

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Daylesford — 28 June 2007

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Ms E. Dempster.

The CHAIR — Thanks Eleanor, I know you have been waiting all day as well. You have heard the spiel, that this is the Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into rural and regional tourism and that parliamentary privilege is afforded to your comments. If you repeat those comments outside the hall, that will not be the case. If you could please just state your name and address and the organisation which you are representing. If you could keep your comments to 3 or 4 minutes, that would be appreciated.

Ms DEMPSTER — Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Eleanor Dempster. I am a farmer and the proprietor of Cellar and Store, the retail outlet that was referred to earlier in this afternoon's proceedings. I am based at Heathcote, and I speak to you about regional tourism with all the authority of somebody who has run their own tourism business for 12 months now! So I am fairly new at it but still very enthusiastic.

There are a couple of points I would just like to make about the equity of access to resources. Heathcote is obviously a different area to Daylesford — I understand that, but we are part of the Goldfields region. It seems to me that government provides resources through a whole range of departments to assist people in setting up businesses and so forth.

But one of the things about resources that I see, for example, that Melbourne has and the rural and regional areas do not have, is participation of the major government corporations — for want of a better description — in the activities themselves. When you are talking about sponsorships and corporate — for example, I will take TAC or WorkCover — it is the ability of those sorts of organisations to directly put funds into tourism in areas in a way that they can get a return in the same way that the TAC people sponsor one of the football clubs. That is a sustained effort of sponsorship into a single area based in the capital city.

By a sustained level of sponsorship into regional and rural events in Victoria, I am talking about allocating thousands of dollars worth. I think a corporate box at the G costs about \$5000 a week; that is a lot of money. If an organisation like TAC or WorkCover was prepared to put \$5000 a week into sponsored events across rural Victoria, that would make an enormous difference to the success of those events. It would provide certainty of resources for those volunteers that run so many of the events that actually make rural tourism in Victoria work. It is not just about those of us that put our money where our mouth is; it is also about those of us who work in the community and work as a community to get rural events happening, to get action in our towns and in our districts.

The other thing about that is it would well behove corporate organisations or government departments to get off their butts in Melbourne and get out to these events, actually use the freebie tickets that they are offered to these things, and actually put numbers through the gates of these places. It is that sort of energy, and it is selling regional Victoria one activity at a time, that is going to keep tourism growing.

I think that government departments, cabinet and the Parliament should be looking at regional conferencing as often as they can, as a first choice and not as a last choice, and at the very least having written into their training programs that it is an expectation that their metropolitan-based training programs should have to incorporate getting out into the regions and spending a bit of that money — it does not have to be in a tiny town like Heathcote, although I think we could teach you quite a lot about living — but it can be getting out to Warrnambool, going to Mildura, getting into Ballarat, Bendigo and Daylesford. There are resources out there to provide conferencing and training facilities and it would be terrific if governments had that. It is a pretty simple thing, and not a particularly costly thing, to write that into your training programs, or the expectation that that will happen. That is part of your participation in a fuller life in Victoria, something that happens beyond the 25-kilometre radius of Melbourne.

I am interested that a number of people have spoken here today and said how conveniently located Daylesford is to the Melbourne airport. Funnily enough that is exactly the line we use at Heathcote too. We are an hour away and so much of Victoria is only an hour away from wherever you happen to be at the time. It is the most wonderful, wonderful selling opportunity, whether it is for international visitors or for Melbourne-based visitors, suburban or other regional visitors, so I hope that the committee is able to come up with, or draw together, a whole lot of ideas about getting people away from the airport. Signage is probably a good thing.

Food and wine tourism, I think, is the focus; it is what people are looking for. Our family has farmed in the Heathcote area since they came to Heathcote in the gold rush, and they just did not leave. We have been doing it for a long time. Sad and all as it is, tourism is the next industry for rural Victoria and you do not want your industrial eggs all in one basket, but it certainly is the path towards the future and a pathway to prosperity for a whole range of society, not just the wealthy and the well off. Can I make an observation that food-handling laws are particularly

onerous in tourism. The comment was made that very few cellar doors have food opportunities. That is because it can take many thousands of dollars to set up to present food within a building and then many thousands of dollars in ongoing, mandatory recording and so forth for food-handling skills. Apart from your training and your accreditation, every week there is all of the recording you have to do. I do not blame a lot of businesses for saying that for the return they get on a plate of something, and the fact that is not their core business, they will not do that.

I do not know if anybody has proposed to the committee the possibility of subsidised transport to regional events. If you go to Melbourne for a major event they have free this and free that. If you go to Melbourne on the weekend you can pay \$2.50 and go anywhere and link up with any train, tram or bus combination you like to get you around the various tourism things in Melbourne. There is nothing even remotely like that in the country. I understand that is because we have not got a massive public transport infrastructure, but we do have trains and buses that get out to these regional places. Do we need to be looking at subsidising those in some way, so that for key events across the year it is not a \$30 train ticket for a couple of people to get to Ballarat to do something — or Bendigo, Daylesford, the Warrnambool races or wherever.

Volunteerism was in the firing line a little bit earlier today. Volunteerism is growing in some aspects of the community and maybe not in others. We praise our volunteers for the CFA, but when they stand behind a counter and they do not drink wine or they do not know how to present themselves in an urbane and sophisticated way, we say that is not quite the go. My family are all volunteer firemen, and they hate doing the training. I think you raised that fact. As soon as you say training, my son and my husband say they hate it because it means giving more hours of free time to get accredited so they can go and do something for free for the community. I am not sure that is an answer for the tourism information centres.

But what is an answer is for Tourism Victoria to get a professional team that goes into every VIC to do an audit of what their website looks, what their newsletter looks like, what their pamphlets are like et cetera, and say, 'These are the areas where you need professional help. This is what we do'. They are a little marketing group that just gets out there and gets all of those peripheral things up to standard so that the men and women behind the counter, who are busy trying to help with people's day-to-day inquiries, are not also trying to develop the framework for a newsletter or develop a website. That is what is happening in our local tourism information centre.

There also needs to be training, maybe sponsored by Tourism Victoria, for succession planning for major rural and regional events. So much of what happens in rural Victoria happens voluntarily. It is not just agricultural societies, to draw on a very traditional thing, but race clubs and food and wine fairs; the things that bubble up from the community and bubble up from a volunteer base. Maybe there could be a training program, a kit or a succession plan that is a template for an organisation to use to develop a community event. I am sure they exist but I have not seen them.

The last thing I would like to say is that regional training centres for hospitality that provide people with a career pathway are an essential part of the story. I want to clarify that. I do not think you need to keep kids in towns, you need to structure your industry, and we have to do that with government encouragement. Also, within the industry we need to pay people well. We need to look at doing that so that people come back to make their lives in rural and regional Victoria, and in so doing enhance the tourism experience because it is their career and their choice to be back there. I hate that phrase 'Let's keep kids in these towns'. No, let us let them out in the world. Let us push them out into the world, knowing there is a really good career structure within the tourism industry or within their town, the place they grew up, to come back to to raise their families and to keep the cycle going.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Eleanor, we appreciate your time. Thank you very much for your help, ladies and gentleman.

Committee adjourned.