

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Melbourne—18 June 2007

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Executive Officer, Ms Lilian Topic

Research Officer, Dr Cheryl Hercus

Witnesses

Mr P. McMahon, Freehold Owner, Cambrai Backpackers Hostel; and

Mr D. Jordan, Executive Officer, Monash University Gippsland Student Union, Churchill.

The CHAIR—Very quickly—we only have about five minutes left—if there are any expressions of interest from the floor, would you like to move forward to the microphone. We do have a couple of members who have meetings that they have to go to so if they happen to walk out during your submission, do not take offence.

Mr McMAHON—I am Peter McMahon, freehold owner of the Cambrai Backpackers Hostel. I also sit on an advisory board for Backpacker Operators Alliance of Victoria, which advises the Victorian government on backpacker issues.

The CHAIR—Peter, I just have to let you know about parliamentary privilege. What you say here is covered by parliamentary privilege. If you repeat what you say here outside the parliament, you will no longer be covered by that privilege. Your name and address are in?

Mr McMAHON—Yes.

The CHAIR—Right. Away you go.

Mr McMAHON—I will continue after Robert. Like he said, the act was in 1995. I have been continuing this argument from my grandfather—I have a copy here, which I have made up—from 1936 when Lakes Entrance was fighting to have a bus service there and the railways was opposing it then. It has been going on ever since. My grandfather took up the argument as the Gippsland regional development body, asking the state government then to allow it. This is a Sydney-Melbourne route, with all the hostels down. It is known as the Kangaroo Coast: a hop, skip and a jump to Sydney. On this map, I have highlighted how Greyhound services all of Australia.

You asked why would you go on Greyhound and no-one else? I came back from Ireland earlier this year to have a look how regional Victoria is marketed internationally. As Robert said, Greyhound is one of the only companies, probably the only company, that does operate and sell—that is, market—regional Australia. All the yellow part, that is where Greyhound operates. Students can buy, from any Greyhound operator, an around-Australia ticket for \$2,000: get off and get on. The rates have probably gone up a bit. I have marked it here, highlighted where Greyhound used to service the Greyhound Melbourne-Sydney route down there for each one of you to see later on.

The CHAIR—So \$2,000 get on, get off? Say \$2,500 or \$3,000.

Mr McMAHON—Yes, over 12 months.

The CHAIR—Over 12 months?

Mr McMAHON—There are 540,000 backpackers in Australia at the present time. Since the new harvest working visa came in, they can get an extra 12 months if they work three months in the harvest.

Mr VOGELS—If they get off in Victoria, they have to hitch-hike out of Victoria to get back on the Greyhound?

Mr McMAHON—They get to the stupid part.

Ms DARVENIZA—Or take the train.

Mr McMAHON—Going back into 1936, to protect the railways, they can come to Orbost. I have a letter from the transport minister and Peter Hall has raised the issue twice in parliament. He is the member for Eastern now. I have done a fair bit but I just want to point out that that is highlighting where you can read it, because I have another colleague from Merimbula who has flown down to explain to you how successful it was before; and then after, and what happened when they were operating because, as I say, they could drop off.

Greyhound was running two coaches down at Christmas time. It is serviced now by Premier Motor, but now they have dropped back to one coach. They had two each; Premier had two and Greyhound had two. I think it was the year 2000, as I said. There was a fine of \$11,000 because Greyhound on a wet, rainy day in Lakes Entrance picked up two backpackers and gave them a ride to Melbourne. They got dobbed in and have not been back since.

I have put all that together. It is to protect the railways; that was the idea originally. But I was on the Melbourne-Traralgon train on Saturday—great service; new carpet; fast rail. There was only standing room available. Every year from Maffra we send the backpackers—and we cater for 50 backpackers at a time—back to Sydney. Everyone meets in Sydney for New Year's Eve. They could not get on. They could not get on any bus.

The CHAIR—Thanks, Peter. If all those facts are given to the committee, that will be taken notice of in our report. Is there anyone else from the floor who wishes to give evidence?

Mr JORDAN—My name is Daniel Jordan.

The CHAIR—G'day, Daniel. Could you give us the association that you may be representing.

Mr JORDAN—Yes, sure. The name of my organisation is the Monash University Gippsland Student Union. We are located in Churchill, about eight kilometres south of Morwell in the Latrobe Valley.

The CHAIR—Thanks, Daniel. Anything you say here is protected by parliamentary privilege. If you repeat what you say in here outside the parliament, you will no longer be protected by that privilege. Feel free to speak your mind.

Mr JORDAN—No worries. First of all, I would like to acknowledge Russell, our local member.

Mr NORTHE—Thank you.

Mr JORDAN—And thanks to the parliamentary committee for hearing us. The student union at Monash Gippsland has for a long time supported Greyhound's intention to have a service through Gippsland, the main reason being that we have 2,000 on-campus students. Of those 2,000 on-campus students, up to 400 can be international students. We have literally thousands of visitors to the campus every year, including many overseas visitors. Greyhound having stops in the Latrobe Valley offers the opportunity for students, in particular during the mid-semester break and the long break over the summer, to go and do some backpacking or—who knows?—fruit picking, whatever they want to do, in Gippsland, because my understanding from talking to Greyhound is that they are looking at mixing the route up and having more stops, giving people the opportunity to stop at different places up the eastern seaboard, and then going to Sydney. At the moment, the students' main option for getting to Sydney is to go to Melbourne and then go to Sydney; that is the easiest way. If we had this opportunity, we would have more students—domestic as well as international—being able to build on the tourism that exists in East Gippsland, possibly getting a bit of pocket money during the break and being able to go up the east coast. That is it in a nutshell.

The CHAIR—Thanks, that is great. It is a very pertinent point. I am sure that I and all the members of the committee have got it very clear in our minds exactly what the issue is, but it is great to hear it from another organisation that has a stake in the problem.

Mr JORDAN—And it is worth remembering that students are among those with the lowest socioeconomic background, so there are car and transport issues, and this is a flexible, relatively cheap option for them.

The CHAIR—Thanks very much.

Ms DARVENIZA—I am glad to hear the student union is alive and well there.

Mr JORDAN—Ours is!

Ms DARVENIZA—That is fantastic.

The CHAIR—Well done. Thanks very much, everybody, for attending.

Witnesses withdrew.

Committee adjourned.