

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Sea Lake – 24 March 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr C. Ingram	Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten	

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman  
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Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray  
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#### Witness

Mr C. Brown, Past President, Underbool Football Club, and Director, Victorian Country 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 at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, under the provisions of the Constitution Act is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee, including members from the Liberal and National parties and an Independent member. Welcome, Mr Brown. I invite you to provide your full name and address, and also if you represent an organisation, the name of that organisation and your position in it.

**Mr BROWN** — My name is Chris Brown and my address is 15 Westh Street, Underbool. Currently I am a director of the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL), although at this stage I am pretty green at it, having come in only in December last year. I am also past president of the Mallee league, of which Mr Terry Kiley is now president, and past president of the Walpeup-Underbool club. So I probably have a mixed bag of where I am coming from today, and I think I will eventually get back to this area and probably my living area.

**The CHAIR** — Could you provide some comments, then we will ask you some questions.

**Mr BROWN** — Given that the VCFL has already put in a submission, I will start off by running through what Victoria does and has through the VCFL. We have 83 leagues, comprising 870 clubs. That comes to 2722 footy teams with 2465 netball teams. There are a bit over 5000 teams altogether, with 96 500 players, 5200 coaches, 12 000 umpires and 340 000 members. Last year 2.2 million people attended VCFL games alone, and 192 000 people attended the grand finals within that VCFL. There are 18 500 businesses directly involved, and a \$57 million dollar turnover by all the VCFL clubs alone — and that is directly, not indirectly.

The biggest trouble in this area is that, while some areas are going ahead, it is declining. It is declining specifically in this area. I think Terry mentioned that in 1997 there were 12 clubs servicing 1600 active participants, and today there are 7 clubs servicing 950 active participants. One club has left to play in what most of us around here tended to believe was a lesser quality competition. Three clubs amalgamated or were taken over, and one club died completely.

From one end of the league to the other is approximately 180 kilometres, so there is plenty of travelling to be done, but I think the VCFL became noticeably active in the area, appointing the full-time employee in the north-west area of the state to help clubs and their volunteers conducting seminars and clinics in order to make it easier to run their clubs.

Probably more specifically where I come from, at Underbool, given that it is an amalgamated club, Underbool has a total population of only 320 people in those two towns. Out of those 320 people we have four grades of football, and 80 players play there; six grades of netball, with 50 players playing there. There is a direct support staff of another 50, and just about everyone else is a member anyway and goes along to have look.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — So on away-games days you close the town?

**Mr BROWN** — It would be a great place for a burglar to visit!

There is no other direct competition to that football and netball. We do not have competition directly from basketball or golf. They are usually the same people who play, so they work around it. Golf is played on a Sunday, and basketball is usually a summer sport played midweek, and they are still all the same people who are doing it.

When it comes down to it, I saw my main topic as population shift. The area where I live is halfway between Ouyen and the South Australian border. When I was a kid there were three leagues in that area, and now there are three clubs. I believe it has been brought about by the diminishing value of the broadacre agricultural products, mainly wheat and barley. Locals are buying out their neighbours in order to expand their acreage and allow the bigger machinery to become cost effective per acre. With less families to serve we find that government services are cut back or moved to larger service centres. With all of these families moving out, we have small businesses, shops and hoteliers struggling to maintain profitability, and they inevitably close their doors, so football and netball clubs in our area do struggle to survive as part of that.

It is interesting to note that around Underbool every time for the past 56 years land has come up for auction neighbours have purchased it; therefore we have lost over 50 per cent of landowners and families in the area, and

along with that we have lost the associated services like banks, bakers, butchers, supermarkets et cetera. For 56 years there is no other person who has come in and bought land in our area at all.

Probably when the Labor government first came in I thought that we seemed to get some good monetary assistance through the availability of grants — we are in the Mildura Rural City Council area — but now they have pretty well been cut back. There has always been just the one major facilities grant available, and that has always been grabbed by Mildura. It never ever goes out into those rural centres. There used to be five minor facilities grants available each year. I think now there are two available per shire. We used to get hold of some of them. I know that at the Underbool recreation reserve I have \$100 000 sitting ready waiting for another grant to go with it so that we can build a new social facility at the recreation reserve. We just cannot get the grants to match it. Usually they are \$1-on-\$1, and the townspeople have worked pretty hard to get that money in the bank. So that is one thing; that governments have really dried up the money coming out. It is pretty well impossible now to gain those.

A lot of the time the government appears to be willing to pump dollars into things like the arts and probably international sports, but certainly not football. I know there is a little bit coming through, and probably a few people have mentioned the AFL with the Auskick program. The AFL does not run the Auskick program at all; it is run by Football Victoria, and it gets some of its money out of the state government for that. The AFL does not put money into Auskick at all. We believe it is a pretty good and well-run organisation, but it should be run by the VCFL within country Victoria. We think it would get out better and be better utilised, although I think Ken Gannon is doing a pretty good job in running and organising Auskick too, but I think they have something like 60 staff and a \$9.5 million turnover, whereas the VCFL has about a \$3.5 million turnover and only 10 full-time staff. It would be great to be able to get hold of that and really push Auskick around a heck of a lot better, I believe, than what it is done.

What can be done to preserve football clubs and therefore small rural and remote communities in the short term? Probably the one big thing is water. It is interesting to see Peter here; he comes from an area that has a bit of water that is able to be utilised and see some irrigation in there. I would tend to think that you should be able to retain people in your town — workers, whatever.

Just to the west of me, right on the border, is Mallee country. It is no different to anything here. They have good water underground, and spud growers have moved in there big time. A football club like Pinaroo has all of a sudden got plenty of footballers, netballers, whatever, because of these employment opportunities within the potato-growing area. Every employee can attract a family, every family can attract another business, and all of a sudden football- netball clubs are part of it.

I believe water anywhere is one of the most important things. We have gone onto the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline. Probably it is interesting to see that we cannot use any of that for irrigation at all. Maybe we could look at the possibility of the government trying to fund an ideal way of trying to find underground water in a lot of these areas and put it on a recreation reserve. If that was successful I am sure that a lot of farmers would take up the opportunity of utilising some underground water if they could find a good, clean aquifer underneath the ground. I know that at Underbool itself we have plenty of water, but it is fairly salty and has a lot of minerals in it, but 25 or 30 kilometres away it is good, perfect drinking water. There has to be another aquifer there; it is just too expensive to try and find it. I do not know whether that is a real answer or not.

Given that we are on the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline, there are two different organisations that supply that water. The Wimmera Mallee board supplies water to the farms, really for domestic and stock only, and then it on-sells water to Grampians Water, which supplies water within the towns. You get into a situation where there is an 18 cents per kilolitre difference in the cost of that water.

So if you want to put water on your recreation reserve or football ground you are up for an extra 18 cents a kilolitre. I got a bill yesterday for the water for the football ground at Underbool for the last three months, and it is \$4500. If you do that for 12 months it will break you. But we need water, and we need those grounds to be in a safe and reasonable condition to play on.

They are just a couple of things that maybe we could explore the possibility of doing. Of course they would not only be for the good of football but for the structural benefit of the whole of country Victoria and therefore the state as a whole. Really that part of the north-western corner of Victoria is the most volatile in country Victoria for football and netball — and probably all sports, including cricket, tennis and whatever runs through the summer. But

the broadacre dryland farming areas are the ones that are in trouble. We all have bigger acres, and there are just diminishing populations. There is not a heck of a lot of we can do about it unless we can find something to work in, such as a new industry that can operate through those big broadacre farming areas.

In conclusion, a lot of those Mallee towns and their sporting clubs are in trouble mainly because of the population shift, the enormous cost of water and other services and the diminishing numbers of volunteers. I suppose the decrease in the number of volunteers goes with population shift, but it also comes back to the fact that because of insurance costs and our current litigious society our volunteers are not game to have a crack at those different organisations as leaders or to sign off on anything that might perceivably get them sued. Sometimes they cannot, but they think they might be able to be sued, so that is a hard one to educate them on. But insurance costs and our litigious society are pretty tough things to get over nowadays.

I am not sure what can be done to save these towns and their clubs within the Mallee, but before long it might end up like outback New South Wales over the river from Mildura, where people now live in the larger regional centres on the weekends, and then the men just head back to their farms during the week. Pretty well everything has died in a lot of those areas, and everything is now centred. You have nothing within a 200-kilometre radius by way of town services or anything. It would be sad to see that happen in our area.

I wrote down a couple of things as I was listening to other witnesses that I wanted to add. One is a comment about the Bendigo Pioneers years and the kids going down there. It is just too far for them to come home. I have a son who thought he might have been able to make it, and he was looking for an apprenticeship. Instead of going to Mildura where he would have been able to come home, say, every weekend and maybe play footy, he chased his apprenticeship in Bendigo. He did not make the Pioneers — he got cut — but he still had his job there; it is 350 to 400 kilometres away — he is never going to come home to play football during the year. That is probably sad. That is exactly what Andy Griffiths from the Mallee Football League was saying about kids going away and just not coming home.

Last year out of the Victorian Country Football League and those country TAC sides there were only 10 country Victorians drafted to the Australian Football League. There has been an enormous effort to put a lot of kids into these TAC Cup areas like Bendigo, Ballarat et cetera. That is really the whole of that western side of Victoria, and only 10 out of the whole of country Victoria got drafted.

At our last board meeting there was a discussion about reducing numbers of players within teams throughout the whole of Victoria. At the last board meeting there was a good, solid discussion on that, and that was to be investigated thoroughly throughout all clubs and leagues throughout country Victoria. The area managers were told to just have a look at that, give us some feedback and see what the possibilities were and what we could do about reducing the numbers in teams. After all, the old Victorian Football Association used to run with 15 a side right throughout all their grades, and I do not think it would be an impossibility to do it here. I think up in the Omeo and District League they even play 14 a side in their seconds.

**Mr INGRAM** — There are no seconds.

**Mr BROWN** — No seconds? Are they gone now?

**Mr INGRAM** — Their seniors play with 16.

**Mr BROWN** — One of the leagues there has gone in last few weeks too, hasn't it.

**Mr INGRAM** — Yes, Riviera.

**Mr BROWN** — I think someone mentioned — perhaps it was Peter Doig — about kids coming out of Swan Hill and said that they have to try to hold those kids from going back into the district leagues. But I think a lot of those regional centres do forget that a lot of the kids who are in the regional centres come from the more rural and remote areas and they go to the regional centres to get jobs. A lot of them are really only attracted back, and we do need to keep those small areas going, because after all in the smaller areas it is much more of a social place to be and everything revolves around football.

I will just finish off with a little story. I can remember a few years ago a final here where I walked back to my car and there was a lady sitting in my car talking to my wife. As I got a bit closer she asked, 'How did you go?'. The

next question was not, 'Who did you play?'. She was there and went to the football every Saturday. She did not have a clue who was playing and did not really care, but that was her social contact. Many people in country Victoria do that. So we do need footy in these areas, and they do not have to be just football or netball- orientated people. That is about all I have to say. Water is probably my biggest thing with country Victoria.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — You corrected a misapprehension on Auskick and the AFL. Can you expand in terms of what, if anything, it needs to do to support areas like this?

**Mr BROWN** — I will talk about transfer fees. A lot of that is done through Football Victoria, and then a lot of that money does come back through the VCFL as well, and then into the regions, but it is not really a lot of money. The clubs get a little bit — actually Andy Griffiths could probably be more specific on the amount of money and just how much is sent back to the clubs and into the regions.

Through our association with the north-central region that we have been with in the past, the money has been really well distributed back into all those junior competitions and development. When you get over into the Wimmera area — and north-central and Wimmera are amalgamating regionally — they have \$46 000 sitting in the bank unspent, so it still comes back to the regions, and what they spend from and with and to whom they give it. I just still think that it would help if the AFL somehow funded more money for football development. Someone mentioned earlier about how the kids have to actually pay to go to the under-15 schoolboy championships. The VCFL subsidises that now through a sponsorship through Vicrail, I think — it is only a very new one — but the kids themselves still have to come back and put some money in. It just seems a bit hard when eventually the AFL does get a pretty good finished product out of all those kids that are really starting off in those lower grades with the clubs, with parents footing a lot of the bills, the travel costs, the guernsey costs and so on. Like I say, someone has to pay for that water, the mowing and the upkeep of the ovals. Even if they do get a grant, it is still a 50-50 grant, and most of the grounds throughout this area are not run by the shires but by committees of management.

**Mr WALSH** — Was country football better served when there was AFL zoning and country clubs actually took some ownership of an area?

**Mr BROWN** — Certainly, I believe. In a way they really got a lot more out of it too. A heck of a lot of footballers came out of country Victoria and went to the AFL then, but also I still believe they were served better with, I suppose, personnel reaching out into those areas. But they also took a heck of a lot more of those kids to Melbourne; they took kids that were never ever really going to make it.

**Mr WALSH** — It was really under-19s?

**Mr BROWN** — Yes. I had a situation with a brother-in-law of mine who was always going to make it, but was very shy of Melbourne, so they came and got his brother, who was never going to make it. All of a sudden we lost two of those young kids out of our town. Now his son is at Collingwood, too, so there is potential for another one who is never going to stay there — plus he stayed in Melbourne — and all of a sudden you have lost those potentially good footballers.

**Mr WALSH** — One of the things that was suggested at one of the other hearings was that there be some sort of priority draft pick-out zones, a bit like the father-and-son rule or whatever, to get the clubs to have some ownership back in the country. Has the VCFL board thought about exploring something like that?

**Mr BROWN** — I have not heard anything at the meetings, but I have only been to two board meetings so far, and it has not come up at all. Certainly Queensland is pushing that, and even New South Wales with the in the state idea, and probably that is a little bit of the trouble. We see that the AFL is now pumping a lot of money into Queensland and New South Wales, calling them 'developing states', but then you look at country Victoria, that is a developing area still, even though it is an area that has been around for a long time providing a lot of footballers. It is still a developing area, but they are just not putting the money into this area. They are putting it into the so-called developing states of New South Wales and Queensland.

To come back to being able to specifically draft, say, a priority draft out of the areas, I am sure that they would pump a heck of a lot more expertise into the area anyway. But then again I suppose they tend to think that is happening by pulling those top players out of the areas and sending them off to the TAC Cup teams anyway. There are a number of them now, pretty well all the ones from Mildura that they really think will make it now live in Bendigo, but the others are run from Mildura to Bendigo weekly.

Like you say, the development officer that is down there with the TAC Cup it is just a glorified taxidriver who runs kids from Mildura to Bendigo for training at least once a week and then certainly on the Saturdays. It is an incredible set-up.

**Mr INGRAM** — You are past president of Underbool, which has now merged with Walpeup. Obviously you have an interest in football in this area. How is the heritage of those clubs maintained? Obviously here we have the Sea Lake memorabilia on the wall. Have those clubs that have merged maintained the heritage and history of both clubs in the merged entity, or do we tend to lose a lot of the heritage of one of the clubs? Do you have any experience of that?

**Mr BROWN** — You do tend to lose a little bit. I think those clubs have been amalgamated for about 22 years, and each of the clubs has run its own past premierships reunion, but they have done it as separate entities too, rather than the merged club running those. They still have a couple of things up on the wall — photos, honour boards and those types of things — from way back with both clubs. It was interesting with the Sea Lake-Nandaly merger and the Berri-Culgoa clubs, getting them to relinquish their grounds. It is a difficult one. You have to trade it off, and really it is the club that has to cut it back. Probably for 15 years neither club did anything on their recreation reserves, because the footy club was not going to pump money from one end to the other and duplicate it. Finally one of them, Walpeup, decided — I suppose through the lack of volunteers, too, to do any work there — to close it down. I happen to be secretary of the Underbool recreation reserve, and I think we have spent close to half a million dollars there in the last eight years. We are ready now to spend another quarter of a million in the next year or so. It is a bit complex, too; it covers all your other sports — your netball, your tennis, your cricket, summer basketball as well as your football.

**Mr INGRAM** — Just on that, how important is it to retain the heritage of the football and sporting clubs?

**Mr BROWN** — It is imperative. Between Underbool and Murrayville is 60 kilometres, and in that area there used to be eight or nine clubs. Now I think there are one or two people playing sport out of it. I suppose, without going too far, a lot of them are jumping on motorbikes and heading out into the national park — and get chased! That is their sport, and they reckon it is good fun. It is quite illegal, I suppose, but what do they do? Those kids are looking for something. One of them decided he was coming to training and wanted to join in the social aspect of it. Of course he had a few beers and got pulled up. He never comes back to football; he reckons it is easier to pay fines out in the scrub if he gets caught. It is really not funny; it is very disappointing. We need those football and netball social outlets. It is like that story of that lady who did not even know who was playing, but she would never miss a game of football, because that is where she knew she could make contact with all her friends.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — I have a comment and then a question. You are talking about the VCFL, and it has come up before, reducing the number of players on the ground. Can I make a plea? If you are thinking about doing that, I would have unlimited interchange benches, particularly at reserves level. The important thing is to maintain the game in country areas. Sometimes we have to relinquish the seriousness of the competition to make sure that anybody who wants a game can get a game, particularly at the seconds level. If we only have say 15 or 16 on the ground, what does it matter if one team has 10 sitting on the interchange bench? Isn't that better than having six or eight 17 or 18-year-olds who have come out of under-15s or under-16s being told, 'Sorry you have trained for the last two weeks, but you cannot get a game'. That is just my — —

**Mr BROWN** — Yes, that is it. There are problems over numbers.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — That is right. But often you get fluctuations, but nothing drives people away from football quicker than not getting a game. I think that sometimes clubs — like when you had this merger here and you did have excess players and you knew it was not going to last, but it is certainly not going to last if very quickly a few of those players just do no — —

**Mr BROWN** — Obviously the big majority of them do not have the numbers.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — That is right.

**Mr BROWN** — I know at Walpeup-Underbool last year the last three home-and-away games happened to be all played at home. I have no doubt at all that if they had had to travel up to that 180 kilometres they would have forfeited each of those last three. I think they had eight players run on the ground. and they went and dragged

out another two or three retired guys, and then the under-16s, who had already played a game, ran back out on the ground again.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — You have raised, as have a number of other people, that attracting volunteers is difficult. There is fear of litigation and of how to deal with paperwork to do with WorkCover and occupational health and safety issues — all these things that they have perhaps never had to deal with before in any of their previous capacities. Do you think there is a role for perhaps the state government as a result of this inquiry to provide funding to go round country communities providing training and encouragement for volunteers, just to help people understand the benefits?

**Mr BROWN** — Certainly. The VCFL is doing that at the minute, as well. It runs an insurance-type forum within all of the areas. I think they came into the Mallee league this year, if not late last year. Probably the difference, say, on ground inspections is just how you get a lot of that safety equipment. You have goalpost covers; you try and get grants to get them. I know they are about, but you try and get them. I know that our club has put in for them five years in a row and still has not got one.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — You need a decent local member!

**Mr BROWN** — There are things like that. You get your sprinkler caps that might all of a sudden deteriorate a little bit, and can be dangerous, and they need to be checked out. To keep those grounds up to that level is pretty difficult and fairly costly. It costs a lot of money just to keep ovals going.

**Mr WALSH** — So would it be better to have someone in who is trained to fill in some of the paperwork or get rid of some of the paperwork?

**Mr BROWN** — I think it would certainly be good to get rid of some of the paperwork, but I think some of that paperwork has already lowered some of the costs of insurance premiums. Because of the paperwork that the Victorian Country Football League instigated, the VCFL clubs now pay about \$2500 insurance a year, whereas you get some in the metropolitan leagues paying \$8500; South Australian country clubs are paying about \$9000 a year in insurance — clubs, not leagues. That has come about because of some of the paperwork that is being done; so although it would be good to get rid of it, it has helped in lowering insurance premiums.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Are all your grounds in the Mallee league playable at the start of the season?

**Mr BROWN** — I would tend to think so, particularly those ones up north on the pipeline. I suppose last year radio stations would be ringing me, as the president of the league, and asking, ‘Are your grounds right?’ A lot of them are sand based, and there is still the pipeline. The pipeline is under no restrictions at all other than cost, and probably over at Jeparit-Rainbow they get some of those hard-baked black clays underneath and without water they get a bit hard. It seemed to be a big worry last year, but just before the start of the year they had a pretty good rain and a lot of that was alleviated. We start to panic at this stage of the year when there is no rain and the ovals look a bit hard and could do with that water, but it works out most times. Maybe we will just stay optimistic.

**Mr WALSH** — Does the Mildura Rural City Council assist you with the cost of that water or the maintenance of the ground?

**Mr BROWN** — The Mildura city council gives Underbool recreation reserve, as a whole, \$3000 a year to offset the cost of, say, electricity, maintenance and maybe a bit of the phone bill or something, and that is not just football-netball, but also tennis, bowls et cetera.

**Mr WALSH** — Is that all the assistance you get?

**Mr BROWN** — Yes, and then of course there are other grants we have to apply for on a one-for-one basis.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Mr Brown, for your time. You will get a copy at the transcript in a couple of weeks, in which you may correct matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

**Committee adjourned.**