

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

#### Members

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

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#### Witness

Mr I. G. Thomas, regional manager, north-east region, Victorian Country Football League (sworn).

**Mr THOMAS** — My full name is Ian Graeme Thomas, better known as Sandy Thomas. I live at 8 Birdie Street, Wodonga. I represent the Victorian Country Football League through being the regional manager of the north-east region.

I will give a brief overview of the current situation. The north-east has been very fortunate in that our club members have not varied a great deal over the past 10 years, unlike other parts of Victoria where clubs have either ceased operation or have merged with others. There have been minor changes: two clubs have left the Tallangatta league to venture closer to home in the New South Wales-based area — that happened in the early 1990s. The Benalla Football Club joined Goulburn Valley, leaving the Ovens and Murray in the late 1990s. We gained one club in this period in the last couple of years. Bullio reformed in 2002 and joined the Upper Murray League. This club was part of an amalgamation with Tallangatta in 1978, but due to local issues decided to make a fresh start, and this has been a significant bonus for the Upper Murray League. The inclusion of Bullio has taken this competition to its six-team league. Three clubs have transferred to the Tallangatta league in the last 12 months, leaving the Ovens and King. Chiltern transferred last year; they switched leagues because of their proximity to Wodonga where they can recruit and obtain sponsorship. Beechworth and Rutherglen joined the Tallangatta league this year, and their reason for leaving was that all the grades of football and netball could be participated in on the one day.

As the Rural City of Wodonga continues to grow at a rapid rate this will continue to assist the playing numbers of all leagues. In 1999 we conducted an independent review of the football structure in the region. There was a number of recommendations, unfortunately only a few were acted upon. The recommendations of amalgamations were not well received as communities normally like to make those decisions themselves rather than be told.

There are a couple of issues I wish to talk on: lack of umpiring numbers in our ranks is of major concern to us all, and Leigh has touched on that. It is not a new problem and is not improving. In fact, it is probably in a very serious state. A lot of our district league clubs have to find their own umpires from reserve grades down to juniors. There has been a concerted effort in recruitment through advertising on television, and newspaper advertisements have had some impact, but retention is our biggest headache. They come in and join for a short time and then they leave. They have had enough. We conducted a survey in the region in the last couple of years, and there were a varied number of opinions why they left. One of the surprising things was that it was not abuse — just that they were too busy and had probably had enough. The VCFL — and I believe you were addressed on it yesterday — is trying to address various aspects of the shortage. They appointed a manager of umpiring to work with all leagues across the state on recruitment and retention.

Another issue — and I believe this one is of major concern for us in the rural areas of Victoria — is that some clubs fortunately have plenty of water, but I think we have gone through our worst period of drought in this state's history over the last couple of years. I believe it is three to four years, and the lack of rain since Christmas has really brought us up into another crisis in Victoria.

One of the major problems for a lot of country clubs is the lack of water to water their ovals. I believe this certainly makes it unattractive to recruit players because once the players see a rock solid oval to train on, they look elsewhere. There are clubs that have to play their home games away on opposition grounds, and that is going to happen in the Ovens and King League this week. This causes considerable added pressure on the clubs to deal with this. It is okay if you are winning early in the year, but if you have the return the game later on and you are on the downhill slide, it makes it very hard for that club to make up any financial gain.

One case I would like to bring to your attention is the Greta sporting complex. A couple of years ago there was a need for the CFA who use this complex as a refuge to look for a further water supply. The locals were all in agreement that the investigation to drill near the complex would be a benefit to all concerned if a sufficient supply was found, but the relevant authority decided on satellite pictures that there would be a better supply of water 5 kilometres away. So far this has not been successful. Now the sporting complex is left to go it alone. With better communications and discussions with the locals, in particular those who experienced underground water supplies, we may have seen a different result. I believe when respective authorities have a need to do something in the community, they should involve all the local committees that share the same common interests. This could see the saving of many dollars for all parties involved by just simply working together.

Another case I wish to bring to your attention is a matter that has been brought up by the local member, Mr Ken Jasper, in regard to the recycled water at North Wangaratta recreational reserve. The treatment plant is approximately 1 kilometre from the reserve and is in a direct line to that reserve. This is certainly an area where the

state government could provide assistance to this important project. There have been similar grants provided elsewhere by the government in Victoria.

Also at Barkly Reserve at Rutherglen they already use recycled water and certainly have a green oval all year round. By utilising the waste water at North Wangaratta ground, it would certainly take the pressure off ovals in the Wangaratta city, and that club has to train there because the oval has not been suitable to train on. Without a water supply this club could face an uncertain future, with loss of gates and no training at the ground, and it is really a recipe for disaster. We can all understand that the user must pay something, but when it comes to recreational activities, surely commonsense can prevail that a realistic amount of charging would be appropriate. Information supplied to me is that clubs can face up to \$10 000 in annual water bills. They are in regional centres. In some smaller localities and towns, the water bill can be between \$2500 to \$3000 per annum. Water or lack of it, or its cost, is really one of the greatest threats facing some country clubs. The smaller clubs, where they lack water supplies, are really doing it tough. You find that these clubs are finding themselves struggling on the field as well. We need to take into consideration our volunteers who give many dedicated hours performing tasks around the club, and one of these tasks is maintaining water to the ovals where they have supplies. Speaking from past experience, one can spend many hours at playing ovals ensuring the surface is well maintained. It is a very time-consuming job. Assistance and liaison with authorities is badly needed. I urge this committee to take on board the seriousness of the water shortage facing country football.

Another area — and Leigh has touched on this one — is capital grant funding for facilities. Netball is an important component of country football and certainly in rural areas I believe it has certainly been a godsend for country football clubs. It is a family day and the clubs have certainly done themselves proud in the last few years in the way they have conducted their affairs. A lot of them take on the responsibility of serving alcohol programs, and it has made it really a club orientated affair. What is needed in regard to this is separate change and shower facilities for netballers and separate change and shower facilities for umpires, including female umpires that we have plenty of today. Netball courts are a requirement in the football ground precinct. The VCFL recommends that a grant pool for capital works be established for football clubs across regional and rural Victoria that is jointly managed by the government authority and the VCFL. Not only would football people use club facilities but also other community groups as well. The multipurpose facilities have benefits for all the community. That is all I have to say, Mr Chairman. I am happy to answer questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — By way of clarification, you mentioned that the state government ought to be putting some money into recycling water into the ground in the north of Wangaratta. I would like to point out that in 1989 I organised with John Brumby — and it was money from the federal government — water recycling for the Maryborough golf club and also the Maryborough footy oval, so it is not only the state government. It can be the federal government as well.

**Mr THOMAS** — Thanks. I will take that on board.

**Mr WALSH** — Compliance with the salary cap in this region — is it complied with, in your view?

**Mr THOMAS** — I would not think it would be. I believe that it is very hard to do, as you probably well know if you have had any experience in it. I believe that clubs should budget for what they can actually spend and raise, and should not spend any more than that. In my opinion the salary cap is a guideline for clubs to take on board. They know they should not go over it, but it is certainly a guideline for district leagues to spend no more than \$35 000, and a lot would not spend that, and some would not get anywhere near it. But I believe clubs should take responsibility for what they do. They should budget for what they reckon they can raise and spend no more. I think that is what the way it should happen.

**Mr WALSH** — But the question that flows out of that then is if the state government became more generous with grants for facilities and for other things, which would have to be spent on those, but would potentially free up more money within the club, would that potentially increase player payments or total player payments in future? We have to be careful we do not just substitute one for the other.

**Mr THOMAS** — I understand what you are saying.

**Mr WALSH** — Because the rest of the community would not be very happy about that.

**Mr THOMAS** — We would want to see government grants going into facilities. If it is a \$100 000 project, they only usually get \$50 000 and the local community has to put the other \$50 000 in, but I believe the day will come somewhere along the line where clubs will have to really look at their player payments.

**The CHAIR** — You mentioned the lack of netball facilities, especially change rooms in the area. What about umpire facilities because we have heard around the state that the umpire facilities are fairly ordinary as well in many cases?

**Mr THOMAS** — In some cases they are. They are in some of the leagues. There are probably a couple of clubs in one league that do not have separate umpire change rooms, which puts things in a very awkward situation. There is a need for a standard to be set, I believe. We put in our review back in 1999 what we believed was a standard that each club should have, and some certainly have taken it on board to try and do that. With female umpires these days, whom you see doing the boundaries, that is a very awkward situation, where you only have one umpire change room as well.

**Mr WALSH** — Sandy gave his views on zoning and any potential re-use of zoning, and he said it was probably at odds with quite a few of the other people in the league. Would you mind telling us your views on that?

**Mr THOMAS** — I am quite happy to do that. When zoning was in, I thought it worked very well. It certainly worked well for the Ovens and Murray League with the relationship they had with North Melbourne, and early in the piece, North Melbourne was very good to the district leagues as well.

I am not an opponent of the TAC Cup, I believe it has worked well. It certainly helps the elite players within our region to have the opportunity to enhance their careers. The ones that get selected do well. The ones that do not, on what we have found, have come back to our various clubs probably as better players because they have gone through the challenges of training and the rest of it when they are with the Bushrangers. I am not an opponent of the TAC Cup, but I know plenty of people are opposed to it. Where I believe a lot more can happen is with the other players, the ones who never get a chance in the under-15s and the under-16 representative state sides and the under-18s. We should have more people working to try and help the clubs and probably cater within the schools to see that football is further improved for those who may be strugglers. Football was not made for the elite, otherwise none of us would have played the game. I believe there is still a part to be played there by someone.

**Mr WALSH** — How could that be done?

**Mr THOMAS** — Through the AFL and Football Victoria we could have people allocated to a region. I would rather see it for the leagues, but it would be impossible to do that for cost reasons. The TAC people are the development people, but they are tied up with the TAC Cup. They do certain work within the region, there is no doubt about that, but they do not have the time to spend in each league the way that I believe it should happen..

**Mr WALSH** — You have talked about the junior footballers. What about volunteers and the sheer running of clubs and leagues now? Is there a role there for the AFL to give some additional help or whatever?

**Mr THOMAS** — Yes, there is, but we, through the VFL, try and run administration courses for all newcomers to take on administration roles in football clubs, and we do our best to try and give them the information about how best to do it. It goes from finances right through to how to run a club. I do not know whether the AFL can still throw out money to clubs for administration. I take on board what has been said, but I reckon the development stage is more critical for what they can do for us..

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Sandy, for your time. You will get a copy of the transcript. You may correct any matters of fact or grammar but not alter matters of substance.

**Witness withdrew.**