

5 October 2020

Dear Committee Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Economics' inquiry into Regional Inequality in Australia.

I grew up in Scottsdale, in rural north-east Tasmania. My family remains there, and I maintain an interest in local affairs and I want to see my hometown flourish. Scottsdale's issues are similar to those in many regional areas, as highlighted in [this 2014 Guardian article](#) about the town and its economy.

I note that the general principles of Regional Development Policy – outlined by the Productivity Commission in its [Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Jobs for the Future in Regional Areas](#) – might provide a useful lens as the Committee finalises its report. That Submission highlights how the Scottsdale area (for example) has below average 'adaptive capacity', meaning the region finds it difficult to adapt to changing economic circumstances. The Productivity Commission states that people-related factors such as education, accessibility to services and infrastructure have the strongest influence on that capacity.

The Committee's Terms of Reference cover a number of important policy areas; I will focus on only a few in which I take a personal interest. I encourage the Committee to focus foremost on education and health policy in considering how to reduce inequality between urban and rural areas. The Committee could also consider strengthening agri-environmental policies and appropriate evaluation of regional development policies.

[Harvard University analysts identify education inequity generally becoming 'baked in' for life](#). This means ensuring the **quality of education at schools in regional areas** is a good place for the Committee to start.

- This useful [OECD report on Learning in Rural Schools](#) highlights the importance of raising aspirations and creating opportunities for rural students. It also finds that Australian students in rural areas have less access to quality educational materials than students in Australian cities.

In order to raise aspirations and create opportunities, I believe students in rural areas should have access to the same broad range of classes as students in other areas. High speed internet is now available in many rural areas and our increasing comfort with teaching by video should make that task easier.

Just as an anecdote, I was concerned to hear recently from a former teacher of mine that students in rural Tasmania are no longer encouraged to study a foreign language, as I had been in the 1990s. Given Australia's openness to trade and investment having been a pillar of almost 29 years of economic growth, I consider students should now have greater, not fewer, opportunities to study a foreign language, whether they be in a city or in a rural area.

With ageing parents, I am concerned also about **health inequality**. I support the [submission by the Lachlan Shire Council](#), which referred to a 'revolving door' of doctors, whereby few doctors remain in that area for longer than a few months. Because patients do not have the opportunity to form a relationship with a doctor, the revolving door discourages residents of regional areas from going to the doctor, thereby reducing continuity of support. Indeed, my family has directly suffered from this phenomenon:

- Lack of easy access to good quality health care meant a close family member waited several months to see a specialist and get tests for cancer. After waiting six months for an appointment,

he was diagnosed with advanced metastatic cancer that had moved beyond the early, more treatable stages.

- I am concerned about the poor health of my other family and friends, where I see so much illness and not enough support given distance from quality medical assistance: a close family member and two neighbours have autoimmune diseases affecting their quality of life; another neighbour has serious heart disease; and another neighbour recently died of breast cancer.
- A close family member – this time in a different part of rural Australia – had terrible trouble with depression after a locum GP incorrectly prescribed medication; she then found it almost impossible to get an appointment with a psychiatrist. To rectify the problem within a short timeframe she ended up seeing a psychiatrist in Sydney by video.

I would urge the Committee to look at what recommendations it can make to address health inequality; the Committee could consider in particular the recent [submission of the Rural Doctors' Association to the Productivity Commission](#) on mental health.

Beyond education and health, I encourage the Committee to consider **agricultural policy**, where Australian rural communities need to maintain their comparative advantages versus urban areas and versus other countries if regional inequality is to be reduced. The Committee should consider the future of Australian agriculture in the face of significant environmental challenges, in particular, soil health. According to the [UN Food and Agriculture Organisation](#), “the main problem humanity is currently facing is not global warming, extinction of species or any other environmental crisis – the main problem we will have to face is the degradation of our soils”. New government policies promoting regenerative agriculture – which improves soil health – could foster opportunities for Australian regional communities to cater better to changing consumer tastes as well as to improve the quality of our soils and offer future generations the chance to continue farming. The [Western Australian Government](#) is encouraging its farmers to consider this approach, which is yielding results, particularly for responding to drought and salinity as well as to respond to the demands of premium export markets. The latest research data also indicates this form of agriculture – where Australian farmers are already leaders – offers [excellent opportunities to reduce carbon dioxide emissions](#).

Finally, whatever the Committee recommends, I suggest it **learns from evaluation of past policies**.

- The [Productivity Commission and the Grattan Institute](#) found in 2010-11 that several million dollars in funding provided to Scottsdale companies did not significantly alter long-term employment trends. Direct subsidies to businesses did not appear to work well in this case.
- Another major policy program that could have yielded significant outcomes for Scottsdale – but did not – was its status as one of the first three towns in Australia to be connected to the National Broadband Network. I am not aware of any incentives provided to encourage tech businesses to set up in the town to take advantage of the NBN. Nor, as far as I know, was there a push to encourage local students to learn tech skills such as coding.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and I wish the Committee success as it finalises its recommendations.

Kind regards

[Name provided separately]