

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Leongatha – 7 April 2004

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Witnesses

Mr R. G. Lucas, secretary (sworn); and
Mr R. W. Taylor, president (affirmed), Mid Gippsland Football League.

The CHAIR — Welcome, everyone. Thank you very much for your attendance today. I have a statement to read before we make a start. 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, 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.

Welcome, Rod and Rod. Just for the purposes of the transcript, would you please provide your full name, your address and, if you are representing an organisation, what that organisation is and your role within it?

Mr LUCAS — Rodney Graham Lucas, 79 Well Street, Morwell; secretary of the Mid Gippsland Football League.

Mr TAYLOR — Rodney William Taylor, 105 Purvis Road, Tanjil South; president of the Mid Gippsland Football League.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your attendance today. If you would like to make some brief comments, after that we will ask some questions.

Mr TAYLOR — In response to your term of reference (a), the Mid Gippsland Football League consists of 10 member clubs from small and medium-sized rural and regional townships. Each club fields at least four teams, with under-16, under-18, reserves and senior competitions. We have approximately 800 registered players and all clubs also have a very strong netball competition. It is our belief that our league and member clubs at this time are extremely viable and will remain so in the immediate and distant future.

On (b), the Mid Gippsland Football League believes that football and football clubs play a vital role in local communities. The majority of clubs in our league belong to towns that can be categorised as being small or very small. In these towns social interaction often revolves around the football club and club activities, with club functions and matches providing a great outlet not only for locals to gather and socialise with each other but also for them to mix with supporters and rival clubs, usually teams based in neighbouring towns and districts. The people in these towns take great pride in their clubs' success and fiercely support the teams, even after losses. On the interaction with cricket clubs, particularly in our league circumstances, usually the people who run the football clubs are very heavily involved in the cricket clubs as players and/or officials.

On (c), the privatisation of the Latrobe Valley power industry and the subsequent downsizings associated with it had a major effect on local football. With an extremely high local unemployment rate, many people have to move for employment and/or further education. Apart from this, a few other social changes seem to have a large influence on our league. Most people who are involved in clubs seem to support their clubs in social activities.

On (d), statistics show that the loss of the local football club has a huge effect on small towns, as it deprives the community of what is perhaps their primary social outlet. The local hotel, if there is one, is often the only place left to socialise in the town. Often the only real sporting activity left in the town after a football club ceases to exist is cricket, which is seasonal — probably more seasonal, actually, than football. Small shops and other businesses in townships that have lost football clubs suffer dramatic loss of business and sometimes are forced to close as people move their businesses either to larger towns or to follow their sporting endeavours.

On (e), it is getting increasingly harder to fund and run football and other sporting clubs due in part to the dramatic increases in public liability and player insurances and the cost of having all the people involved in club canteens, kitchens and catering needing accreditation. The club survives on volunteers and they are providing their services for free. It costs the clubs a lot of money to keep these people educated and accredited for what might be only a few weeks work during the season.

Player payments are regulated by salary cap that is extremely hard to police. While most player payments are paid from funds generated through fundraising by the club, outside sponsors sometimes provide payments directly to the players, thus bypassing the salary cap. The VCFL have a very good risk management program in place and the grounds now come under a lot more scrutiny. With the seasons being longer and drier, the water is a real growing problem. The water restrictions do not allow for the provision of water that is needed in most cases. Even if the water was accessible, the clubs usually cannot afford to pay for it, anyway.

Finally, on (f), the Mid Gippsland Football League would like to see the government grants directed through the VCFL to be distributed to clubs and/or leagues. These grants could be used for water bores at grounds to alleviate the cost of water, to subsidise the cost of educating volunteers and key club personnel and having them accredited, as well as dollar-for-dollar grants for clubs that wish to improve facilities and/or grounds, grounds management education by local shires and the reintroduction of football into junior school programs. Thank you

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Do have anything further to add to that, Rod?

Mr TAYLOR — No, that is pretty well what we have come up with.

Dr NAPTHINE — How important is netball to the survival of your teams and your league?

Mr LUCAS — Very important. Since we have had the five grades it has really improved our league and the two knit in together. I would say netball is the best thing that has happened to our league. The wives and girlfriends all come. One of the clubs is now pushing it as a family outing. So it is not that the husband or the boyfriend goes there and the girls go somewhere else; they are all going to the one venue and playing sport there.

Dr NAPTHINE — How good are your facilities for your netball players, in terms of perhaps change rooms, shower facilities at the grounds and even netball courts being near the grounds?

Mr LUCAS — The netball courts are pretty good. There are some clubs that in the last two years have built netball facilities at the ground. They have had grants from the shire and that to build facilities. Not all have got them but I think they are working on them and they are progressing pretty well.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you have any clubs that share grounds with other clubs?

Mr LUCAS — No. They all have their own; they are separate.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — With the salary cap, a couple of times some of the leagues expressed concern about the increase. In major leagues it was a 50 per cent increase, and in minor leagues — I cannot work out that percentage — it was \$5000. What is your view on that as a message to clubs? How can we go about policing it better, or should we police it at all?

Mr LUCAS — I do not believe the \$35 000 or the \$75 000 — whatever it went up to — should be in this year because we only got notice a week before we started. Any alterations to the salary cap should have been done in October. The VCFL asked the clubs to plan and work budgets prior to the season starting. They have done their budgets and then they are landed with that. I do not know how to police it.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you agree with it? Do you agree with lifting the salary cap?

Mr LUCAS — No, not at this stage. Our league would probably like it to go down, but it is up to each individual league, but our league would like it to go down.

Mr TAYLOR — We have had discussions with their clubs, and next year it probably will be something that will go ahead. We will probably go to \$25 000 plus a coach.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about the policing issue?

Mr TAYLOR — It is very hard. It basically comes down to an honesty thing. The VCFL has come up with a couple of different proposals. At seminars we discussed the possibilities of these things happening, but what is getting paid still comes down to what gets written on the paper and is sworn to. That is what is actually getting paid.

Mr LUCAS — It is pretty hard to prove what somebody gets paid.

Mr TAYLOR — It is a problem.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How effective do you think the AFL is in terms of supporting grassroots football, particularly the district leagues? Do you have you a comment in respect of that in terms of some of the

programs that are good and some of the programs that are non-existent in respect of your volunteer groups? Can you give us some idea?

Mr TAYLOR — In the last couple of seasons the AFL has definitely tried to improve the relationship with country football in getting teams out. Last year it was Richmond, this year Hawthorn and North Melbourne came to our area. With its Vickick program the AFL is certainly putting a lot more effort into that and promoting it more strongly, although I still believe that it should be promoted more through schools — like at school level instead of away from schools. But I think the AFL is doing a lot more in the last couple of years to try to get back to where football started and where football should be maintained at a strong level, which is grassroots footy.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Have you a view on the AFL's elite program?

Mr LUCAS — The TAC Cup?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Yes, one of them.

Mr LUCAS — It probably has its advantages and disadvantages because the players go from the local clubs, and if they do not make the under-18 squad then they might go to the EFL or a major league. Probably a lot of them do not go back to their original clubs, even after they have finished in the under-18s.

Dr NAPHTHINE — What was your view about Traralgon's venture into the VFL? Why did it fail? Would you like to see them have another go?

Mr LUCAS — It is hard to say why it failed, but I believe that at the time probably Traralgon was not well supported. People hated Traralgon. They were always a successful club. If it had been a regional-based club, like Gippsland Power, it might have been a better show.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Do you think that would be good for Gippsland football?

Mr LUCAS — I do not know with the economy the way it is down our way.

Mr TAYLOR — If it was going to work it would have worked then if it was handled better, but now the way the economic trend is in the valley now I do not think it could survive, a club at that level without the support of a lot of outside interests, for sure. I think it was totally mismanaged from the start, and in the wrong concept. It should have been, like Rod said, a community football club and not just a football club run by one club. It was too big a deal to be organised by one club with too big a country football background.

Mr LUCAS — They were still fielding their side in the Latrobe Valley at intervals. It made the firsts, seconds and thirds in there, so it was an extra strain on that club too.

Mr WALSH — Rod, you spoke about grants for training for volunteers to do all the extra administration that is there. Does all that extra administration actually deliver an outcome, or is it paper for paper's sake? Could we actually cut out some of the administration.

Mr TAYLOR — We could, for sure, but at this stage anybody who is going to volunteer on a Saturday morning to work in a canteen for half an hour has to have that certificate. They have to do the course, and being volunteers you cannot expect them to pay for it, so the club has to pay for it. I think it is paper for paper.

Mr WALSH — I accept that.

Mr TAYLOR — For hundreds of years football has been played, and people have eaten hot dogs, but no-one has turned around and died from them!

Mr WALSH — If we go back to when VFL teams had zones in Victoria, do you think country football was better served by a club having a particular area and putting resources into it?

Mr TAYLOR — I think it was. You had more access to AFL players coming to your club for coaching clinics and stuff like that. There was a lot more rapport because local players always still had that affinity with the local area, whereas now it is very hard to get AFL players to come and do clinics or whatever, and whoever they

send to this part of the country could be from the other end of the state and have absolutely no idea of our local football. Local football from one end of the state to the other is still local football.

Mr WALSH — Could there be a case built maybe to have maybe not first pick but some priority draft picks for certain regions for clubs that are allocated to that region to get them to put some resources back into football?

Mr TAYLOR — That would be very beneficial, yes, for sure.

The CHAIR — You also talked about grants for bores and drought programs. Within your league are there many grounds that are having big problems at the moment?

Mr TAYLOR — For sure. With the exception of one of our grounds that has a bore of its own, all the grounds are hard. They probably look better than what they are, but we are fortunate enough that we do not have to run around on them any more. Shin splints and sore feet do not really enter into our equation unless we get phone calls saying that the ground is unsafe to play on, which we then have to follow up.

The CHAIR — How would you see them working? Would you see them as a one-for-one type of situation maybe to give a bit of encouragement, or would you see them working in a different way to that?

Mr LUCAS — If there was a grant?

The CHAIR — Yes, if there was a grants program or something along those lines.

Mr TAYLOR — Our clubs especially would be very prepared to look at that option of dollar-for-dollar grants. If they can maintain their grounds, it is beneficial to them. More people want to go and watch if they are watching a good standard of football. If there are less injuries, the club is more successful especially at our level.

The CHAIR — Obviously it would be great if the government did that. What about things like the AFL as well? Do you think that would help improve its image as far as helping the local clubs go? There is a bit extra for them as well.

Mr TAYLOR — For sure. There is a real us-and-them attitude between country football and the AFL. People think that they are up there and they are not prepared to do anything for those who are down low. The more the AFL can promote itself as helping grassroots football, the more beneficial it is going to be for them — and for us, naturally.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time. You will get a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.