

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Seymour – 14 April 2004

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Witness

Mr J. Ure, president, Central Goulburn Football League (affirmed).

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I call the public hearing to order, and I extend a welcome to the people who have made themselves available today. I advise all those present that 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 advise all present at the 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 advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. The committee is an all-party committee, with members from the National Party, the Liberal Party and the Labor Party, and myself as an Independent.

I call our first witness, Jim Ure. Welcome, Jim. Please give your full name and address for the reference of Hansard and also indicate whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and, if you are representing an organisation, your position within that organisation.

Mr URE — My name is James Charles Ure. I live here in Seymour at 49 Delatite Road. I am representing the Central Goulburn Football League, of which I am the president. It is a local district league covering the area between here and Yea, Benalla, Violet Town and Shepparton.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Everything you say will be taken down and recorded, and it will become public evidence in due course. I invite you to make some brief comments, and then the committee members will be available to ask questions.

Mr URE — Firstly, I am pleased that this hearing is being held, because country football is terribly important to small communities as well as big communities. I was horrified when coming home from a wedding in Canada and travelling down the west coast of America to find there are practically no local sporting competitions there as we have here. It is all college stuff. I was a bit worried about the AFL and the under-18 competition. It does not care much about the junior leagues, all it is interested in is kids aged 16, 17 and 18. But that is another story.

When you are dealing with clubs in towns the size of Thornton; Eildon; Dookie; Yea, which is probably a big community compared with some of them; and Benalla, with the All Blacks, which represents half of Benalla, and the other half goes with Goulburn Valley, you are dealing with clubs that are really struggling to keep their ends up. In our competition we have four levels — under-14s, under-17s, the seconds and the seniors or reserves — so before the year starts we are up for \$970 just in a straight affiliation fees, and then each club has to pay a total of \$3960, which includes their registration fees for the players. So they have 46 players at \$40, and then 22 at \$20 and 22 at \$20 for the juniors. That is before the clubs open the door, before they appoint a coach, before they buy their gear and before they do anything. You wonder how the hell they can keep going. Then of course they have accreditation fees for the coaches and accreditation fees for the trainers. You cannot just go out and rub someone down any more; it all has to be done according to Hoyle. You have to do courses and blah, blah, blah. You have to get blokes who are prepared to spend time away from home to do these courses. We are talking about volunteers, although it is getting to the stage where some clubs are forced to pay trainers in order to get them. It was once all done from the house by volunteers.

So you have those accreditation fees in both those areas, and then you have the cost of the coaches themselves. Very few of them want to do it for nothing, and I do not blame them for that. Then you have match payments for players, and that is another story. Even in a district competition we have blokes getting \$200 and \$300 a week, which I think is disgraceful. Mr Barassi was here at one of our sports dos for the Seymour footy club, and he said it is the only sport in the world where people at fifth-grade level get paid, and he is pretty right. So it just filters down from the AFL, through the VFL and then through the senior leagues and into the district leagues. They all expect money.

Next we have secretaries honorarium. The secretary of a football league is now forced to do an enormous amount of work. Keith Wellman, our secretary, tells me that at this time of the year through the winter he is practically working full time. He is on the ruddy computer most of the time, because everything has to be sent off to Melbourne all the time, and there are emails flying up and down, emails promoting what the VCFL is trying to do, and half of them he does not send to clubs because they would not know what to do with them. This is the sort of stuff that is going on behind the scenes.

Every club has to purchase medical materials, jumpers and whatever each year, and they keep coming up. That is on top of all those other things. Then you have your sponsorship. You work your guts out to get sponsorship in the

town from the local butcher or whomever, and then the VCFL sends out memos saying, 'You should be buying your jumpers and your pies through our marketing program'. How can you tell a bloke who has just bought a spot on the fence for several hundred dollars that you are not going to buy anything off him and that you have to get it through the VCFL? He is not going to renew, is he.

Club membership is getting harder to boost. You are looking at \$40 or \$50 a year, at least. When I first became president here we did not pay any council charges for grounds and the ground was supplied by the council, but times have changed. This ground is probably not the best example of that, because they have a working committee that looks after it and raises money for it, which is great, but a lot of them do not have that.

Then, of course, you have the water problem. With the last few dry years, if you can get water you have to buy it. It does not just get provided. If your ground is not in a reasonable condition they will say you cannot play, because the insurer does not want you running the risk of getting hurt; he might have to pay out something. If clubs have not had much success in recent years, it gets very hard to recruit people and do jobs, especially if you ask them to do it for nothing.

As to the VCFL enticing clubs, I talked about that and about getting materials through them — direct marketing. The VCFL is an organisation that has grown from four when I was involved for a long time as senior vice-president of Goulburn Valley. There were four blokes there: David Coad, Barry Senior and a couple of office girls, and they ran the whole show. Now there are 12, and there are probably another nine regional managers. The fellow in this district does Goulburn Valley, our league, the Murray league, the KDFL and the Picola league. He is only on an honorarium of a few thousand a year, but it all adds up. Unfortunately he does not have much say in anything either. Most of the edicts come from on high. They are told to the people down below, and you can understand how they get upset. They never made any contributions to the decisions being made. I am getting stuck into them a bit. I am sorry. I talked about Keith Wellman and what sort of work he is doing as a league secretary, his email and god knows what.

On disclosure, just having spent 35 years in an insurance company that has gone phut because of the VCFL decisions we were under strict control of ASIC and APRA, and all of our things had to be disclosed. We had to disclose every damn thing we did. Unfortunately it is not happening with these people. We do not know what sponsorship they are providing to the VCFL, how much money. We do not know what the different profits are. We do not know what the total wages are. We do not know what the people are getting paid. We know they are running round in cars, the area managers, to do something, but when do you see them? You do not see them. They have four or five for the whole state, so it is pretty impossible to get around to the individual clubs, and that is where we need help, down here.

I am getting wound up a bit. I do not want to talk about the VFU other than to say that in 1948 it was commenced by a far-seeing gentlemen in Melbourne in what they called the Victorian Football Union. Some of those blokes became VFL directors. Those blokes helped start that, and then it gradually came out into the bush. I got involved in it in 1968. That was a non-profit organisation, purely for the players. Any profits we made went back into increased benefits the following year. In odd years we paid a dividend to clubs that had not had any claims. That has all gone by the board because we are out of a job, and I am glad some of those old blokes are not around to see it happen. I have just about said enough, I think.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Do you have netball as part of your league.

Mr URE — Yes.

Dr NAPHTHINE — And how important is that for the continuation of the league?

Mr URE — Terribly important. I did not realise you wanted to talk about that. It is very important because those girls do a lot of the work, and they bring extra people through the gate. The figures add up in the last couple of years because we have combined them. They used to play their grand final earlier than the men, but we have managed to convince them to do it all on the one day. It has made a big difference to our gates

Dr NAPHTHINE — What is the league's view of how the Rumbalara club fits in with the league? How does that operate?

Mr URE — You are getting into a different area. We need them because it makes our eighth club. We have supported them all the way along. We took them on when nobody else wanted them. Keith Wellman actually worked there for a year when he finished with the Goulburn Valley. He knows them backwards, and I have supported them all the way through. I believe they are at the level they ought to be at the moment. I know they have got ideas about getting up the ladder, but they have to get the club running a lot smoother than it is running now. They do not turn up at some of our meetings. We have a meeting once a month and sometimes they are not there, so it is a bit hard.

I do not like to be too critical of them. It is probably split up a bit too much. They need someone a bit stronger running the football side of it; otherwise, fine. They have a great new pavilion. We went to the opening of that the other day, and it was very good. Their ground is good, and maybe one day they will play in a major league. They recruit from all over the place. A lot of the players come from around Echuca and near Deniliquin. You would not know where some of them came from. They are skilled footballers. So they have something to offer in that department.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You touched on the AFL. It has a very successful program called Auskick for junior footy.

Mr URE — My grandson is just starting on it.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You also mentioned the under-18 competition and flagged some criticism of the AFL in respect of some of the juniors. What are some solutions? What are some other programs? What else can the AFL do for you?

Mr URE — I will ask you a question. Is the AFL there for its own benefit or for the good of the game?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You are not here to ask me a question! I am not answering your question!

Mr URE — I am saying that the AFL is not there for the down-to-earth part of the game, the basic part. In all the years I played they recruited blokes up to 25 years of age out of the seniors in the country. They might not even be major league, but they get around, see a bloke and say, 'He will be all right', and he mostly was. They have matured. They are taking kids at 16. The fellow from Collingwood, Josh Fraser, is a classic example. He did not play one game with Mansfield. Imagine how Mansfield would have been with him playing for a couple of years, this good kid. They would have come to see him. All the locals would have wanted to see him, but he is gone. He was down there playing at 16. Of course he has never been back; he is playing with Collingwood.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about the salary cap? Is it enforceable?

Mr URE — In the country?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You can speculate.

Mr URE — It is very hard to enforce.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How could it be enforced? Could it be improved in terms of how to enforce it itself or is it impossible?

Mr URE — The only way you can improve it is to ban any player payments, otherwise it is all under the lap, or a lot of it is. You smell it, but you cannot do much about it; you cannot prove it. It is going to happen. I remember sitting at Rochester one day when I was still at this club. This bloke said, 'I am paying that bastard \$600 a week, and look — he has not had a kick yet'. I am not joking. That did not show in the club's records. That is under-the-lap stuff. There is that much of that going on. It could be the local car dealer who helps him with a car. You would not know, would you? It is too easy to cheat. Sorry about that. I love the game; I do love the game.

Dr NAPHTHINE — I think you are absolutely spot-on. I think the VCFL is wasting a lot of time on the salary cap. It is impossible to police. You are better just to get on with it.

Mr URE — If they had the strength of character to organise leagues so that similar-sized towns played one another as much as possible, they might get somewhere. I remember when we tried to reorganise this district up here. We had a meeting in Murchison years ago when I was president there. Everyone came to the meeting and

said, 'Blah, blah, blah', but the manager said, 'You should go over there'. And they said, 'No, we have been playing there for 40 years. We do not want to go over there'. It becomes parochial, and no-one is game to grab it by the neck and say, 'This is what has got to happen for the good of the game'.

Dr NAPHTHINE — To use a political analogy, back in the mid-90s there was a restructure of local government. Do you think there should be an independent restructure of country football?

Mr URE — Yes, I do, but always bearing in mind you should think of the little places. It is not always to get what happened with one of our clubs in the Mallee league. We started off with Tempy, then it became Tempy-Goya, then it became Tempy-Goya-Patchewollock — and now it is Ouyen United. So you are going to have those sorts of things happening. You have to.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Jim, following on from that issue of the restructure, in Gippsland we had evidence from the VCFL representative in that region that he had attempted to encourage towns to play against towns, communities to play against communities and large towns to play against large towns, to try to restructure the leagues. All he could really do was encourage, because ultimately the decision was up to the individual clubs and the individual leagues. You have already mentioned that you had the meeting to try to sort it out. How do you get around those towns with individual attitudes or a dislike of trying to go down a different path?

Mr URE — In the end you have to impose it on them, because they will not agree. They all want to see things get better, but not in their backyard. It is the same with the waste — they don't want to have it, but they don't want it buried in their yard. That is the way we live, unfortunately. We are self-centred.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If the VCFL tried to do that — —

Mr URE — They would have to do it.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If it came from the VCFL, would that just create a whole range of disenchantment and anger against the organisation within some of the communities or clubs? I can see it would become fairly political.

Mr URE — Sure, Craig, but you would have to have a series of meetings and get with them, get them on your side, explain what you are doing and why you are doing it, get them to go away and think about it, and then have another meeting. It might take a couple of years. You cannot just go and do it.

I am on the regional board, because I am president of the Central Goulburn Football League, and there are five leagues and we all go and meet, and, really, we do not know what is going on there. We have a regional manager — and he is a good bloke, Freddo — but he does not get told much either. They do things from on high and impose them on you, and then you have to wear it. So they are doing that anyway, in some ways. Why can they not do it for the good of the whole outfit?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Jim, thank you very much for that. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. You are allowed to amend errors of fact or grammar, but you cannot change any matters of substance.

Mr URE — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.