

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Country Football

Melbourne – 10 May 2004

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Mr David Parkin, Individual (sworn).

The CHAIR – Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committee’s 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.

David, your evidence is obviously going to be taken down and become public evidence in due course, so if you’d like to give us your submission and afterwards we will have some questions, please.

Mr PARKIN – Look I was asked for whatever reason, I’m not quite sure and I read the terms of reference and hopefully some of my background may assist the committee. My two current roles are: I lecture at Deakin University – education, primary, secondary and tertiary. I currently lecture in a Bachelor of Applied Science Sports faction at Deakin University, which is really interesting, which is sports education, if you like, on a professional basis. We are probably the only university that provides that sort of tertiary qualification and which in a sense captures all sports.

The major reason I’ve been asked is to do with my research here is with particularly children in sport, and more specifically within the age group 5 through 12, corresponding obviously with primary school. We’ve done a fair amount of work on why the kids come, why they stay and why they leave sport. I also work as one of the two AFL coach ambassadors we’ve employed, just on a retainer. I just checked back with my diary and in the last twelve months I’ve been – to name a few places – Port Fairy, Mildura, Wonthaggi and Castlemaine. In this particular job I get a chance to go out and mentor young coaches and work with their clubs. It’s been a fascinating experience for me. It’s not a paid job, but we get our expenses paid. It comes basically out of coach education, because as you know, the AFL run right across the country at levels one, two and three, which involve all those processes and particularly the primary age groups. My background – in trying to get the education approved by the government to look after kids of that age – well, it has been a bit of a problem in the past.

What’s probably pleased me in going to these clubs – and I was at Yinnar last week? They had a combination, as they do – and as you well know – of football and netball. If you’re in the suburbs it’s usually cricket. But they put together a first-class community club in the centre of that town with social activities and all sorts of things, but they are having difficulties. It seems to me that at the recruiting and retention end, across the board participants is crucial. Ground conditions have been a problem. Facilities particularly for females, I understand, too. I guess the thing that you could be facing up to is a protection of their volunteers; and they are things that I wouldn’t have known about, but came face-to-face with as I talked to people going to those sorts of clubs.

My brief, I suppose, is children in sport and the role of the coach to develop the sport. The primary school years and forming positive habits is crucial and that we teach good programs. If kids have a good educational experience in primary school, then we don’t have to worry too much about the rest. As in sports, the same thing: if you get a good introductory program, you get kids interested and we understand – which we do now – their motives for learning, and we actually satisfy the needs that may at least give us a chance with the child. We will hammer it at the start, so children are more likely to take an interest in sport. Specifically we’ve had problems with not only facing those sorts of decisions at primary level but also with the actual physical sporting practice. The golden years are in fact 6 to 10, which is when it all happens: complex motor skills, including swimming, riding a bike, catching and throwing, hitting, and all those sorts of things. Best learnt at that stage: too early, not a great effect: too late, you’ve got a problem.

One of our real difficulties has been that we’ve got an ageing female primary school teaching population. Teaching is a problem as many teachers in country schools are female – teaching the complex and motor skills, which Australian footy as a sport probably demands – it’s the most difficult game in the world to play, and therefore your introductory program needs to be finely tuned. Australian footy took the initiative of developing a program called the Auskick program, which you all know about. In the States they are fascinated by this program because children are in a school situation most of the time but taken by parents. It provides the best introductory sports program of any sport anywhere in the world in my opinion. Football has become an export commodity in a lot of senses for people in Japan, Hong Kong, et cetera, who are trying to develop the same sorts of principles in their introductory sports programs.

The Auskick program has become critical for learning separate and complex motor skills. Research fact tells us exactly what the evidence is in underpinning children’s motives for becoming involved. And without going into

too much depth, there are about twelve significant reasons why children choose to play or drop out of sport. They're all significant, and we have talked thousands of kids over the past 25 years in a number of countries and there are three critical reasons. I can give you copies of that sort of stuff, if you want it. The first is skills mastery. They come into a program and they don't in their own eyes become competent at the skills of that particular sport. It's the major reason for staying if they do; they need encouragement by becoming competent in that sports skill. And if they see themselves – and often it's through their peers who put them down or refer to them as hopeless or losers, or whatever they say these days – they seem to realise very quickly whether they are going to be competent, and that's the most important one. They're saying, "Make me better, teach me well or I won't stay".

The second one is – and this is crucial to that – "If you taught me the skills, then produce structure, modify a game which allows me to use those skills every day" – and I think Auskick is probably a very good example, where we have the half-time games. We'll bring games of five or six playing against each other, so every kid gets a chance to kick it, action it and do all those sorts of thing. Participation once they've learnt the skills is critical. So how do we devise and modify? I was in Busselton W.A. a couple of weeks ago and the health educator in the local council had produced a game called free ball and the major aim is you divide the oval up with three parts, three rounds of three games going on. Each of those grounds, you divide into three parts. Three backs, three forwards, three middles and three umpires, two boundary and one goal and by the end of the quarter the umpires became the backs, the backs became the middles, the middles became the forwards and the forward umpires. So they all get a chance to participate in all aspects of the game. That was not a football coach, but a health educator who looked at Australian football and said, "This game is inappropriate for this age group. Let's provide something that is better" it was so critical to him that they really do participate, and that's interesting.

And the third thing – I think the children might have heard it wrong – but the third thing that the kids rate, and this is significantly more important than the other nine, is having a good coach relationship. One of the most important things in sport is to have a good coach relationship as it means kids become better at skills, they are taught better and the coach will give them a chance to play. I can't emphasise that enough to this committee. The presidents in the clubs are crucial people in terms of the structure and the processes of how effective they are in producing a club that is viable. The coach I think probably more than any other person holds the key to what approach is used, the standards, the values and the behaviours. You come to expect it of that particular group. I think that's pretty important. So coaches hold in their hands the quality of recruiting, developing and retaining of participants. That's not just at primary level, but at youth and senior levels too. I dare say Auskick has worked very hard to train up these coaches, so there are Level 1s being offered all the time. It's like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge – where there's a change of population, of parents and of kids and what they do. A few stay, most leave. As I said, we go back to the process of re-educating, or in fact educating them for the first time about where their efforts and focus should be, and given the competencies, if you like to do, they feel better. And I think we have worked very hard – and I know I have been a part of that process and have worked very hard. I think it could be better, but in fact it's a lot better than it used to be and I think will continue to improve.

My belief is that if we can get quality coaches into the programs at all levels and prepare them properly to do what's a very, very important job, then the chances are that attracting and retaining our kids in, in this case, Australian football, is probably possible. Without that, I think we will struggle to do what we've done in the past. Whether they see any value or insight to this –

The CHAIR – Thank you very much David.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Rob Moodie and Andrew Demetriou touched on something that you've pointed out, about the schools – and particularly at primary schools in country areas – they predominately have female teachers. Auskick has been very well received. It's one of the constants; wherever we went around the state, Auskick was put up and people said, "Well this is a fantastic program and has probably filled a gap" where there have only been female teachers at some of these primary schools. But have you got a comment on actual school curriculum in terms of where sport fits or where activities fit in the school curriculum?

Mr PARKIN – I have, as you well know. The only curriculum area that is compulsorily mandated at the moment is P.S.E.; choice of schools is a close second now. In the past the Victorian education ministry has attempted to have physical sport education 'unmandated'. I think that would've been an absolute disaster. It's already happened here once.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – To have it mandated?

Mr PARKIN – To have it ‘unmandated’. It’s still hanging in; it’s hanging in with a token emphasis, I think. In my opinion – a token belief – it is the right thing. Look I know it comes down to school-based decision-making, but if art and music and maths and everything else is not mandated, how could physical and sport education turn around and say we should be mandated over and above every other curriculum? It’s a fairly hard argument to win, but I know the consequences. I’ve been in this area now for forty years, and when governments – in particular education departments, or whatever – have seen fit to ‘unmandate’ it and to leave it to a school-based decision, it’s the first to go and the last to be taught at all curriculum areas. And I would be devastated if we were chased down that road. I think if you saw this a few weeks back – my university has a research program going in Colac. And if you read closely the words – a rural city, a good classical part of Australia, I would have thought – they show a linear increase in obesity at the same time a linear decrease in activity. To me, schools must be totally and utterly focused on somehow providing the catalyst to give children a chance to learn physical education and especially sports. Soon we won’t have any reason to get off our backsides at all if we’re not playing sports. Sport will be one of the few things that will demand that we actually become active, otherwise we won’t do anything – buy, eat, be entertained without getting off our backsides – push the button and turn the television. So I would’ve thought that there should be an emphasis on physical activity. We will be working very, very hard from this crucial age from when children are gettable, which is certainly the view at primary school. We need a curriculum and specialist teachers are absolutely crucial. People who know what; they’re competent and committed, probably have to be young – it’s a young person’s lot – and be males and females, quite obviously.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Well I agree, I’m a former PE teacher, as you may or may not be aware. I actually agree with you. When I was teaching many years ago, I was in UWA. We had a PD program and a sport program, and in Victoria, over here, you had a PE program and a sport program. I think that’s disappeared in a lot of schools.

Mr PARKIN – Well it’s become too hard Michael. And it’s not just all teachers; it is an enormously difficult job, but they’re being asked to stretch themselves. Specialists cost and with ten or twelve curriculum areas to primary teacher it is just unrealistic to expect. Some of them are involved in music, some in the arts, and then in PE, they are specialists. We’re doing our best to provide competent and committed and very knowledgeable teachers in that area for communities but sometimes it comes too late.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – So you’re focused at primary, obviously the 6 to 10?

Mr PARKIN – My interest is in the curriculum basically at primary schools; that’s where my interest would be.

The CHAIR – David, obviously for schools to be able to do this well, we spend a lot of time on making sure that we’ve got our coaches right, and do coaching accreditation levels and that sort of thing. We talked about being able to run an amount of mandated physical education and sport programs and having a specialist in a school, and that may not be within the resources, but are there other ways?

Mr PARKIN – Well it’s not, I think impossible.

The CHAIR – But there would be other ways to do it – whether in regard to making sure that teachers have the skills and therefore the confidence to do those sorts of things, and that they actually have the resources to be able to run the programs – which is obviously also important as well. Have you got any thoughts or any ideas or recommendations in that particular regard, where you see there is a lack at the moment but there could be some actual improvements made?

Mr PARKIN – Look to be truthful, the Australian Council of Health Physical Education and Recreation has been running their sports education programs, and I’ve participated in those. And an enormous number of teachers have been able to do it, but again it comes back to the training and the limited time and the emphasis that we need a degree course now for a primary school teacher in those areas – we’ll say those specialist areas of health, physical education and recreation or art or music. There’s so many. The competencies that those people take in the school are just base level and unless they have an aptitude, an interest or a commitment themselves to the area, it doesn’t happen. So you’re at a school now – whether it’s a drama program – it usually runs around the competencies of a teacher or a couple of teachers. But to do that, you’re usually taking from somewhere else and that falls over. Taking it out of PE, taking it out of music, it’s just one of the difficulties we have. So in all levels of preparation and recruitment, it’s a very tough thing to do. It’s not only preparation for them, it’s a massive complex problem to overcome in preparing people to do what I think is an unbelievably difficult task. People may be

willing to the best of their ability and with the best use of their time off, but so it's not as if they're not working harder to bring about change, the fundamental weakness is that people aren't prepared properly in the first place.

The CHAIR – On that, there are obviously more hours than in the school day, and that's where we do have an opportunity –whether it is Auskick or mini ball or other kind of sports. I know my son's in Prep this year, and he's doing Auskick and mini ball, and also swimming. I'm in a privileged position where I can actually afford to do those things. I think Auskick was about \$45. I know from talking to some of the other parents at Auskick – they might have had three or four kids at primary school level all doing the Auskick – it was an incredible investment on their behalf and at a significant cost to them. That obviously seems to be a bit of an issue as well, as far as any of those programs, too. I know that having a cost is good, because it also probably means that people take it a bit more seriously and attend and go to all those efforts, but have you any ideas about ways around that?

Mr PARKIN – Look, I think the cost has built up, but the numbers have gone up in participation. I was in Albury the other night and they had 400. Auskick numbers have just gone from 100, 200, 400 over three years. So people must have the capacity to pay for it. I don't know how it's underwritten and by who. I guess the AFL and Vic Football here are in some way participating in underwriting. It's actually become a pretty, I think, expensive program as a volunteer program, which is running in school ground faculties, et cetera. I know they're trying to minimise the cost of that, and I guess people are voting with their feet and saying, "Well, you might think it's pretty costly, but our numbers just continue to rise in unprecedented numbers here and all around Australia."

Dr NAPHTHINE – David, given the comments you've made about 6 to 10 being the key years, and now while Auskick is linked to football, but it's general exercise –whether it be broader other programs of a similar base. I mean we know the obesity problem that is rapidly emerging. Is this where government and VicHealth should be investing more funds?

Mr PARKIN – I have absolutely no doubt. I'm obliged to Australian football, firstly because it's attractive to so many people. The high focus on that is not just the vehicle for doing the very thing it is, but the kids that we put in a particular sport. The evidence is very strong now. They should be getting the experience across a variety of sports. Now, 6 to 10 and you're wanting to be very good at sport, the best thing would be to get involved in a number of sports until you're 13 or 14 years of age. Research suggests now that champions in fact don't focus or specialise early and have a broader-based experience. And if they fall out on one, they've got others to do, so I would be doing anything within reason.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Should we then have a generalised sports program along the Auskick lines, that is government recognising it as a health program?

Mr PARKIN – Well that's why I think it should be done in the school system. The schools have got our captive audience and we could train people – and I think we can. There may be more demands on universities to prepare them, in the sense of making them capable of doing these things. What happens now is that it's becoming a user-pay system. It's like kids in sports in government-run primary schools; they have to pay for their right to participate in an education program in a sport, a variety of sports. That seems to be fundamentally wrong, with the principle of educating people for life.

Dr NAPHTHINE – And often it is the people who can least afford it that are most in need of these programs.

Mr PARKIN – Research fact would absolutely indicate the veracity of that statement.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Just to bring it to a coach mentor level.

SPEAKER – Umpire mentor.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Umpire mentor.

Mr PARKIN – Well, that can happen, too.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Well, that's not a bad idea; I would support it.

Mr PARKIN – I've got 17 young coaches that I mentor across the country – from AFL to state leagues to country leagues. I was down at Wonthaggi with Dean Rice the other night, and it's just a wonderful role. I'm

encouraged to go all around the country – not just this state, not Victoria, but all over the place and go and spend time with these people and be involved and to assist these people who are desperate to become better in their roles – and very difficult roles. It's just a wonderful privilege for me to be part of that. Stan works much harder than I do, and we think we're making a difference. They come in and they are desperate to get better. They meet up with us and we start to talk, go down and spend some time with their players. It's just a terrific to be part of. It's what I think role modelling is. There is good and there is bad, you know; but role modelling is a very significant role, I think, in the lives of all of us. What's the word? – how we influence becomes absolutely crucial forever.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – I agree with you. Are there thoughts in terms of expanding it? It's a big country; we've now got two police for Victorians.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Lots of ex-AFL coaches, an increasing number.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Like we've got Ronny Alexander. I was thinking of a Western Australian-based one, whether it's Ronny Alexander or a name over there.

Mr PARKIN – Nobody; that hasn't happened, Michael. People won't do it without being paid. It is not just left to a volunteer approach, as much as you would like it. I can't afford it. I was out there last week doing it. They just can't afford the time.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – No, I didn't mean you.

Mr PARKIN – I know Tommy Haffey doesn't want to stay in that work as well. There are people who are doing it and probably very well, absolutely.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – You mentioned when you went around that some of the coaches in Victoria for focus, were talking about volunteerism and how difficult it is to come by it. Are there any other issues that they brought up? Did they talk about a salary cap and the difficulties of salary cap, or were there any other issues?

Mr PARKIN – No, the volunteer one was an issue in the last 12 months. It had been dealt with, I understand, but things are happening around protection.

The CHAIR – That's right, but we do need to promote it more for the community. That's what's coming out of these hearings.

Mr PARKIN – I should know about it, fundamentally, if you've done something in that area. Talk about a scoreboard attendant, and they just won't do it for nothing so then does the volunteer become a paid person? Then there is the income debate, and it's not going to get better, I don't think.

Mr INGRAM – David, one of the suggestions put forward is something that the AFL clubs could provide – assistance for volunteers. For all of the clubs, one of the hardest things they've got is getting the trainers, the supporters, the physios and stuff around the club. And it was put forward that if the AFL clubs could invite the country trainers down to sort of show them the ropes, give them a few secrets, give them the mentoring – it's not something that would cost much, but it provides a really valuable insight to how the more professional operations do it. As you're involved in a number of clubs, do you see that as something that the culture of the clubs would encourage and allow, and how far could you extend that to?

Mr PARKIN – Craig, look it's a very good question. It would really depend. They rang all the coaches, they rang medical and trainers from our fraternity and they rang administrators, people who are secretaries and treasurers. They were fantastic, but they had a vested interest because that was their area and they were trying to develop ways – and because of the zoning effect. It became a national draft and it just lost its way, but they do have it up and running now. Every club now is allocated an area. And they have players – to a minimal number, I think. But, that kind of concept under the current system certainly could be developed.

Dr NAPHTHINE – David, following on from exactly what you have said: the issue of zoning gets raised, where many people in country Victoria have fond memories of the relationship of the clubs –

Mr PARKIN – Me one of them.

Dr NAPHTHINE – The proposal that's been put to us on a number of occasions is, for example, after the first round of draft picks – so draft pick 16 – then clubs have zones, and after Round One draft pick, they can swap

their number 3 draft pick for a priority pick from their zone, so that they've got a vested interest in looking after their zone. There is that same link. Andrew Demetriou didn't jump; he was very unenthusiastic. What would you do?

Mr PARKIN – I'm not a good person to ask. Every time something comes up that's going to compromise the national draft, it doesn't even get a look in. And I think Andrew would be watering that down as quickly as he could, because it's going to cause another complication, and it's already a very complicated system. You can forget about any compromising of national draft in terms of areas just like that. I agree with what you're saying, and I think if you have a vested interest of course people will respond. You can summon an inkling of a reward, even at rookie level, even a couple of rookies or something and tie in your local territorial ownership of players. I think it is a fabulous concept, and that's something that is unfortunately missed out altogether, where a local player actually comes through to an AFL club and is bound to that club.

Mr INGRAM – David, other than things we've already mentioned, particularly the school-based programs, is there any other way we can improve the performance and the standard of the coaching and other sports stuff around football, which would in turn pass on greater skills? Is there anything else you could look at?

Mr PARKIN – The Australian Coaching Council as a body would probably lead the world. I think Canada got started before us, but most countries in the world say that Australia does it best in a sporting sense per head of population, and that's at all levels – whether it's coaching or whether it's sports science, whether it's a program or whether it's recruitment, whether it's developing a program. We're actually leading the world. I don't think there's any doubt about that per head of population. We've had very smart people over the years in sports institutes and with governing bodies working very hard, and collectively. Not so good within sports.

Australian footy doesn't really share any of it's knowledge, as it should; and that's why coach education has become critical – but the costs of sports! We share acutely important knowledge across all of those ranges, across all sports, and I think the Australian Sports Commission, the Australian sporting bodies and Australian football has benefited enormously. We've benefited enormously from what's been done in the universal or international sports. I have tried to work out how can we do it better. Coach education is critical to giving people competencies, not just knowledge. It's a management of people skills aspect, the arts side of it rather than the science side of it, which become the crucial element of whether we succeed or not.

We're suffering the consequences of not nearly as much of the soft skills in communication of management and leadership-type skills. And clubs are suddenly finding that out. The greatest issue now in the past 12 months has been the running of workshops for leaders, because they know they can't win without them. The AFL [to be verified] and most levels of competition are the ones that don't have committed, experienced competent leaders – so, no I don't have a great insight. There are a lot of people who work extremely hard at all times – and we're not just saying "We gotta!" – more important is that for ten years coaching and umpiring education in the AFL has been.

Dr NAPHTHINE – David, in your research – and I want to strictly go on perhaps your research with young people – 6 to 10 year olds: is bad player behaviour, as reported in the media, a significant factor or do 6 to 12-year-olds take no notice of it whatsoever, but their parents do?

Mr PARKIN – I had that same question asked the other day. I can't answer it in the most definitive way that you would like it answered, but I think there's no doubt in my mind that behaviour, whether it's directly influenced by the performer or whether it's a reaction of a parent to what the performer is doing, has a significant effect on the adoption or rejection of that behaviour by the child – absolutely, no doubt about it. A little while ago I went past a school and a tennis racquet was thrown right on the bonnet of my car, and that was a result of something someone saw on telly. It was a 9-year-old kid playing.

Dr NAPHTHINE – He wasn't wearing his cap backwards, was he?

Mr PARKIN – That was a reaction to what he saw, so I have no doubt that it's very powerful – the behaviour of sports people in this country. Our top sports people, including some of our Australian cricketers – well it is to be debated whether they should be seen as role models – they don't have that responsibility. I think it is an absolute abdication of their role in the sport. It's a powerful influence, and the more we can get a positive result for those people, the better they can do their work.

The CHAIR – Okay, thanks, David.

Mr PARKIN – Sorry I went on so long.

The CHAIR – No, it was fantastic, and we got some great evidence there. Thanks very much.

Witness withdrew.