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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Review of state-specific migration mechanisms

MONDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2001

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Monday, 26 February 2001

Members: Mrs Gallus (*Chair*), Senator McKiernan (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Bartlett, Eggleston and Tierney and Mr Adams, Mr Baird, Mrs Irwin, Mrs May and Mr Ripoll

Senators and members in attendance: Senators McKiernan and Tierney and Mr Adams, Mrs Irwin, Mrs May and Mr Ripoll

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To review and report on the suite of State-specific Migration Mechanisms and the extent to which these meet the needs of State and Territory governments for skilled and business migrants with particular reference to:

- The adequacy of consultations with States/Territories on the mechanisms that have been developed;
- The level to which State and Territory Governments have utilised these mechanisms;
- Steps that might be taken to increase take-up; and
- Other mechanisms that might be developed

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 11.15 a.m.

BRASSIL, Mr Patrick, Deputy Chairman, Riverina Regional Development Board

DALE, Mr Peter, Executive Officer, Riverina Regional Development Board

ACTING CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee into the review of state-specific migration mechanisms. This review was referred to the committee by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The committee sought to visit regional areas to take evidence wherever possible but, unfortunately, it has been unable to achieve that in the case of Wagga Wagga and Griffith. I welcome the witnesses from the Riverina and thank them for their submissions and for their appearance here today.

The purpose of the review is to examine and report on a range of state-specific migration mechanisms and the extent to which these meet the needs of state and territory governments for skilled and business migrants. The terms of reference focus on the adequacy of consultations with states and territories on the mechanisms that have been developed, and the level at which state and territory governments have utilised these mechanisms; steps that might be taken to increase the take-up; and other mechanisms that might be developed. At the conclusion of the review the committee will table its findings, conclusions and recommendations in the parliament in a report which will be publicly available.

The committee has received 62 submissions from state, territory and local governments, migration agents and people with an interest in migration issues. The committee normally authorises submissions for publication and they are placed on the committee's web site. If you would like further details about the review, please feel free to ask any of the committee staff at the hearing.

The committee will take evidence from witnesses as listed in its program. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, witnesses should understand that these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Are there any corrections or amendments that you would like to make to your submission?

Mr Brassil—No.

ACTING CHAIR—The committee would prefer all evidence to be taken in public but, if you wish to give confidential evidence to the committee, you may request that the hearings be held in camera and the committee will consider your request. I thank you again for coming here today and invite you now to speak to the submission that you have presented to us. It is No. 8 on our list of submissions and it is now part of the public debate of the inquiry.

Mr Brassil—Thank you for your welcome. It is our pleasure to be here to try to support the submission that we made on 28 September 1999, which was submitted to you on our behalf by Melissa Green. Generally speaking, we are pleased with the state-specific migration mechanisms and with the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. As we said in our submission, we see this as one of the mechanisms that could and should be used to get skilled

young migrants into regional areas. Generally speaking, there is a lack of skilled young migrants in such areas. We have long held the view that the population distribution of Australia is not working to the greatest good of all Australians in that it is too concentrated in capital cities and it is not adequately spread over the rest of the continent.

Mr ADAMS—Hear, hear!

ACTING CHAIR—Order!

Mr Brassil—We see that as a possible help, but this scheme needs even more help. So we are on side with the scheme. We are the certifying body for the scheme and we have used it. Employers have used the scheme and found it to be of benefit. However, we have had some red tape type difficulties with the scheme, which I understand have been addressed, at least to some extent. Generally, we are in favour of the scheme. We have found it to be good. Do you want me to go on to criticisms of it?

ACTING CHAIR—Yes, but we will be directing questions to you. Given the time constraints, any time you can save at this point to allow for questions would be appreciated.

Mr Brassil—The only point that I will make about issues is a recent example in Griffith, where a prospective employer let a job provider know that he wanted a particular person with particular skills. As you would know, the job had to be advertised. We are happy with that theory too. When it became apparent that the skills were not available locally or through the job provider, the employer gave Peter a letter—or some sort of documentation—stating that the job provider had been approached, that the job had been advertised and that there was nobody in Australia available for it. The employer was quite happy to do that and the provider was quite happy to give it to him for a price of \$550, which he found a bit exorbitant for a piece of paper saying that he had done the right thing in assisting with a scheme to bring employable people to that particular area. I do not know what the price for such a service should be, but I think that that requirement and the associated costs should be addressed in some way. I do not have a solution to this issue, but I see it as a problem.

Mr Dale—This matter arose only recently, and I view it with some considerable concern because I see that sort of attitude as an impediment to the greater intention of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme—to address labour shortages and skill shortages. The board specifically addressed that with a study. As Pat Brassil said, in this instance, on the advice of the certifying body—namely, me—the employer, in complying with the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme criteria, advertised to determine whether there was a person in Australia who could fill this specialist position. I might add that the employer, through knowledge of his industry, was pretty certain that no such person could fill that position, save the person he already had there who happened to be on a temporary visa.

Given the regular sort of advice that we would give in these instances, we advised the employer of the various methods available under the scheme which he could use to advertise the position—that is, either in the newspapers or through a Job Network member. Under the old scheme of things it was through the CES. Given the limited numbers of Job Network providers in some of the western areas, this person went ahead and did that. I am not aware of whether that person paid for the privilege of lodging that job with the Job Network provider, although

commercial practice now requires them to pay for that. But as Pat said, my great concern was, when it was time to lodge the nomination on form 1054 under the scheme, to get acknowledgment from the Job Network person that the position had been advertised and that there had been no response to it.

I believe that the scheme would happily accept that much, yet this person was asked to pay \$550. I clarified the situation with the manager of this Job Network and he confirmed that that was their commercial charge. I find that an absolute impediment to the good intentions of the scheme and to the good intentions of the employers. Some employers may be seen to be capable of paying that sort of money, but I am certain that some would not. I think that is detrimental to the good operation of the scheme.

Mrs IRWIN—That was an interesting comment you just made, Mr Dale. In your submission you said that the former Commonwealth Employment Service promoted RSMS but that Job Network is less keen. The old service promoted the scheme but Job Network does not and it is actually charging a fee. You are saying that the old CES would not have done that.

Mr Dale—I am not 100 per cent certain about the current policy of all Job Network providers because there are a lot of individual organisations. Some may be more committed than others to promoting the scheme. I am not aware of any initiative from any Job Network provider in our area that I would consider an initiative under the RSMS.

Mrs IRWIN—I note that under RSMS you brought 24 people and their families into this area in September 1999. How many more families have come into the area since September 1999?

Mr Dale—I cannot answer specifically for that period of time because the structure of regional development boards, under the Department of State and Regional Development, changed as of January last year. I have been executive officer since only February last year. I can comment on the time since February last year to now. Twelve new residents to the Riverina area have either been approved or are currently awaiting approval. The majority of those would be in the western part of the Riverina. There is the capacity for a great many more to be attracted under the scheme. The board has taken an active part in promoting its role as a certifying body under the scheme by publicising the services of the scheme, what the scheme is intended to do and the fact that the board is a certifying body. That is done through our newsletter, which has a circulation of roughly 1,000 around the region and beyond. You are welcome to take a copy of all of those.

Mrs IRWIN—That would be appreciated. On a lighter note, in your submission you gave an example—I am going to try not to laugh here—of Safari Motors at Narrandera. You said that they actually made a video to try to get some people interested in moving to the area. They showed all the highlights of the town, particularly the wife of the mechanic, and their comment was, 'It's not the men we worry about, it's the missus we need to make sure is happy.' Is this the wife of the chap who might have come into the area to work—there are no resources there for her or no community involvement?

Mr Dale—Yes, that is true. That was truly said by the author of this letter, who would faithfully reproduce what was said. That is often the case. Even though primary workers have

an opportunity to come to the area, often there are difficulties in getting full or even partial employment for their spouse or partner.

Mrs IRWIN—I refer now to the different religions. Let us say, for example, that a gentleman who came into your area was a Muslim. Are the resources there to cater for his cultural or religious beliefs? Have you looked at the provision of a community hall or a place where they can worship?

Mr Dale—I believe those resources are improving. I could not say they were available specifically for Muslims, but I would say that those resources are certainly improving. I cannot give you a positive answer in relation to that particular religion.

Mr Brassil—I know that they are available in Wagga, but for an unusual reason.

Mrs IRWIN—That is only one example; there are other religions.

Mr Brassil—There are such places for Muslims available in Wagga simply because there are so many students at Charles Sturt University. They have built a mosque—only a little one—at the university campus just outside Wagga Wagga. There are Muslims in other parts of the Riverina and obviously there are some facilities, but they would be a hall type and used only occasionally.

Mrs MAY—In your submission you identify—and you have said so this morning—that RSMS is a great way of identifying skills shortages, but there was a comment that it was ad hoc and patchy in relation to overall shortages. You completed a business survey and skills audit in 1999. I wonder whether that audit will assist you now in identifying those areas in which there are skills shortages. Going on what you were saying before about the Job Network, is it now going to give you an avenue to attract the people you really need?

Mr Dale—Yes, I agree that it will. I again refer to the fact that I have now been with the board for a year. I have a full understanding of the intention of the business survey and skills audit and the application of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. As you can see in the newsletter, my board has actively set about promoting the scheme and, as you have indicated, is looking at some of the findings of that skills audit to enable us to actively get out there and market the services of RSMS to employers. We use the skills matching database that is available. If people have not already identified a potential worker or employee, they can use that skills matching database to advise employers of the availability of people from that database.

From my experience in the past 12 months, all the nominations under the RSMS have been by employers for people they have found themselves. They have been working with them on a temporary visa basis and have proven their loyalties, their abilities, their skills and their commitment to those employers, so the employer has said, 'I am willing to support you for permanent residency because I want to keep you on my work force.'

Mrs MAY—Have those people they are employing or they are going that further step to keep come to this area through family connections? How have they found your area? How do you go about marketing your area?

Mr Dale—We do it in a variety of ways. To my knowledge, those that are in the area have come through a variety of localised and national advertising by employers. Recently, a general practitioner came to a local town as a result of an extensive and heavily funded campaign to try to attract doctors to the country. That specific community got a response and the doctor was ultimately accepted under the scheme. In most other instances—again from knowledge gained from speaking to employers—people, particularly in specialist areas such as scientific research, have come to the area through advertisements in specific journals and magazines. Recently, a person was accepted by the CSIRO as a scientific researcher or a plant scientist. There is that type of thing. We are certainly evolving the marketing from a regional point of view. The board now has a business plan, which will address marketing of the Riverina. It goes under the name Riverina Naturally. We have committed to the marketing plan. We are currently in the process of appointing consultants to look at our five-year strategic forward plan for marketing the Riverina Naturally name in all areas of industry, tourism and so forth.

Mrs MAY—What has your relationship been with DIMA? Have they been helpful all the way through? Have you found them of great assistance?

Mr Dale—Since June last year when the incumbent at the time, Melissa Green, who is the author of this letter, left State and Regional Development, and with the new structure of the regional development boards, where the board is now separate from State and Regional Development and is in some respects autonomous—it is a quango, I suppose—my contact with Immigration and Multicultural Affairs as a certifying body has been nothing but extremely supportive. Pat Brassil mentioned some red tape difficulties. They have been pretty expeditiously handled as far as I am concerned. My secretary and I were invited to Canberra for a workshop with Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in June last year, where they provided all the necessary resource information for the operation of the scheme. I felt there was a very welcome invitation to make contact with them and with the people who had the decision making capacity, and to visit them on any occasion we needed assistance.

Mostly I would have to say that they have been supportive. Recently the department sent out a questionnaire virtually asking for any ideas on how we could cooperatively market the scheme. That virtually resulted in us featuring it in a newsletter. So I am very comfortable with the relationship at the moment. I think the department is keen to extend the marketing capacity for the scheme and would respond to any initiative. If we went to them and said, 'Look, we think it would be a good idea to do this,' I would feel confident that if it was well planned and put together you would get support for it.

Mrs MAY—So they would take it on board?

Mr Dale—I believe so. That is my current feeling with the connections I have had with them.

Mr RIPOLL—Mr Dale, what about the industries and skills, and what shortages people are going for?

Mr Dale—To try to encapsulate the whole of the Riverina is difficult. It is such a huge area and you know we tend to look at it as the eastern Riverina-western Riverina. There is an identified shortage of available skills in the western Riverina. The mayor of Griffith, who is here today to give evidence later, will testify to that. But it is the trades particularly and also

seasonal work. You could argue that that is not a skills issue, but it is a major issue for the western Riverina.

Mr RIPOLL—Can you give us some examples? You were talking about one in particular but you never mentioned the industry or the type of work. Just so we have got some idea, are you talking about mechanics, electricians, carpenters, plumbers? For example, you mentioned one that was advertised nationally that they could not fill.

Mr Dale—The one that I am dealing with at the moment is a specialist potato crop breeder. We are not looking for a person with necessarily a university degree but someone who is skilled in that area. So that was one—a potato breeder. I have one at the moment who is a chicken sexer for Bartters, the big egg and chicken producers at Griffith. They have advertised nationally and are unable—this is true; the chairman is laughing—

ACTING CHAIR—No, I have actually heard about the chicken—

Mr Dale—Pat Brassil and I actually laughed as well on the way over here. Chicken sexing is a highly skilled trade. As I learnt the Koreans are considered to be the best chicken sexers in the world. I have not asked for an explanation as to why that is so. To Bartters it is a screamingly important issue. Their future breeding stocks and their production are very much reliant on the accurate sexing of their chickens. To them it is an extremely important matter.

Mr RIPOLL—Is there anyone in those industries like, for example, Bartters who is actually looking to train people in the local area for the job?

Mr Dale—Yes, there is. They have a full training component which was submitted as part of the application under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme to demonstrate their commitment. But to be able to train someone you have to have someone with the skill to start off with. This is where they have had great difficulty. We have had other more traditional professions, I suppose. The project engineer was one. A pathology or plant scientist for CSIRO was another. There are two factors, particularly in the western region: (a) they are unable to source an Australian from the current work force through lack of that skill or (b) they are not prepared to move into the western area of the state or to that particular area for no specific reason other than they do not want to be relocated from where they are. That is one of the difficulties that Griffith in particular has. I will not encroach on Mayor Brayne's ground, but they have an incredibly low unemployment rate and a terrifically buoyant business environment and they are unable to fill a lot of skills positions for that reason.

Mr RIPOLL—Is there any sort of forward planning from your organisation? If you have problems attracting people there now and if you migrate people, once they have fulfilled their requirements, what is going to keep them there? Once they are here, what is going to keep them attracted to that area if you currently have trouble getting people there in the first place? Is it a skill shortage or is it a combined skill shortage? Or do they not want to go there?

Mr Dale—I think, yes, the latter factor would be admissible. I think that, once people are attracted to any of the major Riverina communities—I can speak personally, and Pat Brassil can of Wagga Wagga—and they understand the quality of life there and the availability of services there, as it is in Griffith, they stay. I understand that there have been some difficulties with the

scheme and I think there is a bill before the parliament now to try to cut out the scenario where people are nominated under the scheme and do not fulfil their two-year contractual obligation. There could be a number of reasons why they do that. I understand that this bill, once through parliament, will probably cut down the incidence of that happening.

Mr RIPOLL—Yes. From your experience, for the ones that you have been involved with or you have reviewed—that is, the people that are coming over and requiring these visas—what is the employer-employee relationship prior to them coming over?

Mr Dale—When you say prior to them coming—

Mr RIPOLL—We have found through this committee inquiry into this particular matter that almost all the people we have heard evidence from, when we have pursued this line of whether they knew the person before they actually tried to get them, have said yes, they did. Was there a relationship? Yes, there was. Normally there was a connection. It was not purely a case of advertising nationally, not being able to find anyone, advertising internationally and then Joe Bloggs coming in off the street and they have no idea who they are.

Mr Dale—Yes, I understand what you are saying.

Mr RIPOLL—What we have found is that they have already got a person in mind, someone they had in mind prior to even advertising, who is the person they always wanted in that job. So what is your experience in terms of prior relationships?

Mr Dale—I would say from my personal knowledge of the ones that I have dealt with that that is about 75 per cent of the situation.

Mr RIPOLL—What sorts of relationships are we talking about? Based on what? Obviously they know the person, but through what?

Mr Dale—I think in one instance that I know of it was because of a religious affiliation. As far as the others are concerned, I could not say specifically, but I gather that they knew those people were attracted to the area because of some family relationship. Equally, some of the others there, in my experience, did not have a prior connection. I would reckon 70 per cent would be a fair indicator.

Mr RIPOLL—Yes, I would say that would be so. From what we have heard in evidence to us, it would be about that.

ACTING CHAIR—What religion was it?

Mr Dale—As I understand it—and this is only anecdotally—it was a member of the brethren. I think it was the Plymouth Brethren.

Mr ADAMS—I like your newsletter. It looks like yours is a very active group out there, daring to achieve things in your region. Most regions need capital. What I am finding is that there is a lack of capital sometimes to get an enterprise start. Somebody with a million dollars

wants to start a new business and may fit into a region's support base or add value to one of its products or whatever. Do you think that sort of idea could work in the future? Could we offer something to migrants from overseas who have some capital and who want to come to Australia to invest that capital? Would that be a goer, do you think?

Mr Brassil—That is a very difficult question to answer and that is the first time that I have come up against that particular question, Mr Adams.

Mr ADAMS—We have got to get out of the square in the regions. We have got to really punch differently because we are going backwards.

Mr Brassil—Yes. Most of the investments and therefore job creation that seems to go on in most of the inland regions of New South Wales, I dare say, but certainly in the Riverina, is a case of locals developing a business by adding value to it. The common one of course is making wine out of grapes; that has become very common lately. The other is by somebody coming into the region—generally a foreign company; although it can be an Australian company, most often it is a foreign company with plenty of capital—and setting up a business, the most successful of which are related to the products of the region. The wool scourer at Wagga Wagga is an example of that.

Mr ADAMS—I see the cotton gin.

Mr Brassil—The cotton gin at Hillston is again adding value. And where did the capital for that come, Peter?

Mr Dale—It was from Namoi Cotton.

Mr Brassil—Yes, so it was from Australian investors, from New South Wales. With regard to encouraging a migrant to come in with capital, say a million dollars, I cannot see the workings of that. What Wagga did, though this was a long time ago, resulted in getting the wool scour, which is the biggest in the Southern Hemisphere now. We did all the work to say that this was the place a wool scour should be. Having done all that work and paid consultants to do it—and I am talking over 30 years ago—we then sent it to various big firms around the world: France, Germany, Italy and Japan. The French took it up and they were encouraged to come. You are talking a much smaller sort of—

Mr ADAMS—I am, but I guess from that there would be French technicians or some people that we have had to facilitate.

Mr Brassil—Yes, all that has occurred.

Mr ADAMS—Those things need to occur. Also, from that you are actually adding value to the wool from your district and you are getting at least one more step into it. So it is a bit crazy in Australia. It took us a long time before we even got to making tops here—something like 150 years.

Mr Brassil—We used to, years and years ago, but we then went to exporting greasy wool practically to the exclusion of everything else.

Mr ADAMS—And we lost all the skills in doing anything else. It is the natural advantage that we sometimes have with products in that we can add value but we do not have the capital to do that. There are people who, for a whole range of reasons in the world, have that capital and look for somewhere to go. I think that maybe in regional Australia might be able to put some packages together for those people. It is probably a bit controversial that we would be offering citizenship on the basis of capital investment, but the world is now ripping everyone else's education system off by attracting all the IT people they can to their country when they are getting educated elsewhere, so it is becoming that sort of world.

Mr Brassil—Yes, I can see that the government could be criticised for that. Governments get criticised for lots of things.

Mr ADAMS—With your promotion of migration like this, has there been any criticism in your region? Do you get any criticism?

Mr Brassil—I am not conscious of any.

Mr Dale—Speaking to the mayor of Griffith on the way in, I gained the feeling that there is a momentum building for recognition—we are speaking specifically about RSMS. I have been invited as the certifying person representing the certifying body to address a diversity network in Griffith. It comprises various ethnic groups in Griffith which are substantial so that they can have a full understanding of how the scheme operates. I am aware that this is intended to be an employer driven scheme—a chicken and egg thing—but if potential employees have a greater understanding of how the scheme operates then I believe that understanding will assist the employers to satisfy some of their skill shortages.

Mr ADAMS—Your skills audit really showed up your needs and shortages so that you can build on that?

Mr Dale—Yes, like all surveys—again this was done before my time with the board, I am familiar with it—it had some limitations in terms of the range of the industries that were respondents to it, but the key recommendations included in it do certainly give me and therefore the board the opportunity to structurally respond to the issues with some modification for current circumstances.

Mr ADAMS—Is there anything that sticks out much in terms of shortages in your region—mechanics, cooks, chefs?

Mr Dale—All of the above. It is pretty much across the board. In trades there is certainly a shortfall and, as I understand it, in chefs and mechanics, specialist mechanics particularly.

Mr ADAMS—And you have got good TAFE coverage in your region?

Mr Dale—Outstanding. It is very, very good.

Mr ADAMS—Is it that the locals are just not getting into those trades, or is it the process?

Mr Dale—It is a bit of a double-edged sword.

Mr Brassil—Yes, it is.

Mr Dale—We have got this sort of outward migration of young people and—

ACTING CHAIR—Please conclude. It is important, but I am conscious that we do be able to hear from Mayor Brayne before we conclude our public hearing today. But please continue to respond.

Mr Dale—It is no different. I finished my high schooling in Wagga Wagga—and, let me tell you, that is three decades plus ago—and the issues are no different today from what they were then. How can we give young people jobs? The migration of young people then was evident to at that stage seek educational opportunities in the metropolitan areas. Thankfully that has been addressed. Wagga Wagga and the region is very well provided for generally with education and it is one of the big pluses we have in our region. But that still does not stop younger people seeking their fortunes elsewhere, particularly given the current publicity and the perceived shrinkage in regional and rural areas. But for Riverina it is not a doom and gloom picture. Riverina is very buoyant. There are pockets of areas, but the key regional centres of Wagga Wagga and Griffith are still very strong, with strong population bases, excellent services and some big industries established. We have got the Visy Board industry ready to kick off in Tumut soon and there have been a lot of big business expansions in the Griffith area such as Parle Foods. There have been expansions in the defence sector in Wagga Wagga. There are a lot of big positives and it is the smaller rural pockets around those that need to come to grips with their specific issues.

Senator TIERNEY—As a former resident of the Riverina I am very interested in what you were saying there. My question relates to Korean migrants and chicken sexing. I am not one of those who laughs at chicken sexing by the way; it is incredibly important to get the sex right. The boys, I believe, head for the dinner table and the gals head for laying and then onto chicken meat. It would be very embarrassing to be a boy chicken in with 70,000 females if you were incorrectly sexed. So it is very important to do it correctly. The question relates to Steggle then Bartter in the Hunter Valley. This issue of Korean chicken sexers came up there. From my understanding, in the Hunter the resolution was that they did not come in. The locals sort of kept control of it. I just did not quite understand from what you were saying what the outcome was with Korean chicken sexers in the Riverina. Did they come in?

Mr Dale—My understanding from Bartter Enterprises, who made the nomination under RSMS to employ a Korean chicken sexer—

Senator TIERNEY—One?

Mr Dale—One was nominated under the scheme by Bartter Enterprises. I thought this was an interesting one, so I asked the question, ‘That’s interesting, a Korean,’ and this person said to me, ‘Yes, they are recognised as being the best’.

Senator TIERNEY—That was the claim in the Hunter too. So how long ago?

Mr Dale—That nomination is currently with the department.

Senator TIERNEY—I see.

Mr Dale—It has not been approved as yet, but it was only recently submitted under the scheme.

Senator TIERNEY—Has there been any reaction from the local workers? Do they see that as the thin edge of the wedge, that perhaps a whole lot of other Koreans are coming?

Mr Dale—I am not aware of any attitude there. I have not sought that, but nothing has come my way on that.

Senator TIERNEY—There certainly was in the Hunter on that same issue.

Mr ADAMS—There are a number of regions actually where applications have gone in for Korean chicken sexers.

ACTING CHAIR—Regrettably I am going to have to intrude at this point and thank Mr Brassil and Mr Dale very much for their attendance here. We would have preferred to have taken the evidence from you and seen the Riverina ourselves first hand. It just was not possible, but thank you for facilitating the imparting of the information you have to the committee.

[11.58 a.m.]

BRAYNE, Mrs Helen Ivy, Mayor, Griffith City Council

ACTING CHAIR—I welcome the witness. The committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, but should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. Are there any corrections or amendments you wish to make to your submission, which is No. 38 on our list of submissions?

Mayor Brayne—No, I would probably just outline some extensions to that.

ACTING CHAIR—I would invite you to do that now and at the completion of your remarks I will invite members of the committee to address questions to you.

Mayor Brayne—Thank you very much, I appreciate the opportunity to appear. I will not cover any of the issues or much of the issues that Mr Dale and Councillor Brassil have, particularly in relation to the specific areas that they were speaking to. I would like to outline and highlight some of the issues that are facing the Griffith area and indeed the western Riverina that probably are significantly different from issues in the metropolitan areas or even in other regions of New South Wales. As Peter Dale indicated, even from the eastern area of the Riverina to the western area there are differences.

Unlike most of the rural areas we are, as Peter indicated, experiencing a significant growth in development at the moment both in agriculture and food processing, and that expansion has left us with a severe shortage of labour. In fact, we have an employment problem, not an unemployment one, at the moment. There was mention of Bartters, which are now the second largest egg and poultry producers in the Southern Hemisphere. They employ 1,600 in the Griffith area alone and they expect to employ another 1,000 over the next few years in their expansion programs. Parle Foods, which are going through a major expansion, are expecting to need another 400 people in the future. Those are just two industries.

Mr ADAMS—What does that industry do?

Mayor Brayne—Parle Foods are food processors. They are processing sweet corn and tomatoes. They provide all the gherkins for McDonald's hamburgers in Australia and Asia. They are exporting frozen foods overseas and they are increasing their production of sweet corn from about 5,000 to about 20,000 tonnes this year. Their long-term project is for 90,000 tonnes, which is—

Mr ADAMS—And that is for world export?

Mayor Brayne—Yes. As was also mentioned, there is still considerable expansion in the wine industry. One of the issues is that the type of labour they require probably does not fit comfortably at this stage in any of the mechanisms that you have—the skilled migration or the others. While theirs is a skill, they do not have a skill that can be assessed. A lot of them have skills that do not have a recognised certificate, but nevertheless they are very important. We also

have a need for harvest labour for the current harvest season. Employment National indicated last week that currently there are 1,000 needed urgently in our area to harvest the existing crops. So we have got a long-term permanent labour shortage need and also a short-term one.

The other thing that I would just like to highlight too in terms of the issues that the committee is looking at is the fact that we have historically had a long association with migration to our area from overseas. Almost since the irrigation area started, and certainly since the 1930s, we have had migration from Europe and particularly from Italy. Now perhaps 50 per cent of our population is of Italian origin or descent. They have been moving and settling into the area since the 1930s and assimilating very well. More recently we have been attracting migrants from the Asia-Pacific region, particularly from India, Turkey and the Middle East. They are assimilating and enriching the cultural life of our community as well as providing very valuable labour. The advantage I guess of many of those is that they came to this area under a pattern which we loosely call 'chain migration', whereby families came and then sponsored other members of families. The advantage to our area has been that they have been sponsored, so families are prepared to house them, to find them a job and to help them fit into the community and become part of the community. So it has been at very little cost to the community or to the government.

The other thing in relation to that is that, because we have low unemployment, we have not had any of the social problems or issues that are sometimes faced in the metropolitan areas with migrants because of unemployment. That is a very important thing. The migrants who have come to our area have come because they have an affinity with the land in many cases. They appreciate and enjoy a rural lifestyle and they are coming because of that, therefore they settle in quite happily. It is difficult to bring people in who are not used to rural living or who do not want to live in a rural area and expect them to take up some of those positions.

I was speaking just at the weekend to somebody from a local government area in Sydney. Migrants comprise over 50 per cent of the population in their area. They indicated that, while the migrants settle in there, because they have a 20 per cent unemployment problem they do have some social problems which we basically do not face in our area.

So in looking at any possible changes to any of these mechanisms, those are some of the factors that we would like the committee to consider in relation to rural areas such as ours. There are key factors there that probably cannot be addressed by a one size fits all sort of approach, and that is probably what we were trying to say in our submission. We find that it is far more difficult now for people to obtain visas and to be able to settle permanently. It is harder now than it has been at any time in the past, and particularly because now, as I say, they do not fit the qualifications even under the skilled regional migration scheme where families can sponsor them. I constantly have a lot of people coming to me who are keen to have other members of the family come, and they know that they can find them jobs and things like that.

The other thing is that people who have come out on work visas are finding that they are now not being renewed. I have had people who have come in saying that they have been there working for four or five years, had their work visa renewed and are now finding that it is not being renewed. Some of those people have actually shown me that they have private health insurance, they have permanent jobs and they have letters from employers saying that they have a permanent position. But they still have not been able to get their work visa converted to permanent entry. So there are issues like that.

We had hoped that there could be some flexibility in the scheme to cater for the needs of the agricultural and food processing industries. As Peter mentioned, Bartter Enterprises do have their own training program with their own training officer, and that training program includes teaching English to the migrants. They are very specific training programs. In addition, the TAFE in Griffith has established a food and wine industry training centre where people can be upskilled in those areas of food processing that are needed for industries that are developing very rapidly.

The industry leaders feel that the short-term visas are not the solution to their problem. Quite often they have people come who are employed under those temporary visas, but they spend the money on upskilling them and then find that their visa has expired. So that is another area to which we would ask some consideration be given in terms of a change in the way in which these things operate. I think the location of family and friends has a very strong influence, so that area is one where traditionally we have been able to capture a lot of our labour market. They come here and they really want to work. They want to make a life for their families and so they are often prepared to take on unskilled work until they can move into where their real skills are. But the other thing is that they are keen to upskill themselves and they are very motivated to work.

I would have to say that we have tried very hard with the employment schemes. The Commonwealth Employment Service and more recently the council itself have been addressing this issue of trying to attract labour to our area. When BHP closed down we worked with people from the Newcastle area. We brought up a bus load of people, entertained them, looked after them and took them around our areas to show them what opportunities there were. But unless people really want to live in a rural area they find it very difficult to relocate. Certainly the unemployment programs bringing some of the unemployed young people from the city areas to work on the farms and in those food processing areas has not resulted in them wanting to stay. It is an issue that is difficult.

What we are hoping for, and what we see as perhaps the solution in our area, is for the whole system to recognise the needs of regions such as ours and to free up some of the schemes to look at the employment needs rather than the specific skills. There could be more emphasis on rural and local networks to help monitor and advise the government on these issues. We now have a project officer under the community settlements scheme who is operating out of Griffith. That is a fairly new initiative and it has come since we made our submission. That has been very helpful, particularly in bridging some of the communication gaps between some of the people who are trying to find out why they cannot get visas extended and things like that.

ACTING CHAIR—Mrs Brayne, could I just interrupt? I am conscious of the time and there are a number of questions from the committee. Could I perhaps at this stage, unless there is something more you particularly want to highlight, start the questioning?

Mayor Brayne—I would be happy to do that.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for your cooperation. In relation to your comments about the regional areas, do you think regional and rural Australia should be given an advantage in the sponsoring of migration under schemes such as those we are talking about—an advantage over and above larger metropolitan cities?

Mayor Brayne—I think probably what needs to happen, where it can be demonstrated in a rural area such as ours that there are employment needs that can be filled, is for people to be prepared to sponsor migrants to do that, particularly in that extended family, chain migration type of thing. Maybe there is a point system or something through which they can get some sort of preference. But I think there need to be checks and balances. They need to be required to stay for a definite period before they can get a permanent entry. One of the letters that came to me was from a refugee network. They want to live and work in rural Australia—and they have another problem. They would be prepared to have a scheme of temporary entry for 10 years, during which they would guarantee to take out private health membership, they would not be eligible for social security and all those things. They are prepared to make those sorts of commitments to take up those positions. With those sorts of checks and balances, I think there is room for freeing up the system.

Mrs IRWIN—I have to congratulate you on an excellent brief. I feel that you have hit the nail on the head. I found it very interesting when you stated that you were talking to someone recently who represented an area with an over 50 per cent migrant population. Actually I have that type of area in my electorate, and I have a very high unemployment rate. Talking to the number of unemployed people, especially within the migrant community, I have explained to them about this inquiry that I am on at the moment. I asked if they would consider going to our rural and regional areas. Number one, some of them have not got the skills that we are looking to get overseas—doctors, nurses, fitters and turners—and that there is a shortage of in some of our rural areas. But they would be ideal as food processors. They say the problem is that they are looking at the resources that that particular town can offer them, in particular to do with their religion and to do with their culture, and also at affordable housing. What would be your feeling if governments of any persuasion could put the resources into an area like Griffith regarding housing? What if there was money put aside so that they could have affordable housing, so that you could try to build a community for these people? Is that how you might be able to attract them to the area?

Mayor Brayne—We have certainly been looking at affordable housing and that is something that has been recognised by the state government under the Premier's five-point plan for the development of western Riverina. It is a big issue because land is very expensive in our area at the moment and that is one of the issues. But we were trying to get the government to free up some of the crown land that they own and not sell it off at current market rates, but rather to allocate that. If you could allocate crown land you would probably get affordable housing. That is an issue that we are taking up with the state government. But certainly if that is the sort of thing that could be reinforced by an organisation or a committee such as yours, that would strengthen what we are trying to say. That is a big issue—getting that affordable housing. In terms of the facilities, we do have people from a lot of different groups there. In particular we have a Sikh temple, so people from the Punjab area do have their own church there.

We do not have a mosque but we do have a lot of Turkish and Muslim people there, and I know that they do meet. I think that they meet not in a specified temple but in their own environment. We have about 60 different nationalities there now. So there are some networks there that they can fairly easily link into. Without being too specific, if you could target people where there was already a community network for that particular ethnic group you would have success with that.

Mrs IRWIN—I can see what your concerns are also regarding visitors visas and the frustration with employers who might have someone working for them who is on a working visa. They may have been there for, say, two years and been trained. As you were saying, they have paid Medicare, they have paid their taxes and they have given to the community, but when they would like to be able to stay they virtually have to leave Australia and apply offshore. Would you feel that, to make it a lot easier, if they are out here on visitors visas they should be able to apply onshore to stay permanently?

Mayor Brayne—Yes. If they have satisfactorily completed three or four years on a working visa, then that should be able to be converted. That is where you get the community input. You know in the community the people who are genuine workers. You can easily get that network around you. If you had the recommendations coming from a network like that I think you would be able to satisfy them.

Mr RIPOLL—Mrs Brayne, can you just give me some idea of how your council arrived at a solution to a problem, the problem being that you cannot find enough workers to do unskilled jobs? How did you arrive at the solution, being this type of migration scheme?

Mayor Brayne—As I said, we have done a lot of promoting to try to get unemployed people up into that area. We have worked with the farming groups and the employment agencies over a number of years. The area consultative committee has done a lot of work based on the theme ‘Get a job, get a lifestyle’ to try to promote the lifestyle of the region. It has targeted that and there has been a lot of work done. But what we have found really is that a lot of people are not keen to move. If they are not keen to move to a rural lifestyle they are not keen to go just to get a job.

Mr RIPOLL—That is my question though. How do you see that the solution to that problem would be immigration? Even if you could get people there and they were under contract to stay for two years, after 12 months here they are going to soon learn there is Sydney and Melbourne and a lot of other places. If the problem is not in itself the job or the money, if it is the problem of attracting people to rural and regional Australia, how do you keep those people once they are here?

Mayor Brayne—That has not been our experience with the migrants who have come out under those sponsored migration programs, because they have got family and people there, and quite often they have visited their families while on holidays. They know what the lifestyle is. They know what the job opportunities are. Even the islanders, the Fijians, the Samoans and the like, have come out and they have stayed.

Mr RIPOLL—So the real thinking behind yours is not so much just a broad migration program.

Mayor Brayne—No, it would be targeted.

Mr RIPOLL—It would be a targeted family reunion type of program, where you could bring in larger—

Mayor Brayne—Probably in a broader sense.

Mr RIPOLL—or broad family members to the country.

Mayor Brayne—Yes. And nominated—

Mr RIPOLL—Into those regions. Okay, that is fine.

Senator TIERNEY—Just following on from Mr Ripoll's question, in terms of people moving on from the area, has there been any study done on that? You are saying that you have got very good retention, but is there any study on those who come in on these particular programs? Is it 90 per cent retention over a period of time. Or what is the drift of them?

Mayor Brayne—I have not seen any published data on that, I am afraid. Mine is probably more anecdotal than anything.

Senator TIERNEY—The Riverina Regional Development Board has not done anything on it?

Mayor Brayne—Not that I am aware of.

Senator TIERNEY—Okay. Could you just explain to me the role of the Riverina Regional Development Board in terms of migration? Do they play a role in terms of trying to encourage migrant groups into the Riverina?

Mayor Brayne—I think they have been probably looking at trying to encourage employment and promote the area in terms of its employment opportunities and its lifestyle opportunities across Australia. Possibly not so much targeted migrants, although Peter would know more than I. My feeling is that they have been promoting the region. They have done a lot of promotion in terms of trying to attract holiday makers and backpackers to help solve the short-term employment problem. They have done quite a lot of work promoting the area to backpackers to help fill that harvest labour.

Mr ADAMS—Just back to that housing issue again, you probably have given us very good evidence, and thank you very much. I think that issue about the family migrations, the ethnic group and that sort of thing, has been a pattern in Australia that has worked. I think it will continue to work, but we have to base our policies around that. The housing one is very interesting. You are involved in some discussion with the state government?

Mayor Brayne—Yes, currently.

Mr ADAMS—In terms of the crown land thing, I do not know if that is a WTO compliant, but let us hope that it is and that we can make that sort of thing work. Have you had any housing programs in your region or your shire in recent years?

Mayor Brayne—You mean government funded ones?

Mr ADAMS—Yes.

Mayor Brayne—No, because most of those are targeted to people on social security benefits and things.

Mr ADAMS—Welfare.

Mayor Brayne—We need low cost housing for people with families who are working, so we do not qualify.

Mr ADAMS—Has the private sector picked up much on that? You have got a bit of local wealth out there.

Mayor Brayne—We have got a lot of growth in housing at the moment and the private sector is heavily involved in that. But it is not coming on the market as terribly affordable because of the high land cost. You see, what is happening is that we now have to take over prime irrigation land to develop housing, so you are paying a very high cost for the land before you develop it. That makes the cost—

Mr ADAMS—But there is some crown land there?

Mayor Brayne—There is crown land, yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Mayor Brayne, thank you very much for your attendance here today. If there are any matters on which we need additional information the secretary of the committee will make contact with you. You will be sent a copy of the transcript—indeed that will be sent to the Riverina Regional Board as well—and you will be able to make editorial corrections. I thank everybody for their assistance and their attendance in today's hearing

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Ripoll**):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by paragraph (o) of sessional order 28B, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 2.25 p.m.