

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Country Football

Melbourne – 10 May 2004

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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 of 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.

The CHAIR – Paul now if you could give us your evidence, we will have questions for you after that.

Mr DAFFEY – I don't have a PowerPoint display. I'll provide you with the facts and figures as we go along pertaining to the last five years. I have put everything through a filter, so I am hopeful something organised comes out at the end. I always get asked by friends in the city, and by some friends in the country: "Is country footy dying?" And my answer is always no. There are four questions I get asked that I have written down. I may be asked more, but the main one is: "Is country footy dying?" There's always publicity when a club goes down. The second is about sizing. I also get asked: "Is country footy violent?" There seems to be this perception that heads are rolling around the boundary. I tell them, "No, that's not the case at all". With country footy there's this romance from city people about it. Is soccer a threat? I tell them yes and no on that one, but I'll get onto that later.

Is country footy dying? Where there are people there are clubs; it's a product of population. So country footy is dying, as far as I can see, in places where there are no people. For example, the Mallee and East Gippsland seem to be the most isolated areas in Victoria and the most distant from Melbourne. If there are no young ones to play footy, they can't have clubs. The drain from the farms with people going to the cities is also evident in the regional cities such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong. In those cities it seems to be that while there are not many new clubs, the numbers attending the old clubs are growing. Ocean Grove is an example where there is a huge swell. There's only one club still, but there's a huge swell of young fellas playing footy within that club. And that's just people who have moved to the coast, so there's more people who filter through the local footy club. As a consequence Ocean Grove is very strong. It's also got some very good administrators there, so they're strong.

In some of these larger centres there could be more clubs just to absorb the people moving in from the farms. I don't have figures on this, but the numbers going from the farms has increased rapidly in the last 20 years; it seems to be bottoming out a bit now, and the number of clubs dying has decreased significantly. None died in the summer just gone, but two or three died in the previous summer.

In Bendigo, for example, the Bendigo Football League is trying its hardest. It's got nine teams at the moment, but odd numbers don't do for administrators. They wanted ten to make it nicer for the fixtures, and so forth, which is fair enough. Eucha and Rochester used to be in the Bendigo Footy League in the '50s and '60s and have been asked to return. They've also asked Kilmore and have succeeded in attracting Gisborne. Kyneton has been there since the '50s. Strathfield is a developing suburb on the outskirts of Bendigo, there seems to be enough people there now for a footy club – and there's certainly interest among the people there for a club. So I think the Bendigo Football League could do well in trying to establish a club in Strathfield, say, or the government could help set up a club by providing a few funds for the people of Strathfield. They keep saying the money they're paying to the council in rates is not going back to them via sports facilities or to help set up a club.

To the question of administration – you often hear about a club being \$60 000 in debt, and the assumption is therefore made that money is wasted on players. I don't believe generally that is true. This might be because a particular club has gone for a short-term fix in trying to buy a premiership; or they spent money on the wrong things, or were just being wasteful. Money has always been a part of football. I came across an example in 1894 at the Shamrock Hotel in Dunnstown where I heard someone was paying a player, and this was meant to be a bad thing; you weren't supposed to pay players at all, but it's just been going on ever since then. Ever since football started, there have been people paying to get the best players in the region. So I think you've got to accept that. The way to help clubs around that is just to basically help them to not spend money on wasteful things and also just to help them with administration. A big problem does seem to be administrative overload. While the amount of red tape has increased in recent years, greater public liability and demands are increasing. It is a good system, where they're trying to get the personal background for every player. So you could pick up from the desk information about where every player has played, but in some cases that may increase the administrative load within a club. The way to get around this – maybe it's the easiest – would be to have a travelling road show where we put a few people on the road – give an address of the footy club or the annual show or something. Ask them what area of administration are they struggling with; which of the forms or which of the government departments do they have to deal with; or where would they like tuition. Alternatively, in some bigger clubs there's a case to be

made for full-time general managers. Some of the leagues have general managers now and some clubs manage with just a bit of help. They would do well to have a full-time general manager.

Administrative help was necessary at Heathmere, near Portland, after their premiership in 2002. They lost all their players over the summer, so they almost folded six months after winning the premiership. The VCFL's western area manager went down there and helped with a few administrative things. The effect was like a run on a bank, where everyone panics. But the club was saved. So a bit of help with administration does go a long way. Facilities: no longer is a tin shed good enough. Players do need and demand good facilities. Supporters do, too. It's like – I think it's the Carter report; improving facilities on grounds would help. The theatregoers go to the footy, too, and I think it's the same at all levels. If the facilities are better, the supporters don't stay at home; they're encouraged to go to the footy.

At Yaapeet, I am talking about a very strong community with no people; there were 80 people fielding four football teams and four netball teams. And it's a fair drive from Mildura, Ballarat and Horsham. At the end of 1999 the Yaapeet club folded. In 1993 I think they had around \$70 000 – I might be wrong – to create a new shed – not a new shed, but a dressing room and social room. They called it the Mud Hut. It was the pride of the district, but it wouldn't be used very much now because there's no footy club or no netball club. I think perhaps the notion of central facilities in more isolated areas, where rather than giving so much for this club, so much for that club, would be more effective. In one area I know of they have two ovals and one massive complex in the middle of the region, and everyone plays there on a Saturday. It wouldn't be very popular with a lot of people. Everyone likes to play their home game at their home ground, and I understand that. It's just that in terms of providing funding and wondering should we give that much to them? Is that club going to last this long? – it might be an idea to have central facilities in more isolated areas.

It does in Lake Cullulleraine, about 50km west of Mildura. There are two ovals and three clubs share facilities there. These clubs are from very, very small communities. Anyway, I just thought it was an idea worth throwing up. It wouldn't be very well received at first, but I thought it was worth throwing up.

The recent announcement on help with water funding was well received, I believe. Not so long ago it was just considered right to be playing on a hard ground – probably get bindi-eyes in your bum or whatever – but now people have moved on. Everyone wants to play on a nicely watered ground. Sometimes we do play on a privately owned ground. In the 1950s it was not unusual to play on an open-top paddock. People had no choice – and they didn't water their ground. So there was a big bun fight about who plays where. That's accepted, and I think there's an argument in that. Perhaps it should be accepted more than it is here, but it's not. Everyone seems to want watered grounds. If you were to decide where to play, you probably would go somewhere where the grass is lush and the facilities and grounds are better.

Volunteers – A few years ago the AFL recognised 100 volunteers around the country. That was very well received so recognition schemes don't go astray for volunteers. It's the least they deserve, actually.

Umpires – I welcome the recent initiatives. This time last year there were ads to attract umpires. I understand that was successful. More should be done to encourage former players to umpire. One of the issues is – and that's just part of sport – that players and officials don't always see the game from the same point of view. When I played, I thought many umpires didn't have a feel for the game. I encourage former players to take it up and try to fast track them into the service after about half a dozen reserves games – well that's probably a bad example – but just fast track them into senior umpiring. A reasonably bright former player can pick up the rules and the requirements of umpiring.

Zones – It was interesting hearing the conversation during Andrew Demetriou's presentation earlier about zoning. I think it was a good point. Obviously in your travels people ask you, "Why isn't there zoning anymore?" I think it's an idea with merit. The example of the Langwarrin plumber, should he be made to be a plumber just in Langwarrin or elsewhere, wasn't a good one. All players are drafted by clubs, and don't necessarily go where they want to go. From a football perspective it seems to further compromising a draft. The father-and-son rule seems to work. At the moment, where a draft is not pure, you can't select according to merit. A club can select the son of a father who's fulfilled the requirements. He might have played in 50 AFL games, or whatever. Well perhaps you keep the third-round draft pick for the father-and-son and make a second round – as Andrew said – for a zoned player. In that sense it could be an issue, or even if you wanted to make a fourth-round pick for zoning.

It seems to be that anything after selection 40 is experimental anyway, so why wouldn't you experiment on someone from your local area? It's an idea worth considering, because father-and-son appeals in a lot of ways, because the fans seem to like it. They like seeing Tommy Roach play for Richmond. They like seeing Matthew Scarlet play for Geelong – because their fathers did. People like to see the lineages increase. A big appeal of country footy is seeing a lot of brothers playing for one club, or “such-and-such's son”. People feel like that at all levels of sport. That's why the father-and-son rule is something fans want. I think zoning will increase the aspect of ownership. Obviously players should not necessarily be selected from their zone – say, from Warrnambool to play for Geelong. The “That kid is one of theirs” – people seem to have lost it.

The perception of footy is that Australian football is a game for the people, whereas over the last few years it hasn't quite been the game of the people that it was – well, since the corporate makeover. I think that perception is wrong in many ways, because more people now go to footy than they ever did. If you look at those sorts of figures – crowd figures and so forth and the number of games watched on the television – it's still a game of the people; it is just that the corporate aspect doesn't agree with everyone. If the sense of ownership is so important, which it is, then introducing one zone, zoning into the draft, might be a way to increase the ownership. Also it can increase interest in the draft, where people from the area are wondering who their club is going to pick.

The TAC Cup is a much-debated topic, and I have debated it – the pros and cons of the TAC Cup. Basically I'm for it. I've talked to a lot of country people who are not for it at all, but I think you need a pathway to professional sport. I spoke to one footy club last year, and they were saying, “Why can't we just have it like it was – where if someone was selected from here they go to Richmond, and if they're not good enough they come home?” One guy asked me, “Why on earth do I have to play for the Pioneers? Why can't I play for an under-17 or 18 team of my choice and then the AFL?” I said words to the effect that these days there is the threat from soccer, rugby and so forth where players see pathways into the top levels of other sports and they might go for them. But I doubt whether anyone in Nallawil is going to play soccer, so the argument didn't cut much ice! But I think a pathway to the top is essential, and also the dietary preparation and knowledge and skills picked up along the way do stand standard players in good stead. The downside is that two or three players were lost to the TAC Cup teams every year because they were disappointed at not being drafted. It was too much for some; they just dropped out of footy. And if they were really a part of their own club, or at least played with them until they were 14, they just didn't suit their club anymore, so they dropped out of footy.

I know the AFL statistics would say that's not the case. Anecdotally, it is the case. So I suppose I must go with the figures, but I think perhaps a little bit more could be done to ease the players back into the local club life. ‘Club’ meaning teams of all levels – seniors and juniors, under-17s or under-13s. With the TAC Cup, perhaps it would be good for the teenagers to play three games at their local club during the year – just to learn that their club has three generations of supporters – a president who's 45, the fullback is 35 and his son is 17. The clubs are made up of all ages. I think there should be a welfare officer or someone to help kids who might be back after spending time at another club. I don't think they should be banned from going to another club – just if they've got any issues about dealing with offers. And the AFL trickle-down effect – I mean, whatever the AFL does doesn't necessarily work at country level.

The big issue used to be violence. The 1990 Collingwood and Essendon grand final – remember the massive brawl at quarter-time. The same year there was a massive brawl in the Ovens and Murray league, which is still seen to be a low point of what is a very strong footy league. Rochester, it's also the same there. It doesn't happen now, because moves were made to stamp out violence in the AFL. It was deemed to be not okay, and that effect has come down through the ranks of country footy. Also country footy officials have laid their own steps in that regard as well. AFL coach support has been well documented. Racial slurs is another thing – with the AFL standing up to stamp it out, with a lot of help from the media, I think.

A few things go against the grain of popular opinion, I suppose; some people may have said it was wrong and so the idea was kicked out. At the moment it's happening with women in football – the championing of Caroline Wilson is a good example – so there is a trickle-down effect from the top. That's where strong leadership from the AFL is necessary, and from the country footy administrators, too. I think everything was just left to run its course not so long ago, but strong administrative initiatives are a good thing. Country footy is essentially healthy in areas where there are people, and so I don't think that the inquiry will find that it's dying at all, but that there are always ways it can be improved.

The CHAIR – Thank you very much Paul. I think we agree with you. The final statement we've been hearing a lot about as well.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – I know you touched on it Paul – the salary cap or payments for players; it's always around. I was paid when I was playing – probably too much – but there are always clubs, and if not every club, there's certainly a fair portion of clubs that are outside the salary cap. Although I know it has changed from 50 to 70 for major leagues, which again has created some issues of discussion around the traps about people who don't think it should've gone to 70. But what's your view on the salary cap? Mine is that we need to actually enforce it or you just have an open slather, one or the other. What's your view from your experience around the country in terms of an enforceable salary cap?

Mr DAFFEY – I don't have a strong view. It's one of those personal things where I turn off a bit. I don't think anyone tells the truth about money.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Because there's an argument then if we give money to South Barwon – and I mention South Barwon because it's my old club – \$50 000 to South Barwon for an upgrade, what's to stop them putting considerable money into players?

Mr DAFFEY – They can force you to do it. Clubs should not be given the money directly. Can you make sure that it goes towards facilities; can that be enforced?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Yes.

Mr DAFFEY – If they ask for facilities, it should be enforced that it goes towards that facility. As for enforcing a salary cap, that would take a lot of effort, I reckon. And I don't know whether we gain anything.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Paul, in the time that you've looked at country footy, how important do you see the change of involvement of netball clubs in the sustainability of country footy?

Mr DAFFEY – It's one of those ideas. Someone brings it in and you think why wasn't it done fifty years ago. It seems very logical now. It was started in the Bendigo league – I think in 1991 – and 1991 was the first year it was brought in. It was very small then, but from what I gather every club has three netball teams in the Bendigo League. I think as much as possible, if not everywhere, a football club needs people around the club so there's that interaction. The debate about women in football at the moment – familiarity between football and netball teams can't hurt. Just socially I just think it must be better. It should be encouraged more. Sometimes it doesn't happen because there's no netball court. You need a netball court.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Yes, facilities is an issue. I think one of the biggest challenges for country facilities is netball courts and changed facilities for the netballers. That's probably the biggest challenge across country football in many areas.

Mr DAFFEY – Probably why it's not a metropolitan phenomenon. Seems to be very much an aspect of country football. It doesn't happen in metropolitan footy. I've never asked and netball bodies have not wanted to be aligned in the cities, but it does seem more aligned with country footy and netball; and I definitely see a benefit to footy people and an opportunity for netballers as well.

Mr MITCHELL – Would you think that with the netball facilities, they're treated more as a poor cousin of football clubs?

Mr DAFFEY – Definitely, yes, that would be true. Netball people have a problem with that, and that's fair enough. It could be changed but it would overturn a lot of history. Footballers are seen to come first.

Mr INGRAM – What role do you think the media has in portraying the positives that came out of country football and go on out there on those country grounds every Saturday and the country netball courts? Because you do hear a lot of the negatives and you said yourself, that your peers promote the negative [indistinct]. But what role does the media have in portraying football in a better light?

Mr DAFFEY – It has a huge role. I reckon its role has improved in recent years. Probably over the last five years really, I think. It used to be standard for a player from the regions to get a League game, and he'd be on the back page of the *Sun* – that was accepted. He's from the country so he must be a hick. It doesn't happen so much now and it wouldn't be accepted. That's a good thing, but the media in Melbourne – are you asking specifically about metropolitan media or –?

Mr INGRAM – Metro media yes – well, all media.

Mr DAFFEY – I mean this is the way of the media –

Mr INGRAM – To sensationalise.

Mr DAFFEY – That’s your word Craig. Yeah I suppose they do; they jump on the things that are far more sensational, like a big brawl. If things are going along smoothly, it doesn’t hit the newsreaders because it’s just the way of news. The media does tend to jump on an issue. I think the metro media has, like the Hepburn brawl in 2000. There was a lot of ill-informed nonsense written about that. A lot of television crews and helicopters landing on the Dunnstown footy ground, and that wasn’t very well received. It’s actually a good example, because the television crew filmed what Dunnstown thought were the facilities. They filmed the old footy rooms, which were broken down. They would’ve had their place in the ‘60s and would’ve been the pride of the community, but five or six years ago, or ten years ago the Dunnstown people, through voluntary labour, bought these new rooms and they’re very proud of them; they’re the pride of the community. But the television cameras were far more interested, and the newspaper photographers were far more interested, in the dilapidated rooms, because they were seen to be such a big part of country football. So there’s the perception and a pride thing. I can see where that would make a better picture, but it’s actually telling a wrong story. The Dunnstown people were people were upset about that. So the media was presenting a wrong story there and sensationalising the brawl issue as well. A lot of people just get the tail end of things presented in 30 seconds’ worth on television.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Just on that media thing, Paul, can I say that both the *Sunday Herald Sun* and the *Sunday Age* do a fantastic job printing all the country footy results, and as much as possible, country netball. I’m not sure who organises that, but I think that is great. I mean, I know from country Victoria, you read through not only leagues that you used to maybe play in yourself, teams you used to play for, but also other leagues that you have some association with. I think it’s fantastic, and it should be encouraged. I think both – I certainly know the *Sunday Age* – and I’m just trying to recollect that – now seem to have a double page of their sports lift out devoted to country footy or country sport. They actually run stories about different leagues, or different clubs, and again – I mean I think that is a very, very positive thing. I would suggest that that is widely read, irrespective of whether people have any association with those particular communities or towns, but just because of the association with grassroots footy.

Mr DAFFEY – Yeah, it’s another one of those ideas. It was a decision of the editor of the *Sunday Age*, Peter Hanlon. You’ve got to fill the pages on a Saturday night – it’s sort of, “How will we fill the pages before the Saturday night game finishes at 10.30pm?” It’s aimed at the country people, so why don’t we give them stories about country footy? Which would seem very logical. They ask me, “Can you do it?” And it’s certainly well received. It’s kept going for the last five – four years, actually. The *Herald Sun* does it with Friday night footy. They fill their early editions with country stories and then they take them out, so the city people don’t realise, because in Melbourne you don’t get those editions, but that is a service for the country.

I think it benefits both parties; it benefits the newspaper because it might attract more readers. Everyone loves country footy in the country, so everyone benefits. In their own issues, with all the results that go in, I think footy people actually underestimate what the media does for them. There is that sensational aspect, which is true. Take one issue and blow it up and everyone goes bezerk. There’s also those daily reader services like the teams going in, the results going in every Sunday; a story on the local kid who’s got his first game, or someone’s won a medal or this story on whoever. A club tends to get angry when there is one negative story. In some cases their anger is warranted if the story’s treated badly or gives a wrong emphasis perhaps. Sometimes I think a club should be educated to where – and we’ve all been through that – to where a bit of a bit of negative can be a good thing, because newspapers and radio stations, and occasionally television, do a lot of good for these country footy clubs every day of the week. There’s been various standoffs, I’m sure, between editors and country papers saying, “We’re not going to run your teams on Friday; we’re not going to run results – no footy for the next month”. And people feel their throats are cut. So it’s one of those imperfect relationships where both sides have their grievances but they’re necessary for each other. So I think it works both ways.

Mr MITCHELL – Paul, just on the TAC – I don’t know if you heard Andrew this morning talking about the shortening of the season, and it’s been pretty strong across the state, that people would prefer the opportunity to get the young blokes back and use them as a draw cards for local games. How have you found that sort of thing?

Mr DAFFEY – I've heard that and I basically think it's a good idea. A good set-up would boost country finals. The point from the drafting perspective is that one of the issues for these kids – I call them kids because they are kids, I suppose – they're 16 and 17-year-olds – the talent scouts are onto every aspect of their lives. But one of the aspects that they seem to want to know is how they last the duration of the season. A season is 22 games or 18 games. Stamina is one of the determining factors of whether a kid is drafted. If someone just drifts off after Round 9, then that might come into consideration. It's another imperfect science anyway, so maybe that aspect of the drafting decision should be left off; it would be a real benefit for country footy. I think if those young fellas did play for their local clubs in September, there should still be a TAC Cup final series, because that should definitely be a determinant of drafting a young player – how they perform in finals. If it means shifting those finals forward a month, I think that could be good.

Mr INGRAM – Paul, would then going back and playing for their local country league also provide another measuring stick about how they perform in those big games, in amongst senior aged players, which is a bit of a test as well? Surely that's something that should be looked at – give them another go. Most of the talent scouts would already have them flagged well before they got to the finals of the TAC Cup.

Mr DAFFEY – You'd think so, wouldn't you? There seems to be a lot of what the presidents and secretaries and the supporters think of it. A lot of the kids there, do they really want to play a season with the TAC Cup or not? They may not necessarily want to go home and play for the local club. They seem to flock to the TAC Cups squads. But that's another aspect. We only hear from the presidents, who want their team with the flag and their local players to play in their club. It goes both ways.

Mr MITCHELL – How do you find kids who go and play TAC and they get pumped up thinking that they're going to become the next superstars, and then something happens? They might get an injury or something, or they get knocked back. What have you found are the after-effects of that knock? Are there programs to get them back into the local sides, or do they just drift away from footy full stop?

Mr DAFFEY – Again I always thought that it would have a bearing on whether they leave footy, but the figures show that they don't.

Mr MITCHELL – But is that what you found through travelling around the state and talking to people?

Mr DAFFEY – Yes, I've heard of a couple of boys who stopped playing. They hadn't gotten over the disappointment, but you tend to think it's a personality issue, the type of young lad to be hit hard by the disappointment. If it didn't happen in footy it would've been at school or somewhere else down the track.

The CHAIR – Paul, just a final question: Going around all the country clubs like you do and watching the country games, I'm sure a lot of people would talk to you. In regard to volunteers and umpires, which you touched on in your submission, have you come across many ideas on how we could improve our retention of those people, people in the game, and how we could encourage them more and provide better recognition?

Mr DAFFEY – Not really. People say that they should. I don't see how. The idea of keeping players umpiring, encouraging players umpiring is one thing. Retaining – paying umpires more might be one of them. Just making things easy for umpires. A transport system to games maybe. I'm not sure how we keep umpires umpiring longer.

The CHAIR – What about the status of umpires as an issue in comparison to, say, that of the players – you need umpires to actually be able to have a game of football?

Mr DAFFEY – Umpires aren't given a high status as umpires. In League – in various leagues – you get to know individual umpires and they tend to gain status or respect if they've been around a while and are doing a good job. But they're not given any status because they are umpires. Perhaps they should be given more.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Well it's tax-free

Dr NAPHTHINE – Hang on –

Mr DAFFEY – So there's –

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – My point is –

Mr DAFFEY – I have lived in Ireland, and there are tax exemptions for artists there. So you too don't live in Monaco or wherever the tax havens are! They live in Ireland because artists over there have a tax exemption status in Dublin. Let's bring it into country footy. The tax exemption status seems to work. The artists living in Ireland – well, why can't we create some tax exemption status in Australia? Some went in and created classes that tended to attract a population. Castlemaine is an example of a successful country town at the moment. There were reasonably nice old building from the gold rush days that created an ambiance which attracted the artists, and the artists gone in and the population followed. If you can do that – create a tax status in terms of population, you can attract such a population.

The CHAIR – Paul, thank you very much for your contribution today.

Mr DAFFEY – A pleasure.

Witness withdrew.