

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Shepparton – 14 April 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield  
Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram  
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell  
Dr D. V. Naphine  
Mr P. L. Walsh

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman  
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray  
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

#### Witness

Mr P. Briggs, president, Rumbalara Football Netball Club (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome. It has to be said that this is the largest attendance that we have had at any of our country football hearings so far, so I thank those from Shepparton and surrounding areas for coming along and supporting our hearing tonight and the people presenting to us. I will read a statement before we 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.

**Mr BRIGGS** — My name is Paul Anthony Briggs. I live at 9 John Street, Shepparton. I am president of the Rumbalara Football/Netball Club.

**The CHAIR** — Would you like to give us your brief presentation and then we will have some questions afterwards.

**Mr BRIGGS** — I make the point in starting that the relationship in our club is one of a family environment and that netball is an integral part of the way the club operates as a family unit, so the findings of this inquiry should stretch a little bit further to look at some of the relationships that come from the way in which netball operates alongside country football.

The position of country football and netball is intrinsically linked to the social, economic and emotional wellbeing of country Victoria and to the educational, employment and social opportunities that are the building blocks of healthy communities. In saying that, I add that football and netball are not isolated from the economic and social constraints that are placed on rural or regional communities. The work that needs to be done in attracting and making regional areas and country areas attractive to professionals in all levels, not just in sport, are the same issues that are faced in attracting footballers, netballers and good managers and administrators into clubs and into country Victoria from metropolitan areas. The Rumbalara Football Netball Club is a reasonably unique football club. We do share a common trait inasmuch as we do pursue the games of football and netball.

The history of our club has been an intermittent one. We trace our history back to 1898 or thereabouts, which was the Cumeragunja football club, and we celebrated our centenary premiership in 1998 as Rumbalara football club. This club was alive in the late 1800s; it disappeared for a short time; it re-emerged in the late 1920s; it played in the Moira and district area. It was alive for approximately eight to nine years. It won a number of premierships. It disappeared again and re-emerged in 1946 as the All Blacks operating out of Mooroopna. It played for one year, won a premiership and disappeared and we re-emerged in 1997, so we are celebrating our eighth year of competition as the Rumbalara Football Netball Club.

The history of our club and the reasons for its emergence and its position at the moment is linked to the history of Aboriginal people, and it is an integral part of the way in which the Aboriginal community wishes to express its identity and its culture. I think we share that common trait with all country towns and clubs that have their own identities, and they hang on to the passions and history of their clubs as representative of the uniqueness of their communities, and the Rumbalara football club is no exception to that. I wish to show you the vision of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club. It is very inclusive of not just the football aspect of it, which takes up a place there, but also the role of our elders and our women in the club and the netball aspect of our club and the family of our club.

The Rumbalara football club, as it says, has aspirations of being one of Australia's best regional sporting clubs and, more importantly, a leader in promoting community wellbeing, which is not necessarily confined to the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community. We think it is an integral role for us to play in bringing about issues around reconciliation, but also bringing a healthy dialogue and healthy communication between Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal communities. Some of the ways we have gone about addressing these issues have been on both levels internal — about encouraging indigenous people to seek a broader dialogue within the Goulburn Valley area. I refer to that because of what I see as the isolation that Aboriginal people find themselves in and the lack of celebration of aboriginality and identity in the broader sense, that it is really an isolated celebration and is confined largely to the Aboriginal community, that the broader community do not celebrate the identity and culture of the Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal people find that distressing and are looking for ways in which they can bridge that cultural gap and that social gap, because we do feel the social and economic exclusion, and we feel that

through poor school retention - kids not getting through the schooling system, the educational system, and in doing so not being able to enjoy the economic returns that the Goulburn Valley offers.

We have a GDP in the Goulburn Valley that is somewhere around \$4 billion; there is a fairly vibrant and healthy community in that sense, but Aboriginal unemployment in this area is somewhere in the vicinity of 80 per cent in the private sector, which we think is a national disgrace, not just a local one. How we go about addressing that is important to the Rumbalara Football Netball Club for our own economic and social wellbeing. The club has worked hard to address that issue internally within the Aboriginal community, to seek inspiration and aspiration to want to seek outside opportunities in the work force. In doing so we have joined in partnerships with a number of educational and employment institutions — educational institutions like Melbourne University and employment opportunities and employment partnerships, I suppose, with Job Network. As an example, from March 2003 to approximately March 2004 the Rumbalara Football Netball Club, with Job Network support from bodies like Work Trainers and Ganbina — a key to Aboriginal employment — we have placed something like 121 people into what was virtually a non-existent relationship between the Aboriginal community and the private sector. So the main opportunities for employment, which is a reflection on the football club, have been around the social ills of the Aboriginal community and the crisis intervention work around social justice, education, health issues and addressing the crisis in the Aboriginal community from the public perspective.

We realise that is a very unhealthy profile to have, that the profile needs to be more broad, needs to be more inclusive and that communication needs to take place in the broadest sense on the shop floor to build experience in the work force to enter into business and to partake in the economic returns that the Goulburn Valley per se has to offer, and we will do that whilst we are operating purely in a public sector environment in relation to government. We have taken that role on board as a football/netball club to try and shift what was the pattern of relationships between the Aboriginal community, the non-Aboriginal community and the government sector. The role of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club has also been seen not just exclusively to the operations of the Goulburn Valley and the community here, but has taken on a leadership role across Victoria and indeed in a national sense. We have been invited by northern communities from Weipa across to Port Hedland to come and talk about the way in which the club operates, the types of things the club is doing about community development, and the way we are trying to inspire young people to be actively involved in community life. That, I suppose, is represented to some degree by the fact that we were able to convince a fairly high profile person like the Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, to take our position as no. 1 ticket holder in the Rumbalara football club. I think it sort of says that this club operating out of Shepparton is not isolated. We take that on board in the way in which we conduct our business, the way in which we conduct ourselves, that if Rumbalara puts a foot wrong, it is not just a reflection here in the Goulburn Valley on our community and our immediate families, but communities right across Victoria are influenced by the way in which Rumbalara conducts itself, and also communities right across Australia are taking note of the way in which we do business.

We have been focused largely on issues around healthy lifestyles and health promotion. Some handouts are in front of you to show the breadth of the work that we have been doing — issues around leadership and personal development, around men's and women's health issues, diet and nutrition. We have a very poor health profile here in the Goulburn Valley as across Victoria — Aboriginal people are living 20 years less than non-Aboriginal people — and we take that on board in terms of lifestyle issues, and we think that is related to self-esteem, to personal and emotional wellbeing and also to physical fitness. We are working with bodies like Melbourne University on research into cardiovascular disease and also into the impact of sport and recreation on issues like diabetes, which is rife in Aboriginal communities, but which is becoming more of an epidemic and a problem across the whole community.

We have issues around youth suicide prevention. When the club first started we had just come through a difficult time in our community where a lot of young Aboriginal men had suicided. Our focus now is on having the eye of our community to be more than just a parental eye; to provide leadership and mentoring skills to our coaches, our senior players and our captains to be aware of what is happening in the community, to be aware of young people on the street, to be aware of those who are coming in contact with the club, and to look for signs of distress and to be able to refer those young people on. Issues around emotional and spiritual wellbeing and youth suicide are important. I have a graph that highlights the relationship of the football club to the issue of substance misuse. It shows that during the football season while the club is operational the issue of substance misuse is addressed to some degree and the incidences are low. We think that is not just about football or netball but about social participation and the people reaffirming themselves. We have big issues around school retention and big issues

around unemployment, and in most cases these kids are not getting a pat on the back from anywhere else but their football and netball club. The profile is not a healthy one.

Juvenile justice issues are there. We are overrepresented in the courts and in the juvenile justice system. Kids are not getting the best start, and we want to do something about that. We are working with the Aboriginal Medical Service on the antenatal and postnatal care programs and trying to bring that into the way in which the netball club operates and the way in which the football club operates, given that a lot of the young kids in our under-14s, netters and under-17s are coming out of single-parent situations. The nature of the community, the nature of family, the nature of role modelling among young men is a very important issue for the club to take on board. Not only are we looking to play football and netball, we are looking to create good citizens and we are looking to create a healthier profile and a healthier response to the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The club has taken on board — not out of choice but out of necessity — that it is an inclusiveness issue that we are talking about, and the club at the moment is in the best position to take this issue on board. Infrastructure in the Aboriginal community is primarily confined to infrastructure that looks at crisis intervention. If the schooling systems are not working adequately and if they are not responding to the job opportunities that are present and they have a skill pool that is not able to access those job opportunities then we have a problem. It is a long process but we are well on our way to doing something about it.

I have a document that looks at the partnership between the Rumbalara football club and Melbourne University in setting up an academy of sports, health and education. That is not so much about elite sports but about participation and using the motivation of sport to launch kids into having career aspirations around sport, and then looking at that as a pathway from sport into other careers. We see that as a healthy thing to do. We do not see that asset as exclusive to the indigenous community, nor do we see the club as exclusive to the Aboriginal community. We are encouraging all people to participate in the club. Our club has a constitution that encourages non-Aboriginal people to be a part of the structure of the club. We are encouraging non-Aboriginal people to be a part of the players, of the supporters, of the volunteers and of the committee. This is about building bridges and communication channels.

The academy of sport's health and education program will start off in July this year. We have already appointed a curriculum and programs person to do that, and there is a submission before state and commonwealth governments for the longer-term development of the academy. We think that will be integral to building a platform from which we can address the poor standard of education that currently exists not just in the Goulburn Valley but right across Victoria. That is about all I would say on that at the moment, unless there are any questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Paul. We have heard a lot of issues from many of the clubs with regard to costs of insurances, costs of water, costs right across the board that are imposed on clubs. Do you find those same things are an issue for you at Rumbalara?

**Mr BRIGGS** — We run a structure in our club which, as I say, is addressing a lot of those healthy lifestyle programs and we run a program element to our club, but it does not give us funds to pay our water bills and our insurance costs and to buy the footballs and the netballs and other things. What it does do is give us the capacity to address those issues that I have spoken about with the player groups that come through the gate and also the families that come with those player groups, so we think that football and netball can be a by-product of what the Rumbalara Football Netball Club does as opposed to its main function.

**Mr WALSH** — We have heard from a lot of other clubs about the issue of volunteers and getting people to be secretary, president, gatekeeper and trainer and all that. Does that issue face you just as much as it does everyone else?

**Mr BRIGGS** — Yes. Coming out on to the public stage and to compete in a public environment has been difficult for the Aboriginal community. It is difficult to encourage Aboriginal people to take a public place, even if it is just standing on the gate and asking people for money or being on the kiosk and being responsible for the transactions that go on. People become very scared of making mistakes and of being placed in a situation where they might be seen to be making a fool of themselves. It is that as much as apathy about whether they want to do it.

We do have some issues around transportation. As I said, we have a lot of people who come out of single-parent families and we are coming out of an environment where the average income for a person in the Aboriginal community is around \$12 000 to \$14 000 per annum, so these kids are coming out of a poverty environment and the ability to travel is an issue. Therefore the club has to rely on a collective approach, I suppose, of running buses

rather than trying to encourage people to find their own way to the football. We have to go around and pick up and do those sort of things. It is also difficult to get volunteers in that area because people need the specialist licences and other things, so you just cannot pull anybody off the street or out of the home and say, 'Can you drive?'. There are lots of issues related to that. Volunteers are difficult to get, but we are getting by.

**Mr INGRAM** — You mentioned the youth unemployment percentage. To my understanding it is quite similar in Gippsland. One of the issues we have in Gippsland is that a lot of those young people come from families where there is extremely high unemployment in the adult population community. I suppose the question is how do you see the pride in the football club and their achievements there translating back into pride in employment and breaking some of that employment cycle, which is providing the role model, because that is the real crux of the issue that we are trying to deal with in Gippsland, and I am sure you are trying to deal with it here?

**Mr BRIGGS** — Yes.

**Mr INGRAM** — Do you see that providing role models in sport will provide the role models in academic or employment opportunities?

**Mr BRIGGS** — It has been small steps. It is the profile that the club in this instance takes, and it has been a reasonably successful club in terms of winning games, winning premierships. I think we have won something like 17 pennants and premierships over this last seven years across football and netball, which gives a lot of pride to young people who are participating in those teams. We are doing a lot of work on leadership development and development of mentors. We have been working with schools. We have been working with lifting the aspirations of footballers to take jobs, and to be seen to be taking jobs, and I think the profile of the club has lifted the profile of the Aboriginal community. Whereas in the past the media relationship with the Aboriginal community was related to the incidences of juvenile justice or native title or other issues — and they were particular to Aboriginal communities — it was a very negative perspective, I think, on Aboriginal life, and kids responded to that.

The club gets a very affirmative response in the media in terms of its strengths, and if we win on a Saturday, which we have been doing at different times, the Monday paper also gives a very strong perception of the strengths of the club. The kids take that as their own strengths and are feeling good about how they are perceived in the community. It gives them something that they can hang onto, that they can hang their hats onto, as a pat on the back. As I was saying earlier, the pats on the back are not coming in the school system because they are virtually out of the school system by year 9. They are not coming in the work force because they are not participating in the work force. It has to come from somewhere, and if they are not getting it at home, then this is the place where they have been getting it for the last seven years of, in saying, 'You are doing a good job, and you have people around you who are encouraging you to take the next step'. I think what sport has been able to do in this instance is give us a safety net where we can work with kids to say it is okay to fail, but you have got to be having a go. So I think the role modelling that the club as a whole does within this community and the modelling that individuals do as senior players with young people has been an important aspect of the communication between the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal community.

We ran a program called Ladders to Success, and we took that out into the broader community, into the private sector, and it was not hard to get 60 employers involved in an employment strategy here with the commonwealth to look at this issue about unemployment. That would not have happened prior to the club. We would not have gone out there and got such a positive response if the club did not have a healthy profile. If it had been a very negative one; if we had had a negative experience, a negative relationship, we would not have got the responses. So as a modelling, the club has to do that and do it well, as well as our leaders within the respective teams. That image is a very important element of creating opportunities, and I think we have worked very hard to create a healthy image and a very strong, creative and proactive image, and that is helping us build bridges and build relationships across a whole variety of sectors within community, not just necessarily in the sporting fields.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — We have heard some perhaps negative comments from district and regional leagues with respect to the AFL. The AFL has a designated Koori-Aboriginal indigenous officer, Michael Long. Can you advise whether his work through the AFL has had any direct benefits or relationship with Rumbalara?

**Mr BRIGGS** — I am not too sure, but about three to four years ago, we were approached by Boston Consulting when they were doing, I think, the business plan for the AFL and for its management of indigenous players within the AFL. We responded to what we showed was the way in which we were managing our players

and the types of things we were doing apart from just playing football and netball, and we influenced, I think, the way in which Kick Start was being done by the AFL in the top end, and also the development of Michael Long's role. Since Michael has been appointed to that role we have been in constant contact with him and also with the VFL and Derek Kickett on his role as Auskick coordinator amongst Aboriginal communities, and we have been encouraging the AFL to take a developmental profile here in Victoria as opposed to the northern states.

We are saying that as an image and as a leader and as an influence amongst young Aboriginal kids, they need to work as hard here in Victoria as they do on Melville Island, the Northern Territory and the top of Queensland. That is a theme we have taken to Dimitriou. It is a theme we have taken to Michael Long in the way in which he is operating, and we have tried to build that relationship with clubs like St Kilda and Hawthorn and also Carlton to take a view about Aboriginal kids in Victoria and pathway programs. I think the AFL was very northern centric and flew over the top of Victorian communities to do their developmental and promotional work, and working on the iconic images of Aboriginal people by using northern images. We thought that needed to be addressed.

**The CHAIR** — You will receive a copy of the transcript and will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance. Thanks very much for your submission today.

**Witness withdrew.**