive of the Victorian Country Football League. We also have affiliations with the South-East Affiliated Leagues, the South Australian National Football League. We do compete in Inter League in Victoria and also are involved in Inter League with our two neighbouring leagues in South Australia. We believe that our netball competition is very strong and we compete in competitions outside our own situation.

I will just quickly browse through the problems and make quick notes of the key points. Financially our clubs basically work from year to year. I do not believe that any of our clubs would have strong cash reserves, which is a problem I will address later. As I mentioned before, we do not have premises. We have cash reserves. We believe that we are financially stable. Our main source of income comes from finals — that is where we win or lose. This year, although it was a wet year, we were lucky with the weather and our gates were up, no. 1 because of the weather and no. 2 because of the competing teams. A loss of the rise and fall in our income revolves around our finals.

On problems, I think there should be an appreciation that we do not look at only football. I think it is necessary to look at the situation of our grounds in particular for the full 12 months of the year. We do use them for 6 months of the year but in all our instances we do have cricket using the grounds as well during the summer months. School athletics and Little Athletics also use those grounds. It is very, very important and we believe that grounds are probably our key issue.

Ground surfaces we can address as a total situation. On lighting for training — getting back to the ground situation again — our basic problems revolve around electricity costs, water costs and rates. These are the things that chew into the fundraising that we have. Our fundraising for clubs is restricted to a certain extent, down to gate takings. Some of the clubs have licensed clubs. In this day and age, with .05 and that type of thing, they are not as productive as they were in earlier times. I know that through experience as a hotelkeeper for 30 years. There is a change in drinking habits. So water, electricity and rate costs are our big worry.

I think we also have to look at the situation that in this day and age everyone is more conscious of the work of Worksafe and the conditions of the grounds. We believe that there is a void somewhere. We do not know who has the power to pay for it. I do not believe that the football clubs have. They do not have the resources; they work from year to year. The councils are a question mark in some places. On governments, I cannot answer.

We believe the key issues are the ground surfaces, no. 1. Lighting facilities we believe are necessary, as no. 2, for training facilities. Also these things can be used for other sports and night entertainment. This year one of our clubs will be having a Twilight Agricultural Show. Twilight concerts have been held. Therefore we want the lighting not only for the football but also for night cricket and other activities within the communities. We believe lighting is very important. We have volunteers who have to sign ground reports before our games start. It is pretty hard to get fellows to sign them. We had difficulty in our second semifinal this year getting someone to take up the situation of actually signing the agreement that the ground was safe to play on.

As I said before, I believe they are the three key issues. There should be an upgrading, particularly in the likes of, say, the cities of Hamilton, Portland and Mount Gambier. I believe more could be done in creating better sporting surface facilities and arrangements than we have at the moment. We say that we are moving on. Fellows have knocked around. I should not personalise, but I do not think that Dr Denis Napthine will mind me referring to them. If we have a look at some of these situations, it definitely needs an upgrade. Nothing much has changed since 1950 when I was playing football.

The CHAIR — Michael, do you have anything to add?

Mr HARRISON — From the Hampden league point of view, we have an eight-tem competition. We run an executive of seven. I am the general manager and a finance manager. We are lucky enough to have our operations run out of the Warrnambool Business Centre at the Fletcher Jones complex. We meet with our clubs every month at a forum level. The executive also meets every three to four weeks as well, and any other times we require meetings we have them.

We have good, strong competition amongst the eight teams, and we are always looking to expand it. We run six grades of netball, and we are very strong in netball at an interleague level and also the state championships that are held in Melbourne every year. We have probably got very similar problems with grounds as the Western Border Football League. The cost of public liability insurance is one of those that keeps coming up every year, and the ground rental for clubs. It varies in the league from Camperdown, which is up around \$7000 or \$800 a year for rental, whereas clubs in and around Warrnambool are around \$2000 to \$2500, so it is a big difference for a small country community to pay such a large amount extra. The cost of ground maintenance for all our clubs is the same, and it continues to grow. Under the user-pays system clubs have to pay for any maintenance that they require.

Employment for school leavers is getting harder around the smaller country townships. More of them seem to be going to Melbourne to work. We seem to have a lot of the smaller towns becoming less populated as we go from year to year. We are probably lucky; we are a major league club as far as that goes. The smaller towns in the district leagues would find that a lot harder, but we certainly feel the pinch in that area as well. We seem to have a drop out of junior players. Once they have finished football they go the elite AFL squads, and if they are not good enough there some of them do drop out unfortunately, which is a shame. We also believe that there is more selection of sports for young people these days. It is not just football or cricket, which I grew up with and probably many in this room did as well. Now there is so much more for them to do, and there are also work opportunities. They seem to be able to go and work. I am also involved in cricket. If games get put on on a Sunday, kids are working and cannot play, so the work aspect comes into it as well.

Sponsorship and finance of the league is one of our big ones. We have done very well with sponsorship in the last two years; it has increased by over 50 per cent, and our finals is definitely our biggest turnover in income for the year, but certainly we have problems at ground level with all clubs. Certainly they have to look at maintaining their grounds and facilities. We only have one club that is a business; the rest are all supported by their local committees, and they work very hard to raise the funds to operate.

Basically we are very similar to Western Border in a few things, but we believe that as towns are getting smaller they are finding it very hard to get the finances in. There are some things, like the salary cap within the VCFL, which I do not believe is working all that greatly at the moment, because clubs are getting around it a little bit. I was at a general managers meeting in Shepparton last week. They are going to look at ways and means of having a working party look at tax on footballers and umpires and see what they can do.

Dr NAPTHINE — Michael, the issue of grounds has come up in both areas. If you look at what the state government can do to help country football, would you believe that having a pool of funds to which the clubs could apply for ground maintenance or putting lighting in would be a positive step forward?

Mr HARRISON — I attended a meeting here probably 18 months ago. The local council is looking at improving the grounds, and it did a report on all the grounds in Warrnambool. I am sorry, but it gets back to cricket again; I represented a cricket club then as I was not on the Hampden league executive at the time. They are going to upgrade the two Warrnambool grounds — that is, the Reid Oval and the Friendly Societies Park — before the district grounds. There is supposed to be some work done in that area. The Warrnambool Football Club does a lot of work at its ground because it is a business, and the Friendly Societies Park seems to get put back a bit, although there are plans in place to improve the grounds over the next three or four years.

Dr NAPTHINE — How many grounds do you have in Hampden that can play football under lights?

Mr HARRISON — Three.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do they have lighting sufficient to play a game?

Mr HARRISON — Yes. We only use two at the moment — that is, Cobden and Warrnambool. Cobden is probably the best. The district league use Warrnambool more than the Hampden league. We believe the lights at Cobden are better. Port Fairy has put them in, but they probably need to upgrade more lights as well; it is not quite bright enough.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Mike, you raised the issue of tax, and that has been raised before. I reckon you have about as much chance of that happening as I have of getting my income tax free. I understand that the Geelong Football Umpires League has tax-free status for its umpires, but in my view tax-free status for players would allow clubs, as you have identified, to pay more and more.

Mr HARRISON — Sorry, I should have explained earlier. According to the meeting we had last week, umpiring is a hobby and umpires come under that; however, with football we want the working party to look at it and go to the VCFL and Football Victoria. They will assert that to such and such a dollar amount it would be a hobby, and with amounts over that umpires would need group certificates.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Right, so a certain amount — —

Mr HARRISON — A certain amount per week. That is what they are looking at, to see if it can be structured that way. Hopefully it will not be that high and most players will still need a group certificate.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — If you are paid above that?

Mr HARRISON — If you pay about that amount, if this group can get it going and set up a document to go to the VCFL and Football Victoria to look at it and then go on further to the government, to the tax department, it is just to try and stop this outside the salary cap. At the moment we do not need to be blind Freddy to know what is going on..

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I agree. On that point, because it has been raised before and I well know — I have played a fair bit of footy; always have, and I probably always will. Even when you were playing, Denis, they did not have a salary cap, did they? The salary cap happens in every league. What about a salary cap officer at VCFL level, whether it is done in the structure of your south-west border region, which I think the VCFL has done down this way, and duplicate that across the state? But some of the leagues are saying that they have not got the resources or skills in their own leagues to investigate individual clubs. Do you see a benefit in the VCFL providing resources on the ground, because clubs are getting away with it and always have?

Mr HARRISON — All leagues have a salary cap officer; I know we do. Not knowing what they have done for the last few years, because I have not been involved with the league for that period of time, but one would assume that any input from the VCFL we would be grateful to receive. To be honest, if we do not receive a complaint from someone to say, 'This player is getting X amount of dollars outside the salary cap', then we cannot investigate it. Until we receive something — —

Each club has to put in its statutory declarations four or five times a year — that is, where they are at and what their payments are going to be for the year and where they are going at such and such a month, and that. At the end of the year, if they all add up to under the salary cap of that league, then we cannot do anything about it unless someone can prove to us that they believe someone is breaking the rule and the law of the salary cap. Then we can investigate it. Until that happens, we cannot.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — One more for either of the leagues: it is the old chestnut of the AFL contribution to grassroots football. They say that they put around \$15 million into football in Victoria. What are the benefits to grassroots footy and/or can either of the leagues identify some areas where the AFL or VCFL can make some discernible differences on the ground, if they are not already doing that?

Mr MURRELL — We have good representation from Geelong coming into the area and working with the schools and the junior footballers. We have that relationship; we cannot criticise them for not assisting there. We had the good fortune of having Hawthorn and Geelong play at Hamilton two years ago but we had to fight for that ourselves. We probably did it a little bit underhand, with all due respect, but, you know. It is harder and harder to get those situations. Essendon had their camp in Warrnambool this year. But as far as getting cold, hard cash, it does not seem to be there.

Dr NAPTHINE — You have a Geelong player from Casterton on the Geelong list?

Mr MURRELL — Yes, Jarrod Rooke.

Dr NAPTHINE — A great success.

Mr MURRELL — Yes.

Mr HARRISON — Maybe one area they do look at are our primary school children, where they have the programs. They do help set up their chances of starting their football and looking at the skills of the game. But really there is not much that comes back to a league level. The clubs have got more chance of getting something back if a player makes the AFL. They might get a few dollars out of it. There is not much, though.

Mr MITCHELL — What ways are you finding that people you believe are actually cheating the salary cap?

Mr McQUILTEN — I was going to ask the same question. I am blind Freddy. Tell me what is happening.

Mr HARRISON — There is probably the old way, with cash under the table, or goods or services or if someone wants a garage built I assume they might get it built by the football club but no-one knows they paid for it. But it is hard to prove that. If we can get someone out there from another club who says, 'I know for a fact that that is that' and ask, 'You put it in writing to us' then we will investigate it. Until they are prepared to put it down on paper, what can we do about it? That is the hardest part of it. Some leagues, especially up north, have salary caps. We have a salary cap of only \$60 000, which includes all our coaches and all our netball. The salary cap for the VCFL for major leagues is \$50 000 minimum, but you can ask for extensions. Some leagues are up around the \$80 000 or \$100 000. The Ovens and Murray Football League are having problems because across the border they have all the pokies. Clubs in that league have a salary cap of whatever they like. I was at the general managers meeting last week and they know that. We cannot do anything about it because clubs over the border in New South Wales have as much money as they like.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You are both major leagues. How do you go in terms of getting volunteers and training people to be trainers, dealing with the injuries and the sophisticated equipment that is now required?

Mr HARRISON — In the Hampden league most clubs have a head trainer and have two or three others as well for the whole day and that is for the week as well. Most of our clubs are probably lucky in that they have three or four personnel on board. Being a major league, I guess we are lucky enough that those people do support them in that way. Then they have training courses. There is a trainers association in the Hampden area for all trainers, not just major league but district league as well. They have training programs with people coming up to give talks and instructions. They have doctors, physios, whatever. When the Essendon Football Club were here in Warrnambool we had forum nights. We had one for administration, which was conducted by Peter Jackson, the CEO, which I attended. Kevin Sheedy and the coaching staff did a coaching one; they had an umpires one; and they also had a junior one.

One of the important ones they had was a trainers one. A lot of the trainers from the area, from all leagues around here, went to it. Walking out, following them out — because I was one of the last to leave — a guy from Essendon said to his partners when he was going out to the car, 'I could have gone for another hour or two quite easily. I kept it simple; they listened, they looked. I could have gone for a lot longer than I did'. It was good to hear that he got plenty of response from the trainers who did attend.

The CHAIR — The Western Border Football League straddles the border of South Australia and Victoria?

Mr MURRELL — With five teams either side of the border.

The CHAIR — Are there any particular complexities that arise out of that at all?

Mr MURRELL — Not really. We do not look at the border as an issue in any way whatsoever.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Except that they play the grand final on the wrong side of the border most years.

Mr MURRELL — Two out of the last three grand finals have been held in Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that. Thank you for your time today and your presentation. It has been worthwhile. Obviously you will get copies of the transcript and you can correct any errors of fact or grammar but not of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.