

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

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Mr A. D. Crowden (sworn).

Mr CROWDEN — My name is Andrew Driscoll Crowden, I live at 55 Green Street in Wangaratta. While the program states that I am the vice-president of the Wangaratta City Soccer Club, which I am, I do not intend to represent necessarily the views of the soccer club here today. I am also a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne in the school for rural health, and I guess that is what I am, but I do not intend to represent the University of Melbourne either, so these will be my own personal views.

The CHAIR — Would you like to make your brief comments and afterwards we will have some questions for you.

Mr CROWDEN — I have circulated a brief paper and will talk to it very briefly. I have chosen to focus on two interrelated issues that arise from the terms of reference: firstly, the relationship between football and complementary sports such as soccer; and secondly, that the future of rural sport and the ongoing viability of rural sporting clubs can be assured.

By way of background I wish to acknowledge at the outset the significance of Australian football in Australian history, and I think it should survive. The influence on certain male aspects of cultural identification is well known, and Australian Rules football has certainly played some part in building community identity in many community towns. It is now clear, however, that in places where Australian Rules football is played, despite visual and print media saturation, corporate sponsorship, various advertising campaigns, government initiatives and the like, the game is experiencing many challenges. Particularly at the junior level Australian Rules struggles to attract young players, and some clubs, particularly in rural areas, have had to close. Even at the elite level survival is a major issue for many clubs. That is by way of background. Australian Rules football is culturally valuable and should survive. The challenge is how to ensure that it does survive.

I want to talk briefly now about the relationship between Australian Rules and football — soccer. By way of putting things into context, the trends in relation to football participation in Australia are very clear. You know this: in Victoria 4.5 per cent of the adult male population plays Australian Rules annually; in rural Victoria, however, about 11 to 12 per cent — and, unfortunately, falling — of adult males participate in football. There is a big difference between Victoria and rural Victoria, so we are talking about heartland. Nationally, of the football codes played, the game the rest of the world calls football, soccer, is also the no. 1 participation sport in Australia — about 200 000 players and increasing. That is based on 2001 census figures, so it is increasing. Australian Rules is second with about 152 000 players, and unfortunately falling, followed by touch football, which is almost equal to Australian Rules football at around 147 000. The two codes of rugby, league being slightly greater than union, attract approximately 128 000 players. That is the context I wish to address.

That soccer is the most played football in Australia is not surprising, given the multicultural and increasingly diverse nature of Australia. What is somewhat surprising, though, is that soccer still ranks as no. 1, given the corporate sponsorship and the media saturation of Australian football.

Let us look at Wangaratta, which is an interesting context as well, to take it right down to a micro level. In Wangaratta we have population of about 18 000 people and a district population of about 26 000 people. Most weeks during the winter season in Wangaratta up to 400 males and females participate in soccer on a Saturday and Sunday — junior local competitions on Saturdays; representative competitions on Sundays. Moreover, 11 boys and 4 girls play at association representative level — that is Soccer Albury-Wodonga. They travel around the country. I have just come back from New South Wales from a competition for one of my young lads, so 11 boys and 4 girls play at that association level. Two boys in Wangaratta play at National Soccer League level. They live in Wangaratta and they play in the national league. So it is interesting, given our population and the percentages of people who are participating and have a pathway to an elite level.

Despite the administration challenges at the national level for soccer, those who live in rural areas do have enormous potential opportunity for national and international participation and success for both males and females playing soccer. It is an inclusive sport. It is an international sport. Unfortunately there is not the same opportunity within Australian Rules football. Obviously it is not an international sport, and Australian Rules football is a solely male game, or virtually solely a male game, and is not played in all parts of Australia. Those who play it are usually the stronger, fitter males, thus access to Aussie Rules is more limited than it is for soccer, so in a way it is easy to understand why the participation rate for soccer is increasing and Australian rules is stabilising or falling.

Soccer is an inclusive game where male, female and people of all shapes, sizes and heights may comprise a team. Sensitive to this context and given that we want Australian Rules to survive, and I certainly do, what do we do? This is the second part of my submission. The challenge is to ensure the continuing survival of Australian Rules football while at the same time ensuring the survival of a range of other sports that are now flourishing, particularly in rural Victoria, as well as metropolitan Victoria and metropolitan rural Australia, across an increasingly diverse rural Victoria. Rural Victoria is changing; it is culturally diverse. Accordingly, to my mind the answer must surely lie in the creation and fostering of sporting environments that are sensitive to the realities of contemporary rural Australia. Diversity should be encouraged and all interests, even those who do not or will never have an international profile, should still be supported. Thus the uniqueness of Australian Rules football should be acknowledged and supported.

However, the viability of one sporting activity should not dominate the discourse. In rural areas sport and recreational activities should be approached from a perspective that is sensitive to the cultural changes in rural communities and the diversity of sporting and health needs of rural people. Planning should also include consideration of these sporting and recreational activities that are passive as well as active. Walking groups, cycling and other outdoor activities that are such a large part of rural community recreation must also be considered. Particularly in rural environments, this will best be done — and this is my answer — if energies are pooled.

Collaboration is the key. It is from this perspective — a collaborative perspective — recognising the sporting and health interests of rural communities that I make the following recommendations. I divide it into three brief areas. To ensure the future of rural sport and the ongoing viability of rural sporting clubs and diverse sporting activity, which is one of your terms of reference, there should be stronger collaborative relationships between all sporting and leisure activities in rural areas. Funding should be provided for sports assemblies and/or institutes to be initiated and further developed. Collaborative models of shared sporting administration and research and resources should be developed and operationalised, and rural communities should be encouraged to continue to develop sporting precincts where swimming pools, gymnasiums, netball, tennis, hockey, lacrosse, cycling, football, soccer, Australian Rules football, rugby, and a wide range of diverse sports are all co-located together sharing resources and collaborative administrations. Sports assemblies could include an international sporting section and other sections, including declining sports in need of support such as Australian Rules football. You could have a football section.

My second point is that to ensure the future of rural football and the ongoing viability of rural football clubs, there should be greater collaboration between all football codes. Football sections within a sports assembly model should be able to support each other. Declining sports such as Aussie Rules would be better supported. Higher participation sports such as soccer would be able to continue to flourish. In fact, I would like to see a situation where both flourished. There may be even be the opportunity for players to participate and progress along pathways in different codes. So some people who choose to play Australian Rules football for a certain time of their life may even have the opportunity to play international football as in soccer. It could be done if the codes came together — and Australia needs it to be done. There should be stronger relationships between Australian Rules football and complementary sports such as soccer. Particularly in rural areas there is enormous diversity of sporting and leisure activity choices. Different sporting activities, as I have said, should be co-located together to share administrative support facilities, coaching, management et cetera. Resources are scarce. We need to pool them. No-one can survive on their own. The codes need to come together.

Finally, I will make a couple of brief comments about ensuring the future of Australian Rules football as a code. If it is to survive, it must try to increase participant access by being more inclusive and less focused on elite competition at the expense of junior sport and other competitions. The code obviously must change and it must do so quickly. Corporate sponsorship and television coverage of elite level competition at the expense of grassroots competition is, in the end, self-limiting and has already almost destroyed the game. If any football code is not able to offer considered junior development and access to girls and women as well as boys and men, then it is unlikely to flourish within the diversity of choices in contemporary multicultural Australia. In rural areas these realities are no different. I will stress the point: Australian football in rural areas must collaborate with other codes of football as well as with other active and passive sports in a sports assembly or sports institute model of rural sport and recreation administration. Thank you.

Mr WALSH — Can I challenge your assumptions about the participation rate in Aussie Rules? I see you have a copy of the VCFL submission there, but from my recollection of reading that, the participation rate at the

junior level is increasing substantially. There are more junior clubs; there are more junior leagues. There is a decline at the senior level because of the changing demographics of some parts of country Victoria. So what do you base your assumption on?

Mr CROWDEN — On the census and the Football Victoria Victorian football review of 2001, and the ABS sporting Australians 2000 year book, Australia. You may be right, and I am pleased to hear that, if that is the case. I just pulled the latest national figures I could. If there are more recent figures, that is great.

Mr WALSH — Can I suggest you get a copy of the VCFL submission to this committee and have a read of it because it is conflicting evidence that we have had, that is all.

Mr CROWDEN — I think you will find that my figures are right, but we could argue statistics. You are suggesting that more people play Australian football than play soccer?

Mr WALSH — No, you said it was in decline. The VCFL figures say that particularly junior participation rates are increasing substantially by participants, clubs and junior leagues.

Mr INGRAM — In Victoria?

Mr CROWDEN — In Victoria. I was talking about Australia.

Mr WALSH — This is a Victorian government inquiry.

Mr CROWDEN — I realise that, but the Victorian government surely needs to be cognisant of what is happening in the world, and in Australia, and to look at international pathways for sport and participation. I recognise that this is a country Australian Rules football inquiry, but I felt I needed to put this context in because we have a lot of people playing our sport. In fact, we are the biggest football code.

Mr McQUILTEN — One of the problems I see with what you are talking about is in parts of Victoria, unlike Wangaratta where there is a strong, according to you, soccer connection, if you go to Ultima and Sea Lake and you get out in the Wimmera, there is no soccer club, none at all, and the only codes are Aussie Rules and netball. They are about the only ones — and cricket — but there are not many alternatives, so that is a slight flaw in your argument in those sort of areas. I can understand that in the Wangarattas and the Melbournes it is different, but there are parts of country Victoria and parts of country Australia where there is no soccer, and it is only football.

Mr CROWDEN — I would imagine that children and people would be travelling from those areas to play soccer, though. I would be very surprised if people are not. Soccer is played everywhere. I do not know those two particular towns you talked about, but if there were an increasing multicultural group within that community, then soccer, even if were not being played competitively, it would be played. Football is everywhere. If you go to Africa, to the deepest darkest parts of Sudan, or wherever, where there is a civil war and famine and the like, the kids are still kicking around a ball. So football, no matter what code it is, is universal.

Mr McQUILTEN — In America they did not even have a soccer ball; they were playing with a tin can!

Mr CROWDEN — However, I acknowledge what you saying about access and the recent 50 or so years of Australian history, where Australian Rules football has been the dominant sporting activity of young men and boys; but it is changing.

The CHAIR — My electorate is Seymour and soccer is certainly becoming quite important in a lot of the towns, but the soccer clubs are struggling very much with facilities and access to them.

Mr CROWDEN — Exactly.

The CHAIR — Have you any recommendations — I know you are talking about maybe sharing of facilities, obviously — for making that possible? Have you any recommendations as to how the state government could work with soccer associations to ensure that they have facilities to keep going?

Mr CROWDEN — I think my suggestion for a sports assembly or institute model is what I see as the best solution. It is not going to be easy, though. Soccer's biggest challenge, as with cycling I would imagine and others, is that it is stressed for facilities. In Wangaratta we are at the south Wangaratta reserve; we have basically three and

a half soccer pitches and 400 kids participating in the sport. We are absolutely chock-a-block. We look at some of the grounds around Wangaratta and we think, 'Oh, if only our 400 kids could walk there it would be a lot easier'. That is why co-location is so appealing to a sport that is growing. Having said that, I think Australian Rules football is a fantastic game, and I want to see it grow and thrive as well. In a diverse Australia we should be able to have multiple codes, and I like my idea of kids who are playing Australian football at the elite level changing over and playing a bit of soccer at an international level and vice versa. There is merit in that idea because the two games could be complementary — not many would agree with that. You laugh, but I do not — —

Mr McQUILTEN — It is a bit like Palestine!

Mr CROWDEN — It is not, because we are all people and we all like football and we all want to win on an international stage. Australia needs its elite youth to be diverted partly into football — soccer — as well playing the local small Aussie Rules game. Do you know what I mean?

Mr McQUILTEN — Yes.

Mr CROWDEN — It is a big challenge for this country. If Australia could be up there and be competitive at World Cup level then that would be significant, both for women as well as men. That means enormous things to this country if we could get that happening, and I do not think soccer can do it without Australian Rules football support. That is why we should co-locate. Resources are scarce around here anyway, so we need to co-locate and get our administrations right in all football codes, in all sports. We should share a gymnasium, share the grounds, maybe build a ground with our pooled resources, share coaches. Coaching is coaching is coaching to a certain extent. There are unique aspects in different branches of different sports, but there is some common ground in coaching such as relating, communication, connecting with kids — those sort of issues. There are different skills, you have special parts of courses, but we could do wonderful things in rural Australia if we had an institute model that was not just an international sporting institute model but one that included cricket, netball, hockey — well, hockey is international, but we could bring the sports together. That is my view.

The CHAIR — In New South Wales it is a bit easier because a lot of rugby league or rugby union is played so you have the same dimensions on the ground and the posts can usually be adjusted. You can have a wider goal post at the bottom to make it into a soccer goal. It is not so easy to do that with Australian Rules.

Mr CROWDEN — You could not use the same ground. When I say co-location, I mean co-location of activity. You would still need discrete football. I suggest you would need discrete hockey — obviously, because it is played on synthetic courts. You would need discrete rugby and you would need discrete soccer. You could share the grounds for training. Why not bring the premium local Aussie Rules squad together with the top soccer squad? We virtually did it: one of the Australian Rules football people worked on fitness this year with the Warriors. The Warriors is the local representative national youth league soccer team, and a key sporting identify in Wangaratta did some training with them, so why couldn't we do that? We could share facilities. There are different programs for different sports. Obviously Aussie Rules football is for big strong men, whereas some soccer players are young women.

Mr McQUILTEN — Years and years ago schools got their acts together. the town was the hub in the middle and then around that you had the footy fields and the cricket fields and other fields, and in the middle was the swimming pool with the one kiosk that serviced all of those other things on a Saturday. It makes a lot of sense..

Mr CROWDEN — That is my idea, and we could have a shared sporting club which could even serve meals and become the hub of the community. Even in the smaller towns I think that could work because you would be recreating that community hub.

Mr INGRAM — I did not see it in your submission, but in your position as senior lecturer for the school of rural health how important do you think regular organised physical activity is to young people's physical and mental health, particularly in communities that are financially disadvantaged as well as disadvantaged in health, mental health and a number of other areas — which a lot of rural communities are?

Mr CROWDEN — You know the answer to this one, Craig. I think it is absolutely one of the most important things. Organised active competitive recreation can give so much to kids. I am still of the view that on the football field or on the playing track people are equal. The referee or the umpire or whoever is in charge. Even if I am coming from a disadvantaged background or I have disabilities in one aspect of my life or I am struggling at

school or whatever, when I get on the track and grab that football and kick it or whatever, that is a healthy outlet and good for people's mental health. That is my answer to that. I think that as well as competitive sport, activities such as cycling and passive recreation are equally important. Therefore, while we have our competitive precincts of sporting collaboration, we could also create a healthy community hub. This is perfect in Wangaratta with the Barr Reserve, and Wangaratta is creating an interconnecting sequence of bike paths. It is important.

Mr INGRAM — As someone who grew up in a Victorian town that had no organised Aussie Rules football and the organised sporting activity was soccer — that was Mallacoota — and has gone on and played in a number of country leagues for Aussie Rules, I do not see that the two cannot be competitive, because I have played in both Aussie Rules on a Saturday and soccer on a Sunday in particular leagues. There is probably a number of young people who would, if the timing was right, be able to play both and follow both codes to a certain extent until they decided whether they wished to continue or go into one or the other. Is that your view on that?

Mr CROWDEN — Yes, that is exactly what happens in Wangaratta, particularly the boys — boys and girls, actually, because they play netball as well. Those who really love their sport tend to play as much as they can, so in Wangaratta you can play on both Saturday and Sunday; so on Saturday you can play Australian football and on Sunday you can play soccer. As the kids get older, it is harder. Under 13 it is a bit challenging; under 14 or 15 it is very difficult for them to do that, but some still do. Why could you not have a system whereby if you were together you could actually timetable your sporting calendar in a different way to provide better access to more sport, particularly with the younger kids, the 10, 11 and 12-year-olds. Why couldn't they play what we call in soccer a goal kick on a Saturday morning and then Aussie Rules on Sunday or whatever? We could introduce the kids to a variety of sports. That would be my idea. Focus on their health, their mental health and their sporting recreation so they can enjoy all sports. Out of that I am sure we would still create really good elite Australian footballers and also good elite soccer players. At the moment we are divided.

Mr McQUILTEN — We have Mark Viduka now who is not doing too badly.

Mr CROWDEN — Mark Viduka is doing all right. We are hoping he is going to be coming to Telstra Dome on 24 May — he and Harry Kewell — to play against Turkey.

Mr WALSH — You spoke a lot about the participation stuff, but one of the things we have heard everywhere is the difficulty of football clubs getting volunteers to help run the clubs, and now all the issues around food handling and the responsible serving of alcohol and all the courses they have to do. Is that a similar issue with soccer clubs?

Mr CROWDEN — I think it goes across all sporting clubs. I was at a committee meeting the other week where one of the very experienced women who had been involved in netball for years and years claimed that the age of the volunteer was over. She may be right. In Wangaratta I think we are lucky with the Wangaratta City Soccer Club. We have a committee of about 12 people and we have a lot of support on a Sunday. It comes with high participation, I think. If you have a lot of kids playing the sport, you are going to get those parents who put up their hands, but I think it is challenging, and I think the water problems and all the other issues that have been raised within the various submissions apply to all sports. It is looking for solutions outside of one sport and looking for rural communities. That is my point.

Mr WALSH — So if the age of the volunteer is over — —

Mr CROWDEN — I do not know if I agree with that. I did listen to her because I respected what she was saying.

Mr WALSH — If it is threatened then, what can we do to not threaten it, from your experience?

Mr CROWDEN — Again — and I do not want to sound like a broken record — if four or five sports got together, while we would be running separate committees, maybe there could be a central accountant or a central administration, so that instead of everyone having to worry about doing the books and trying to learn the various accounting systems that are used, we could all go to one person, so there would be the pooling of resources, and at the same time maybe you could link up your TAFE college, so you had coaching courses or whatever going through it, and then maybe a university would be interested in coming in and giving kids a degree to do a sports and recreation course. Pooling it all together, and giving credentialled, articulated education as well as sharing resources is the secret.

Some rural communities, as you say, are dropping in population. Some are blowing out with different interest groups, with an aged population, or a group of refugees, or whatever. We really need to look very carefully, and again we need to look outside our individual sports and look at what is best for our diverse communities. Our diverse communities are changing. Sport could pull it all together though.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission. You will get a copy of the transcript and you may correct any matters of fact or grammar. It was great to get that perspective today. Thank you.

Mr CROWDEN — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.