

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Bendigo – 20 May 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
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Mr D. Drum, board member, Bendigo Football League (sworn).

The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence to 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, 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 country football. Welcome Damian, thank you very much for agreeing to be a witness today for us. Can you provide your full name and address and say whether you are representing an organisation, your position in that organisation and the name of the organisation.

Mr DRUM — Damian Kevin Drum, representing the Bendigo Football League as a board member, and in doing so I would like to apologise for the ill health of our chairman, Mr Mark Johnson, who was also listed to give evidence today.

We have organised and distributed a handout which I would like to go through, and from that obviously we will go through the normal process of questions and answers at the end.

The CHAIR — Yes, that will be fine, Damian; please continue.

Mr DRUM — The Bendigo Football League welcomes the opportunity for the abovementioned inquiry and the BFL supports the submission of the VCFL which we know has already gone ahead and will be an integral part of this inquiry into country football. Talking about the demise of country football clubs both in number and capacity in recent years is directly related to the change in population and the reorganisation of infrastructure such as schools, banks, hospitals and government agencies. I would like to refer to the dot points as we go through this.

Terms of reference (d) asks that we identify the impact of the decline of the number of football clubs on country towns. I think the first dot point goes to this issue and we would like to, from Bendigo and the region's point of view, state very strongly that it is our opinion that football clubs do not disappear from towns and communities. The towns and the communities diminish and when there is very little or nothing left the football club then folds or merges. So we would challenge anybody to show us a vibrant and dynamic community that has lost its football club. If there are instances out there I would think they would be in the minority.

So we recognise the ability of the football clubs to survive with dwindling populations. We want to stress very strongly that the major issue associated with country football clubs is the population drift. The population drift is also exacerbated by schools, banks, hospitals and government agencies closing down as the population moves away from the regional areas.

The game of Australian football plays a pivotal role, the benefits of which are simply unable to be quantified in terms of building and maintaining community identity, cohesion and social interaction. There is a statistic which VicHealth put out in the last month which I do not know whether you have had the privilege of seeing, but effectively in a judicial court in Melbourne a judge has stated that over the last two years he has had over 600 juveniles before him in court. Of the 600 juveniles that appeared before him over a whole variety of offences, 1 of them was involved in team sport.

Now we do not say sport is the only answer, but we do say there is a real awakening here for government at all levels to realise this important aspect of team sports in particular. We are saying all sport, but in particular team sports have this added benefit of the role model aspect and the coach aspect. Effectively it gives kids that role model and that positive peer pressure to stay out of trouble. I do not know how you could quantify that, but it needs to be acknowledged and understood. Without ever having people say so, that could be the motivation behind so many of our volunteers and others who run football clubs throughout country Victoria. They understand that, without having knowledge of the statistics, and it is in fact their motivation.

The next dot point is that higher education employment opportunities for young people are the primary reason why young people relocate from country areas. Places like Bendigo are exceptionally fortunate to have a vibrant TAFE institution, a vibrant university, a fantastic senior secondary college, in fact a large urban city which attracts so many young people for education. Therefore football in Bendigo is the beneficiary of that relocation, but not so for some of our outlying areas. So it is good for Bendigo in this particular area is to the detriment of some of our smaller towns.

Specifically the Bendigo Football League likes to raise issues of volunteers. The viability of country football clubs is based on volunteers — adequate training, indemnity of and general assistance thereto are all matters requiring attention. I suppose Mark Johnston was very keen to push the fact that it is getting harder and harder for our volunteers to do their job within the regulations such as the food handling issues or the indemnity issues associated with even escorting umpires off the ground. We are asking volunteers to do things like escort umpires off the ground but should any trouble happen what does a volunteer do in that instance, trying to keep angry supporters away? So there is a whole range of things. We are asking people to serve alcohol responsibly We are asking people within the country football sector to do work that in a changing society is now starting to move into areas that have legal consequences. We are asking presidents of football clubs to sign statutory declarations about salary caps, so the whole legal issue is now creeping very strongly into country footy and scaring people away from helping in one aspect or another. We therefore need as much help in that area as we possibly can.

An issue very much specific to Bendigo is that the Bendigo Football League supports the establishment of regionally based hubs appropriately resourced to administer the game, remove duplication and allow a significant amount of volunteer effort to be redirected. So this is specifically a Bendigo issue. This model that we would like to talk about exists at the minute in Geelong, for instance, and the model we are looking at is called, for want of a better term, Football Bendigo. We would like a governing body to stand over the top of all of football in the region, so we are looking at someone who would administer collectively junior football in Bendigo, two district leagues such as the Heathcote and District Football League and the Loddon Valley Football League, and the Bendigo Football League. This body would then also incorporate the TAC Cup team, the Pioneers, the VFL team, the Bendigo Bombers, and bring it all under one umbrella.

Decisions made within this region are made for the betterment of football, and that body would then also look after the umpires as well as the netball associations and another league on the outskirts of our area as well — the Maryborough and Castlemaine District Football League. So we believe there is an enormous amount of duplication that takes place with transfers, player movement, sponsorship deals going back and forth, leagues fighting other leagues for sponsorship deals and so forth, and just the general bickering that goes on in football clubs trying to do the best thing for each other and leagues trying to do the best thing for each other. We believe there are significant benefits to be made from a model. We have already applied for government assistance to try and develop this model and get it up and running. We have asked people at Football Geelong to help us with it, but there is a cost associated with setting up the model, and we had that application knocked back last year. Again that is an area where the state government could really help us set up a model that we think would take football in this area forward.

Going to item 2, costs, the capital operating costs of country football clubs are escalating. Specific capital funding is required, as are netball facilities, competition standard lighting and ground surfaces — all of which are in the area of capital input. I see the VCFL notes say that in the vicinity of 50-odd per cent of their grounds have facilities for netball. In this region I think we would be going at 10 per cent. If you are talking about change rooms, some clubs have an open tin shelter, so at least the girls do not get wet, but they are still getting changed in public toilets and in their cars to then go out and play. For instance, in the Bendigo Football League we had made it mandatory for all of our Bendigo Football League clubs to field three teams of netball. We have had a lot of resistance from our clubs because some clubs say if they have netball teams, great; other clubs say that netball has nothing to do with footy, they just want to have a good footy team. We are saying that across the board all clubs will field three grades of netball, and we went to the extent of making one of our clubs play their B-grade netballers again about a month ago, the girls had to play two games.

We are so committed to making netball work because we understand what an integral part netball plays in our football culture. I want you to be duly impressed by the emphasis that the Bendigo Football League is placing on netball in this area and therefore to truly understand how much emphasis and effort we will need to put into capital input and capital expenditure to get our netball facilities up to standard. We are talking about lighting We have introduced lights to the Queen Elizabeth Oval at the moment, which has now made it viable for our football clubs to play in the evening, but what do we do with our girls? We have gone to the expense of the men bringing in portable lighting so the girls can play night netball, but again we are looking around. Maryborough has outstanding lighting, and we are now introducing lighting to the Queen Elizabeth Oval, but we do not have adequate night lighting for our netballers, so that is another issue there.

I will talk about ground surfaces later on because that has become a huge issue. During this promotion the future of the game lies with the lower age groups. Education about and promotion of the game is vital to encourage and retain the next generation. Other recreational and entertainment pursuits will only be an issue if football is not adequately promoted. Football can no longer take its position for granted. I will leave you to read more about that.

We are working very hard. We have a situation where the Bendigo Junior Football League is not directly linked to the Bendigo Football League. It operates reasonably well as two separate entities, but we think there is possibly some room for improvement with, as I say, a Football Bendigo model where it all comes under the one umbrella. We have very good communication between those two groups.

Turning to item 4, facilities, clubs struggle with the reality of providing 21st century facilities to the standards provided by other sports. As a team sport football requires a large area, as you would obviously be aware, and in most cases the facilities are ageing and were built by the local communities. The current government funding policy towards multi-use facilities, while theoretically sound, fails to take account of practical reality and the social infrastructure aspect of such facilities. Again, a lot of that stuff there is self-explanatory, and I would be happy to answer any questions after my presentation.

Moving on to grounds, longer term solutions to water shortages are currently being investigated by clubs and leagues. The AFL suggested that government should negotiate with local councils to lower ground rentals. The cost takes no account of significant assistance already provided by local councils and the ongoing cost shifting to local councils. The state government pledged a grant to some country football clubs for ground assistance, but it actually committed local councils to moneys not budgeted for and/or not prioritised, so some did not have the dollars for the dollar-for-dollar funding that the government came up with three weeks ago. Some did — for instance, Bendigo is quite happy to receive this money because it is out there drilling bores continually trying to find answers. It will be able to pick up the government subsidy; but there are other councils out there that simply did not have the money budgeted for and that now have to go and try to find it to take advantage of the state government's option.

The state government option of trying to cart water to football grounds has been met with a fair amount of mirth in this region, simply because you cannot get a water-carrying truck without a couple of weeks notice and you simply could not hire one for the two, three or four days that you would need to cart the water in to fill a dam and then pump it on to an oval. The opportunity of carting water to get these football grounds out of the drought-ridden state that are in really does not make sense in this area, although there is an enormous amount of support for the assistance-for-bores option because grounds such as Kyneton and Castlemaine have had success with putting down bores. At the main oval in Bendigo this option has had mixed success. There is a belief out in the football community that the dream of bores is possibly the way to go. The disappointment of mine, which I quite openly went public on, was the question of why it did not happen back in November, December and January when football leagues throughout the region were planning for a long, dry summer and a dry autumn. We were putting plans in place back then on how to cope with drought-ridden ground. We were disappointed the government came out as late as it did with assistance which I have said publicly, and I say it again today.

That is the official Bendigo Football League presentation, and I have a few other points I would like to make as someone who has been involved with country football and football at all levels for too long to remember. In relation to the ground situation, we have Kangaroo Flat Football Club at Dower Park and also Golden Square at the Wade Street Oval — two of our major league clubs — still unable to even train on the ground at the moment due to the water problem. In the late 1980s Bendigo introduced a TAC Cup team to the city with the Bendigo Pioneers, then in the mid-1990s we introduced a VFL team, which were the Bendigo Diggers and are now the Bendigo Bombers. We have introduced these two elite teams into our region yet we have not made one skerrick of an addition to our facilities. These two elite teams train harder, longer and more often than our existing major league teams. South Bendigo and Sandhurst have simply had the Bombers, or the Diggers, just plonked on top of them and told to share the ground. The Bendigo Pioneers have effectively been plonked on Golden Square's ground to share. It seems to work quite well where there is one other co-tenant, but the situation we have at the Queen Elizabeth Oval (QEO) is quite untenable. This city has had extremely dry weather for nearly the entire existence of this BFL team.

It is quite ironic that and having three clubs using one oval we have been waiting for a really wet winter to turn the ground into an absolute bog, but what the driest autumn of all time has forced two other neighbouring clubs, Kangaroo Flat and Golden Square, off their ground. They have had to turn to the major ground at the QEO to play their games. It was not a wet winter, it was a dry autumn that has now ruined our premier ground. We have a

beautiful ground in the middle of the city that has been overused, and we have been told by council workers that the ground has gone already at this stage of the year. This means Sandhurst, South Bendigo, the Bendigo Bombers, the Pioneers, and the school groups which use it, have all been banned from using the premier ground because it is already shot in relation to grass coverage. It is ironic what caused the initial damage.

It has identified the fact that had we as a community — we are talking about football clubs, the city council and maybe state government — had Wade Street, Golden Square, Dower Park, and Kangaroo Flat, which are really fine facilities, up to speed with drought proofing and lighting the load could have been shared quite easily and sustainably. That has not happened, and now we are in dire straits with two dust bowls and one that has turned itself into a dust bowl because of the lack of grass. That is at the top end of our football sport in Bendigo. At the bottom end, which is the grassroots participation at junior level, we have a chronic shortage of sporting fields. It is not just footy either. I would like to point out that we have got hockey in this town bursting at the seams. We have got junior soccer absolutely bursting at the seams. Cricket in summer now has to be played in shortened versions on Friday evenings to get games out of the way so that the pitch can be reused on Saturday morning. Seniors play cricket here on Saturday mornings. They play from 8.00 a.m. through to 12.30 p.m., and no sooner is that game of cricket off the ground than they have got another senior game playing through from 1.30 p.m. until 6.30 p.m. We are now using sporting facilities in this town to the absolute maximum.

Hockey has one artificial field, which is the only artificial field in the whole north-west of the state, and teams come from Swan Hill and all over the north-west to use that hockey field. They are in desperate need of a second field but council has limited funds to help out in that area. Junior football is played all day on Saturday, not just Saturday morning but nearly all day Saturday until the seniors come on, and all day on Sunday until well into the afternoon before they finish playing. That is the issue with the bottom end. I have been involved with a local community where I live, out at Judith and Strathfieldsaye, trying to get the council to purchase some new recreational land, and it has highlighted the point to me that councils faced with debt, which is probably most councils, find it very difficult in their planning process to say they will not let a housing development go ahead, even though it will return to the city some substantial rates over a long period of time, but will use that land as recreational space, which is what we all think is a commonsense approach and a planning issue. The temptation from the council point of view is to simply say that is economically best for houses to go there and put the sporting facilities out where it is cheaper. This is the experience we have had in Bendigo, where the council wanted to buy 50 acres of land 3 to 4 kilometres out where the houses may be in 10 to 15 years time. The dislocation from the kids not being able to walk from school to a sporting facility certainly would have been the case in this instance. We have just recently been told the council is in fact going to put itself into serious debt and purchase some land in an expensive part of the new growing area.

We have got some real issues with capital expenditure. Again, I have spent a lot of time talking to the Minister for Sport and Recreation about help from the state government for the local council to purchase new sporting land, but quite clearly the answer is no. The government does not get involved in helping councils to purchase sporting land. It will help in development. I think there needs to be some sort of rethink in that area possibly, and I think even in the planning stage if we understand there is a temptation for councils around Victoria to develop only residential does the government have a role to say there are enough houses — although there is a plan for a playground and some recreational space, is that enough? Should it be left to city councils to decide there is a need for football, cricket, hockey, netball and substantial recreational facilities. Whose responsibility is it to make sure that they are adequately catered for in the growing areas of our state. That is an issue that is present here.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — A bit like a green wedge in the major towns.

Mr DRUM — Similar, providing the green wedge is used for other than walking. Thank you.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I have two questions, but first I have a comment. You have not been involved in politics as long as I have. I was on council for eight years. It is a council responsibility, and certainly what you were speaking about last seems to me to indicate that you have got some problems with your municipality, not the state government. Council responsibilities — I have got a council called the Surf Coast council, which would be easily the most debt-ridden council in the state. We had to put in an administrator it was so incompetent. What it did with its developers was to impose a requirement on them to have recreational space, and it is doing this as we speak. So when the developer sells 100 lots, it cannot sell any more lots until it constructs three recreational ovals and a pavilion. That is at no cost at all to the Surf Coast council because it has not got any money — we are talking about

debt — and it does that. Now you need to take that up with your municipalities, because if that is not happening that is their responsibility. That is a comment in respect to councils.

My question regards the AFL. I have not heard you mention anywhere the AFL. You talked about the Bendigo Bombers coming in and requiring additional facilities. What role should the AFL have, particularly when they have a TAC Cup one and a VFL one?

Mr DRUM — The AFL puts in \$5 million a year into football in Victoria, and we are grateful for the work we have there. The presence there effectively is that we see regional development officers come into our region to help organise the running of football, the running of Auskick and the running of those football development programs. We also have to understand that in other states the licences are not owned by their own clubs. In other states in the AFL, for instance in Perth the licences are owned by the Western Australian Football League, so the money that those clubs in Perth generate goes into football. The profit that the South Australian football clubs generate goes into running the football. The money that the Victorian clubs generate goes to the Victorian clubs. Right? So what we have is: how are you going to do this and do it evenly across the country? You cannot double hit the Victorian clubs without double hitting the Western Australian clubs or the South Australian clubs. How is the AFL going to take money off the AFL and say, 'Righto, you are running the junior programs by yourselves over there, you are running it in South Australia and in Western Australia'? How are you going to say, 'We're going to take another whack off the AFL, and we are just going to run junior football in Victoria, on our own'?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am not with you on this one, Drummie.

Mr DRUM — You want the AFL to do more for Victorian football?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am asking you should they?

Mr DRUM — I think they should do more in issues other than financial, such as promotion. Bendigo has the Bendigo Bombers. I would be critical of Essendon for not getting up here enough and being truly visible and truly generating excitement in the game.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So you do not think they have a role in the capital side of the structure here?

Mr DRUM — Certainly not.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — In a place like Bendigo, when they have two elite teams?

Mr DRUM — They cannot do it, Michael, when you look at what the AFL stands for, who its members are and the fact is you want part of that group to look after one of its states.

Mr INGRAM — Just following on from that, there are basically three levels of football in Victoria. There is the AFL, which is national as you rightly say; there is Football Victoria, which governs the whole range of the programs at a state level.

Mr DRUM — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — And there is the VCFL. You indicated that the state government should have a financial input into developing Football Bendigo, as you put it, a bit like Football Geelong. Surely as part of the game development it should come out of the funds from either Football Victoria or the VCFL or as a feed down from the AFL?

Mr DRUM — That is a good point. We are talking in this instance in the vicinity of \$10 000 to develop the model. Once we develop the model, which is all we were asking for, we were saying that the grants were there from the state government to all sporting organisations that are looking to improve themselves. We thought we had a very good opportunity. The grants exist, we simply missed out on application. Whether that money can come from the VFL, AFL or wherever, we are happy to explore that.

Mr WALSH — Drummie, your regionally based hubs — —

Mr DRUM — Yes.

Mr WALSH — I assume that to help country Victoria you would put the centre of that in Serpentine or somewhere not in Bendigo, would you?

Mr DRUM — Most certainly.

Mr WALSH — Good.

Mr MITCHELL — Drummie, do you know what the turnover of the VFL is per year?

Mr DRUM — I do. It is a little rocky. When we took over — —

Mr MITCHELL — Just a ball park figure.

Mr DRUM — I am not 100 per cent sure, but I would be guessing in the vicinity of 200 of the Bendigo Football League.

Mr INGRAM — Could you provide that information for us?

Mr DRUM — Certainly, that is a phone call. As to the full turnover, I am just unsure whether it includes clubs, whether some of the cost of umpiring and those sorts of issues pertain just to the league as opposed to the league and the clubs. It gets confusing.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — On the salary cap, there is a view that the more money you give to clubs or leagues the more money they will pay players, whether it is openly or underhand.

Mr DRUM — I think there is always that temptation, but we would not be looking for cash injections in any other way than capital expenditure. They cannot sell the lights to pay their centre half-forward. They cannot sell the netball courts or netball facilities to pay a centre half-back.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — No.

Mr MITCHELL — If they get the money for the lights and they do a cheaper version then that frees up more money to pay players.

Mr DRUM — You would find in the reality of the way it works that that simply would not happen — simply would not happen.

Mr MITCHELL — That differs from what we hear.

Mr DRUM — No. I would be very, very strong in the aspect that any moneys that are given for capital expenditure — I would be very, very strong on this point — that — —

Mr INGRAM — I do not think that is the issue. The issue is that if they got money for facilities that would mean that they would have more money to pay players, and that would just escalate the problem with the salary cap and the payment to players.

Mr MITCHELL — More of their own money.

Mr INGRAM — Basically, instead of putting the money aside that they raise to upgrade facilities they would spend it on players.

Mr DRUM — I think you have got to give a bit more credibility to the people who are out there running footy clubs. They are very community-minded people who work and work. You would be aware of it; we are all aware of how hard these people work. I believe that they work and spend within their budgets. Considering the amount of clubs we have out there, very few clubs get themselves into financial trouble. They work hard. Even the process of raising money is a very good community project. Going in you have an informal relationship with the local pub, a relationship with the local hardware man, a relationship with the local trucking magnate — whatever it is — and you generate the money out. Of the 90 per cent of the money paid to footballers only 10 per cent would go to players who live somewhere else — for instance, the 10 per cent of Bendigo players who do not actually live here — and most of it is spent in the same region. The money tends to go round and round, and this is what we

have to understand. Very few clubs get themselves into financial strife by paying players. There are a few, but the vast majority of them spend what they can afford. Of the \$19 million that is spent in salary caps in country football, the vast majority is invested back into country towns.

On the fact about the salary cap being an issue, you will find that the date when the \$50 000 salary cap was put in place was well back in the early 1990s. We are saying that the salary cap for country football clubs has not moved for 10 years and in the same breath the AFL salary cap has gone up thousands of per cent. By holding the status quo and keeping our salary caps to a bare minimum of \$50 000 — and as Michael says they are getting broken all around the state — this is the sole reason why we increased the salary cap to \$70 000. It was not because we wanted clubs to spend more money. We wanted the salary cap to reflect what is truly happening out there in the community.

As I said earlier, we are asking presidents of football clubs to sign legal documents that they are sticking to the salary cap. How can we possibly ask football presidents to do that — effectively break the law — when we know that the vast majority of clubs cannot operate in a competitive manner on \$50 000? The amount of \$70 000 is more reflective of what is actually happening, and that is what we have done. We are not instituting the spending of more money. We are simply bringing the rules more in line with what is happening in reality.

Mr WALSH — Should we have a salary cap at all?

Mr DRUM — I think it is a very good bargaining tool for the clubs. They need to have that salary cap as a bargaining tool when negotiating with players. If it is open slather they say, 'Listen, you blokes just did the crop out the road. You blokes got \$400 000 for the crop that was donated to you', and we would say, 'Listen, we can't fit you in a salary cap'. The clubs need the salary cap as a bargaining tool; they need it as a point of reference. If they go 5 per cent or 10 per cent over or 5 per cent or 10 per cent under, so be it, but the salary cap forms an important part of the discipline associated with sticking to responsible payments.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Damian. You will receive a copy of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. You can make any corrections to matter of fact but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.