

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Thursday 29 June 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Mr Troy Gray, Victorian Branch Secretary, and

Mr Michael Watson, Political Officer, Electrical Trades Union.

The CHAIR: Welcome. I will just read out our brief statements.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you each please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Troy GRAY: Thank you. My name is Troy Gray. I am the Secretary of the Electrical Trades Union.

Michael WATSON: Michael Watson. I am the Political Officer of the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for coming today. I might invite you to make an opening statement of around 5 minutes if you would like, then we will introduce ourselves as members of the committee and start asking questions.

Troy GRAY: Thank you very much. Thank you to the committee for the invite. The Electrical Trades Union is one of Victoria's oldest unions; we have been around 121 years. We are not an industry union like the CFMEU, we are a craft union – so around 22 different industries. Proudly we boast record membership – we have nearly 20,000 members, and they are in all four corners of Victoria and range from electricians to intros to powerline workers. Basically we build stuff, we keep the lights on and we keep the production lines going.

I have been an elected official for 24 years and before that I was workplace delegate, so that is about 33 years, if you add that up, representing electrical workers. The union itself, depending on who you talk to, sits in the left of things – the left block, the weight block, whatever you might want to call us – and we do a lot of progressive things. As well as having record branch membership, we have inclusive LGBTQI courses, we have domestic violence awareness courses for apprentices – we make that mandatory. We are full on in the renewable space; we are into the training on that side of thing. It is all gangbusters. A lot of people would say about what we do, 'She's pretty woke, pretty progressive, pretty lefty.'

When it came to the minister's announcement about this year's duck season and this year's quail season, the history of it is, over the 23, 24 years that I have been going around the traps working with hundreds of electrical workers and organising tens of thousands of them, there is always a debate around March. 'What's happening? Is it going to go ahead? Is it going to get banned? What is the union doing?' With the announcement this time around, without any real dialogue with the unions or our members, the reaction from our members was unprecedented in the 23, 24 years that I have been an official, and we sit here today firmly contesting and representing those members to say that an effective, responsible and regulated duck season and quail season should be ongoing – and our submission says a lot more than that.

I should also state up-front, my full disclosure, that the Electrical Trades Union, as well as being one of the oldest unions in Australia, is an affiliated union to the Australian Labor Party, and I am a card-carrying member of the Australian Labor Party, as is my comrade that sits next to me. I should disclose as well that some of the committee members we have known – we may have even shared a beer or organised together in a past life – so just to get those disclosures out of the way sort of thing. So that is in summary who we are, what we are and why we are here today.

All I would say – it should not be taken for granted, the reaction from blue-collar workers. While I say that we do a lot of the progressive stuff – we have First Nations programs where we get First Nations people into electrical jobs; we have a WAVE program, which is almost unprecedented in Victoria, where we are placing 40 to 50 female members in blokey workplaces each year, and that is moving forward. But if you ask me today, ‘Troy, cut it out – what’s the average ETU member?’ It is a 34-year-old bloke with a pair of steelcaps on. He is an electrical worker. He has got one kid on the ground, probably another kid on the way, a \$600,000 mortgage. And in the garage he has a boat, a four-wheel-drive, a motorbike, a set of fishing rods, mountain bikes. Many of them are licensed firearm owners and have a strong connection to outdoor recreation, and the decision – we say wrongly – by the minister is somewhat the canary in the coalmine that has lit the fuse within our members on this particular issue. So that is a bit of an opening statement, and I look forward to trying to answer any and all of your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might ask the committee members to introduce themselves, and then I will kick off.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Katherine Copsey, Southern Metropolitan Region.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan and Chair of the committee, and I am going to start. You mentioned it briefly in your opening statement. I am interested in what are the range of outdoor recreation activities that your membership participate in and enjoy.

Troy GRAY: The list is long, and from the decision of the minister I am learning more and more every day. Let us start with all the forms of hunting. You have the deer hunters and the pig hunters and the duck hunters and the quail hunters. Now, I have not surveyed the members, but two out of three members, given their age and demographic, would have to be into fishing. When the minister’s announcement was made and there was a walk-off on one of the biggest infrastructure jobs in Melbourne, our phones rang off the hook. I do not know how they do it and I would not do it, but the rock climbers were ringing us – we have members that do that. They say 90 per cent of their area has been banned. The gold prospectors rang us; many of our members are into that as well. They say that 60 per cent of their land – and I have no science to back that up – that has gone. The people that ride the horses through many of the state forests rang and said, ‘We’ve been banned from doing that.’ The people that used to just grab a caravan, a barbecue and their dog and go into the Wombat State Forest and go off the park a little bit, which is what you want to do – that has been banned. The people that used to go out and collect firewood in many places – that has been banned. So you name an outdoor recreation – and there is a reason for it, which I can explain later – our members are into it, and it is big to what they do. It is big on their mental health, and it keeps them going to work six days a week to build everything that Victoria needs.

The CHAIR: Did you say that you would support an approach that would see wider access to outdoor spaces, public land, for recreational purposes?

Troy GRAY: I am a free diver and have done that, chasing the crayfish, for 35 years. Nobody wants to see what has happened over in Europe, where they dive to 30 metres and there are fish this big – it was fished out a hundred years ago, to be really frank. Regulations, responsibility, bag limits – access ways is a major issue with our membership – it does not matter what the outdoor recreation is. The gating, the fencing of many of these outdoor recreation areas does not even stand up to scrutiny – some of the stuff that has happened out there – so we support responsible, regulated access to the bush and the coastlines.

The CHAIR: Do you have any reflections on the current management of that access by Parks Victoria, for example, or by others, in terms of their ability to balance the need for access for recreation and conservation purposes?

Troy GRAY: Horrible. From firsthand experience, I reckon you should hand it all over to First Nations people. They have been doing it for 50,000 years, and they would be doing a better job of it, to be brutally frank. I can give you many examples, if you have the time, where access has been cut off for no reason whatsoever and a blind eye has been taken to other environmental damage that has been out there. I think it is very poorly handled. And with the access – whoever governs it – every time we ask the question there are about three different bodies and ministers that are across accessing bushland and coast land and recreation and all the rest of it. It should be under one body, and people that know what they are doing should be doing it.

The CHAIR: You are clearly of the view that the governance and administration of access to public land for recreational purposes is a bit problematic, opaque at the moment and could be streamlined. You think they should be more consolidated.

Troy GRAY: There is no consistency. There is no reason behind the decisions. Too many people make the decisions. There are not broad policies about why these decisions are in place. The whole thing about access for outdoor recreation needs to be reviewed. There should be a stronger body that oversees it with decent policies, and again, it should be regulated and responsible. It is a piecemeal effort at the moment. I do not know who is making a lot of these decisions.

The CHAIR: One of the things your submission talks about is the need to improve the way regulation and access occur, with things like booking and balloting systems being put in place in this context for access to wetlands for hunting purposes. You think that that kind of system that sets an amount of access that people agree to is important – how would you see that working? I just want a bit more detail about how you would see that.

Troy GRAY: One hundred per cent. As an overall package, if we are going to pull it apart and we are talking about duck hunting based on science, you need regulation, you need bag limits. It is seasonal. Things go up and down. You need proper access. It should be promoted a lot better. I think Vic Fish and GMA should be the one body – very similar to New Zealand, which has Fish & Game, I think. As part of all that, if a balloted system was to improve crowded wetlands, I would be in favour of it – but as part of an overall solution.

One of the points I would like to make is that there are a lot of hunters out there, and this is death by a thousand cuts. All the workers at the Ford vehicle factory in the 1970s and 80s all shot under moonlight. That was the first attack – ‘You can’t shoot under moonlight.’ So hunters said, ‘Okay. We won’t do that.’ Then they said, ‘Well, you have to have a WIT’ – waterfowl identification test. ‘Okay. To keep it going, we’ll do that.’ And I am not against any of those things. Okay, the big generational and cultural camping events, which are the long weekends, ‘We won’t open it on a Saturday, we’re just going to open it up on a Wednesday. That’ll keep it going.’ ‘Okay, we’ll do that as well.’ We are happy to look at all of that. We suggested ballots and we suggested access, but it is as an overall package to overhaul the whole lot and say this moves forward in a responsible way. So the answer is: yes, as part of a full package.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Gray. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you for coming today and thank you for your realistic approach to how we deliver access to publicly owned public spaces in this state. I have certainly been fighting for the rock climbers up in the Grampians, who have been severely impacted by Parks Victoria’s and others’ decisions not to let them climb in most areas, and now we are fining people if they go off a designated government track, which seems absolutely unbelievable. We have also heard about the short edge of the wedge argument, where it is duck and quail shooting today, but it will be fishing tomorrow. You have started to go into what you have agreed to and accepted, but are we just going down the path of banning all forms of hunting and, basically as you have described, many forms of outdoor recreational activities – and for what purpose?

Troy GRAY: Exactly. Our view – and again, we are not alone in this. The ETU sits within the BIG group of unions. When we had the walk-off the big infrastructure jobs, it was the ETU – I will be up-front with that. Since then, there are eight unions that have joined us. Those eight unions represent about 120,000 Victorians. If you add their families, you are talking about a quarter of a million Victorians. They see – our members see – just the blunt decision. Without any scientific evidence, we are just following some of the agendas that have happened in other places around the world. Certain places that are around the world – I do not know – people are happy to poison deer. It will go like this: duck, quail, 1080 the deer, everyone will pull the doona over their

head while all the deer population agonisingly dies for five days; that gets rid of all of the deer. And then other parts of the world that have followed that track then go on to ban catch and release. So if you quota for six fishes and you have got your son with you – or your daughter – that is that.

Now, am I saying there are committee members here today that want to head in that direction? I cannot say that. But that is the journey that we are travelling on if we ban duck hunting for nothing other than the reason, 'I don't do it, I don't like it, so you can't do it.' That is the journey that we are travelling on.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, a quarter of a million Victorians is a pretty sizeable number that, you know, will be impacted by this. Do you think this committee really ought to take cognisance of the fact that you are representing a large proportion of the population here, and arguments for probably many more?

Troy GRAY: I have met with, since the walk-off and the start of our outdoor recreation group, a number of politicians, and I have strongly suggested, as somebody that has represented predominantly blue-collar workers for 33 years, that you ought not underestimate the fuse that is lit out there by this decision. I can tell you for a fact, union-led or not, if there is a decision to ban duck hunting, the day that decision is made, or the day after, the major infrastructure projects in this state will shut down. They will walk off. Now, whether the unions lead that or they do not, they will shut for the day. That is the temperature in the room out there, and there will be a call from those workers that are 100 per cent union members to lead a campaign to get it back. There will also be a call from those workers to match and resource that campaign to the equivalent of our political donations in the last 10 years, which I can tell you run into the millions.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, there is a very powerful message. I hope our –

Troy GRAY: It is not a message. It is not a message and it is not a threat – whether we lead it or not, it is going to happen.

Bev McARTHUR: We have also learned – and we have been out to Connewarre and we have been out to Heart Morass; I actually could not go but others did – the amazing number of volunteer hours that are put into supporting wetlands and environmental causes and even the provision of nesting boxes, not just for birds that can be hunted but for many other species as well. I imagine many of your members who are involved in that volunteer activity – what would they say if hunting was banned? Would they be walking off that job too?

Troy GRAY: So I will break that down. Full disclosure, I was born in Geelong in 1969.

Bev McARTHUR: Great place.

Troy GRAY: I know I only look 35, but I was born in 1969. I had never been out there until this issue was raised. So I went out there and I met with the people – that was before I think the committee did. I have worked in construction with many of the families that owned that land and that have been out there and I have heard, around the traps, the work that they do. In regard to that body of water, they should be given a monument, they should be given an award and they should be given some resources for the thousands of volunteer hours that they have given down there. The main body of water there is millions of years old, but what they call the hospital swamps, when you back off, if you go to the 50s and 60s, was just salty sewage. They spend thousands of hours up to their belts in mud putting in bird nesting boxes, getting rid of all the weeds, keeping the vermin down, bringing in heavy machinery to make sure that the water flows through, planting the reeds and, yes, for a short time every year getting a feed out of it. That would not be there today if it was not for the Field and Game and the families associated with that part of the water. And I am telling you that if you ban hunting and you go there in 10 years time, it will go back to what it was in the 50s and 60s: salty sewage full of vermin and weeds, and that is the end of it.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you very much.

Michael WATSON: Could I just add something to that just very quickly? There seems to be a narrative being developed that these wetlands would be maintained out of goodwill if hunting stops. As a trade union that has seen industries open and close and move away, we have got a very good reason why that will not happen. When you look at a town that had a factory that supported a community enterprise – a sporting club, a brass band, whatever it may be – and that factory and that industry closes, those groups struggle to continue. We have seen that everywhere from down the valley when the SEC closed to when things down in the western district

closed. You need that nexus of support to allow that activity to continue, and that is exactly what will happen to the swamps and the wetlands that are maintained by shooters if the recreation is stopped. And some of them will probably just get developed into housing at some point too.

The CHAIR: Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thank you very much for being with us today, sharing your submission and making yourselves available to the committee. I think you answered this in your response to Mr Batchelor, but I just want to check. Have you done any analysis – so your members partake a lot in outdoor activities. Have you got any sense of how many of your members exclusively partake in duck hunting as an outdoor activity? I think you said this earlier, sorry.

Troy GRAY: No. Without doing a survey it is impossible to know, other than to reiterate – and we will do that. We are going to do a survey about outdoor recreation, what they want. I know what that feedback will be. So the answer is no, other than to repeat what I said before: as somebody that has represented and organised tens of thousands of blue-collar workers, the reaction on this one is bigger than anything we have done. It is bigger than anything we have done driven by the membership.

So the answer is I do not know the exact numbers, but the sentiment that there is too heavy a hand on outdoor recreation – I can give you the exact figures if you want. We work by points of contact, right – so ringing the office, social media, emails, letters that come in. When there was the walk-off – and we deliberately do not do media; others do – we had about 400 points of contact in that three-day period. That is unprecedented. Even when we had the CUB dispute, which was Australia's biggest dispute since the MUA dispute in 20 years, we did not get that feedback. There were roughly 390-odd positive, 'Come on, we have to do something, get it happening,' seven negative, and then there were a couple of curious questions. As a union official that organises, it is unprecedented to get that. You would take that all day every day. If you were going to have a campaign about whatever it may be and 95 per cent of the points of contact come back in positive – 'Let's do it. You must do it. Let's do it' – that shows me that the membership is more than 90 per cent behind it.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. And similarly, I am interested if you know if your members participate currently in pest control shooting.

Troy GRAY: How many or do they?

Katherine COPSEY: Do they.

Troy GRAY: A hundred per cent, yes.

Katherine COPSEY: Okay. Thank you. To switch to a different topic now just around responsible conduct of hunting, I know in the submission you speak a lot about regulation and sustainability. I just wonder if you have a view on the incidence of wounding that we are coming to see and the adequacy of current arrangements around enforcing regulations – arrangements and resources, I suppose.

Troy GRAY: Look, you will not get anybody, I do not believe, who will sit here and say wounding is a good thing. I think if there was a better body that regulated this recreation, if it was better promoted professionally as perhaps Vic Fish has been, and again without getting into a death by a thousand cuts, there are probably training packages out there to enhance your shooting capability to minimise wounding. So we are happy to look at it all as a package, but we cannot divorce ourselves from the reality of life and the food chain of life as well. That is, that for humans and animals to exist and thrive, other things die and are eaten and that is the reality of life. Put it this way: the vast majority of Victorians are meat eaters out there, and all the hunters in Victoria, and to meet that demand millions and millions of animals, fish, poultry and shellfish are consumed on a yearly basis to let people thrive and survive. To say now that a very small percentage of the hunting community cannot go out and get their feed in a holistic cultural way beggars belief. Will there be wounding in a part of that, there will be. There are measures, I think, we could take to minimise that.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Given the level of your members stated interest in outdoor rec, and as part of that some of them hunting, what steps have you taken to share advice and resources on responsible hunting practices to your membership?

Troy GRAY: It probably draws us to the outdoor recreation lobby group. If I can just give you the basis of that and then we will go forward. When the debate was flying around, and to be brutally honest people were sniffing the winds before this decision was made and things were not looking good, our union was contacted by a heap of members going, 'We need to do something about it.' Then the rock climbers, then the gold prospectors, then the people that ride the horses, then the gun dog people contacted us. From that we started the outdoor recreation lobby group, which is an official division endorsed by our council, of the union which will go and advocate for those rights as part of that. That has been fully resourced – that is, it happened two days before the walk-off – and as part of that we are putting out general information and we will be putting out general information about why it is important that the union and the membership back this issue and whatever else goes with that, including any sort of outdoor rec tips.

Katherine COPSEY: Specifically, there is existing advice on humane dispatch methods and avoidance of wounding, have you shared that through email or social media with your members?

Troy GRAY: We talked about that at the outdoor rec group, about the difference between how you dispatch a duck – whether you use the spike method or whether, you would say, it is the windmill method. That discussion is had at the outdoor recreational thing as well as fishing and other issues. I will be honest with you, I am not against different dispatching methods.

Katherine COPSEY: My time.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Mr Gray and Mr Watson, for being here today. I have got a few questions but one I just wanted cleared up at the beginning. You mentioned that there are eight unions, but I note in the resolution of the building industry group there are four named. Are you able to name the other four that are involved?

Troy GRAY: Yes. You have the mining division – and it is growing by the day, I have got to tell you. The BIG is the CFMEU, the plumbers, the metalworkers and the Electrical Trades Union. The mining division of the CFMEU are fully supporting this. The TWU are fully supporting this and the AWU are fully supporting us. We have been contacted by members of the UFU, the finance union – these are members, not unions, but they support it. So to date, unless I have counted wrong –

Michael WATSON: Seven.

Troy GRAY: ETU, CFMEU, plumbers, metalworkers, mining division, AWU, TWU – seven.

Sheena WATT: Lovely. Thank you for clarifying that.

Troy GRAY: By the end of the day it will be eight.

Sheena WATT: There we go.

Bev McARTHUR: What about the public service unions? How is that going?

Troy GRAY: Well, members contact us. You would be surprised what they say. But look, it is up to every union. I will be honest, if your union base is a 34-year-old male that earns 200 grand a year, probably the outdoor rec, wouldn't you expect, is a bit more relevant in that. I do not know.

Michael WATSON: We have attended events, both union events and general things – Troy, me and other officials – and the interest from union members from all sorts of other unions is there, but the seven Troy mentioned are clearly engaged and supportive.

Troy GRAY: I will make a phone call; it will be eight in a minute.

Sheena WATT: Yes. We did have the mining and energy union present to us on Monday in Sale. What they spoke to were some of the challenges for working people engaging in the season with the later advice about the declaration of the season and why that made it hard for working people to seek leave and make other

arrangements. Do you have any views from your membership on the later decision for the season? Was it shared with you what challenges that meant for working people?

Troy GRAY: Again, I will go back to what I know, which is our members, right.

Sheena WATT: Yes.

Troy GRAY: Our members predominantly – they work across a range of industries – work rosters. When you wake up in the morning and your alarm clock is flashing, our members have been up the pole at midnight in the rain keeping that power going. When you drive across some of the big projects, our members – and the big ones have over 1000 on there – pull the steelcaps on at about 5:30 in the morning, they have to work a 10-hour day and they get home at 7 o'clock at night, and that is six days a week. Everyone loves a bit of overtime – it is not compulsory, but I used to work it. And if you do not work that overtime, you will not get another job. You get very institutionalised. The jobs at the moment – the big infrastructure ones – are all underground. You go to Swanston Street, you drop 80 metres into the ground and you live six days a week underground. What they look forward to is getting out when they have their bunched up RDOs and long weekends to the outdoors. Whether it be fishing, hunting – ducks, deer – or whatever it may be, it is critical for them to keep going, otherwise they just become institutionalised, where they work six days a week and, to be brutally honest, they are a bit hung over on a Sunday and they are going back to work on a Monday. So those announcements that were delayed just put all their trips – they have them planned at Christmas time, going away. Look at an RDO weekend: go to the coast or the bush and have a look at the HiLuxes, the Rangers, the union stickers, the average age – it is our people. This bugging around with a decision based on nothing other than, 'It's too hot in the kitchen,' has infuriated our members.

Michael WATSON: Mick Bucknell, who is one of the –

Sheena WATT: Case studies in the submission.

Michael WATSON: case studies. I spent hours on the phone talking to him. He has come into the office. He is one of our outdoor rec group members. He does Christmas with his family, and then the next thing they start planning after they have had a couple of weeks off is who has got what – who has got the tents, who has got the bikes for duck season. He goes out with his dad, his brother; he has got his kids and in-laws and everyone. It is Christmas – a couple of sleepy weeks until New Year's – and then every weekend and downtime is oiling the bikes, cleaning the trailer and getting the camping gear ready for the start of the season. It is the Melbourne Cup for his family at the start of the year, as it is for a huge range of those people who prep and camp. If you close a wetland with 24 hours notice, if you do not have clear start and end dates to the season, you end up with people who have moved their work and their life to prep around a date and then they are stuffed.

Sheena WATT: So that decision, you would argue, disproportionately affects working people rather than those that are, say, working for themselves or can make those arrangements?

Michael WATSON: Yes. Working people need to plan in advance. They do not have the luxury of jumping on a flight to Bali when they so choose.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Do you have any view on the impact on workers by other changes, such as the hours – you know, 8 am starts and other things? That was something that I had asked others.

Troy GRAY: There is a lot of debate for and against that.

Sheena WATT: Yes, I know.

Troy GRAY: We think it should be an hour before and an hour after. That would be a good fit for that. I still think you should be able to shoot under moonlight, to be quite honest. Given that the duck populations are there, I think it would be a good thing. Yes, I think an hour before and an hour after would be good.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Okay, very happy. Thank you very much for that. I did note with interest your recommendation that First Nations land management should be integrated into native bird hunting and wider hunting regulatory frameworks. But my time has expired, and I will perhaps just take that as a recommendation worth noting. Thank you very much for your time today.

The CHAIR: Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you so much for appearing. It has been really insightful to hear from you and read your submission. There has been quite an advancement and I think a welcome advancement in the last decade in terms of a focus on men's mental health, and we see that throughout the community and across government, with financial support for things like men's sheds. In terms of men's mental health, how important is that to your workers, and would a ban be quite a detrimental step in terms of the mental health of your workers?

Troy GRAY: Absolutely. I said at the start of the presentation that we work in a number of industries, and the average is a 34-year-old male. In the construction industry, for example, the suicide rate is eight times the national average, and there are a lot of factors in that, as you pull back the layers. A lot of it is hours of work – six days a week, a little bit hungover Sundays – you get institutionalised. To help address that, we run mandatory mental health day courses for apprentices and we have toolbox mental health things, but a big part of it is getting away – getting into the bush, getting out on the coastline and, I will say it, hunting a duck and getting a feed. A big part of it is that for a lot of our members, and if it is banned, our members are just going to end up working six days a week in a tunnel and going home and watching Netflix. It is not what we are about.

Michael WATSON: It is also cumulative, in that since this has been brought up, and also for the last couple of years as decisions have been made about parks and camping and other things, there has been a sense that, 'I can't do what I want to do. I've bought a house in this part of the world to take my kids to this forest with the motorbikes like I used to do. I can't do that.' Now, that is an example from one of our organisers. There is also a sense that if you ban these activities or limit them – our members have said to us – 'Well, where does that leave us?' There is almost a cultural disassociation, like, 'You've stopped me doing what I want to do.'

Look, to take a term from the corporate world, there will be a productivity cost to this, because the fact that they have planned weekends to go and camp and fish and hunt and do whatever it is they want to do – that is what allows our members and blue-collar workers working tough, long hours to recharge and come back to work and be productive.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Troy, you described yourself as being on the woke side earlier.

Troy GRAY: Couldn't you pick that up?

Evan MULHOLLAND: There are some who say that a ban on duck hunting is progressive and that a continuation of duck hunting does not really fit with the progressive nature of the Andrews government. What would you say to that?

Troy GRAY: I disagree with that. Everybody is entitled to their view, and I only speak from my background. You can study the history of the ETU, the campaigns we have been involved in and the initiatives that we have done. They are too long to mention. We fit the woke box – maybe not me personally, but the union does. But a part of that is we can be progressive on all those issues that I spoke about – inclusivity, equal pay, equal rights – and we are going that hard on the 'yes' vote, harder than any other union in Victoria. But we cannot leave behind the working-class values and recreation that we have had that go back generations and generations. The sport or the recreation of hunting, and in particular duck hunting, is critical to our members, and we think it fits right in the Labor heartland of working-class values.

Evan MULHOLLAND: You kind of touched on it in your response to Mrs McArthur, but would it be safe to say that if hunting was banned there would be further walk-offs on site from the union?

Troy GRAY: Not 'fair to say'. Get it tattooed on your arm. It is going to happen. It will happen, whether we lead it or they walk off by themselves. Now, my view is that the union has some leadership, because that is what they pay their dues for.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Some activists have said that hunting is somewhat of a misogynistic activity and that young boys are being bullied into hunting too. You could be left with the impression that hunters are a bunch of sort of cowboys in it for the thrill at the expense of birds and young children. Have you ever seen any evidence of this?

Troy GRAY: Well, let me put it this way. I left school at 15 years of age. I started my apprenticeship at 16 and a bit. I paid my first house off at 27. I have raised seven children in that time, two of them full-time stepchildren – five daughters, two sons. I became a workplace representative at the age of 21, and I am 54 years of age. Through that time anybody that knows me would say, ‘Troy spends too much time on progressive issues and looking after other people to a fault,’ and I am a hunter. So if people think that I am a man-child, that I am a barbarian, I say, ‘Look at my life, and if you can go one better, go your hardest, because I am proud of what I have done.’ I am proud of being a hunter, and I am proud of what our union has done in that patch as well. If people want to call me misogynist, people want to call me a man-baby, go your hardest. I have got thick skin.

Evan MULHOLLAND: No worries. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Mr Gray and Mr Watson, for appearing today. You mentioned that you surveyed members before, and you had not received such an enormous amount of –

Troy GRAY: We have in years gone by. We normally do a survey every two or three years to do with industrial issues. There will probably be one coming up too with the Voice. As part of the outdoor recreation initiation of that group – it is fully resourced and financed; it is a recognised part of the ETU – we will be surveying members in regard to that, about all things outdoor recreation and what it means to them.

Georgie PURCELL: But you have not yet.

Troy GRAY: No.

Georgie PURCELL: So how did you reach the position that you have now? What consultation did you do with your members?

Troy GRAY: It is the other way around. They consulted with us in a way – and I am not making it up – that I have not seen in 33 years, in a big way. I can tell you from one union official to another, in the campaigning mode, regardless of the issue, if you could engage your membership as much as the membership has been engaged on this one, you would be a happy union official. We are off and running. The members are driving this one. I do not need to put a letter in their box to find out that the members are up and about on this issue.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. I cannot say that they came my way when I was a union official, but the reason I ask is: I have received a number of emails from ETU members that are deeply concerned that you have taken this on in such a big way. With all of the issues facing working people at the moment – I mean, we have got a cost-of-living crisis, low wage growth, insecure work – why have you made this a priority?

Troy GRAY: It is the number one complaint from our membership. If the minister did not make this decision, I am not sure we would be here today. The issue of outdoor rec is always critically important, but it is the number one. There is cost of living – we will charge out on that; we had a rally on that. There is the Voice vote; we will be hitting the streets and we will be resourcing that pretty big. All the other progressive stuff that people have been involved in we have led and supported shoulder to shoulder, but on this particular issue it is membership led and it is unprecedented.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you think that your view is representative of the broader union movement or just some of your membership?

Troy GRAY: Well, in Victoria in the unions that are some of the most successful unions, it is 100 per cent the view of those seven unions, and it is growing.

Georgie PURCELL: 100 per cent?

Troy GRAY: It is growing.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. In your submission you say that this year's decision on a shortened season was unscientific. Can you please explain to me how it was unscientific?

Troy GRAY: I honestly believe, from the discussions I had, that the decision was based on a political one and the temperature was too hot in the room. You can pick a survey to suit you, to be quite honest. Let us go for an example. The average amount of quail in an average year in Victoria is about 3 million to 4 million. Now, there are a couple of surveys out there; they have jumped to somewhere between 6 million and 9 million depending on which survey you want to look at. What is the justification for bringing the quail season from three months to four weeks if the population by independent surveys is – if it has not tripled, it has doubled. So where is the scientific evidence to reduce that season?

Georgie PURCELL: Okay – from bird experts, but we will move on.

Michael WATSON: Well, if I may, the evidence that was received on the first day of this inquiry said a number of times in a number of different ways what the two largest impacts on bird numbers are.

Georgie PURCELL: We understand the impacts, but that does not change the fact that there is long-term decline. But I want to move on because I am short on time. You talk a lot about outdoor recreation, and you are making some very extraordinary claims about what will happen if duck shooting is banned. New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia all banned duck shooting decades ago. None of the things that you are saying will happen have happened. Why would it happen in Victoria?

Troy GRAY: There are more ducks shot in New South Wales than in Victoria for a start.

Georgie PURCELL: That is incorrect. It is 6 per cent. I just want to be clear: it is 6 per cent, shot on rice crops, of what is shot in Victoria.

Troy GRAY: Welcome to Victoria. What is your question in regard to what will happen?

Georgie PURCELL: Well, you are talking about four-wheel driving, camping, fishing – none of that has been banned or is in any way under threat in the states that have banned duck shooting.

Troy GRAY: As I said at the start of this committee, there is a sentiment out there that there is too heavy a hand in regard to outdoor recreation, and there are many examples of that – of gated ways, of treated pine posts being put in there and of heavy machinery being brought in to drop logs on old walking paths that fishermen used to use. Now it is duck hunting. There is talk about changing deer from a ‘game’ definition to ‘vermin’. What is behind that is that they will then helicopter and 1080 those deer and try to eliminate all the deer through it. This is the agenda that is getting rolled out. At the last ALP conference they were going to put up a motion about changing the agenda. It is a well-worn path. I have respect for any party out there. We are a democratic country. If people do not like duck shooting, they can get on the stump and debate about it. But the agenda is out there. We are gating the bush and we are gating the coastlines, and working-class people are not falling for it anymore, to be brutally frank.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. If you do not mind, I have limited time.

Troy GRAY: No, you are all right.

Georgie PURCELL: Duck shooting actually hinders other forms of outdoor recreation in many ways. Every year when the season is on you cannot go bushwalking, you cannot go kayaking and it is a public safety threat. Why are duck shooters special in terms of access to the outdoors?

Troy GRAY: I do not agree with your comments. If you have a look at the wetlands –

Georgie PURCELL: It is literally illegal to be on the water.

The CHAIR: Mr Gray, please finish.

Troy GRAY: The wetlands, as an example, down at Geelong are pristine because of the hunting community. Depending on the year, it is 10 weeks, 12 weeks or four weeks of the year. After that, get your kayak and swim around as much as you want. There are certain times and certain parts of that. Geelong is an example. I do not know the exact figure, but I have had a look at it, and the waterways down there where they actually shoot would probably be 10 per cent of those. On the other 90 per cent, grab your bat and ball and go for it. Do what you want.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, for coming. You said in your introductory remarks you need to use all sorts of progressive things. One of the criticisms I have seen aimed at the ETU over the years, which is an interesting juxtaposition to where we are now, is about the \$500,000 donation to, I think, the federal Greens years ago, and yet here we are. Are you able to help me with how you can do one and the other?

Troy GRAY: We are a democratic union. Again, we have been around 121 years. Our decision-making bodies are the executive, the state council and the biannual council, and through that 121 years, driven by the membership, the executive and the state council, different issues have come up. Dare I say, in the 1950s it was the groupers versus the Catholics – back in those days – and decisions were made about which way to go and which way not to go. In the 2000s – I will be brutally honest – it was based on previous leadership, but the Greens, when it came to industrial relations at a federal level and when it came to the right for unions to organise, I will be frank, were number one in this country at that time. The unions were under attack by the ABCC, royal commissions, ROC and building codes, and nobody spoke louder than, particularly, Adam Bandt from the Greens when it came to our right to organise. So the previous leadership had a relationship, previous executives, and decisions were made around that. In 2010 we had the internal debate at a shop stewards conference at Crown Casino with some 400 about what we wanted to do politically and where we wanted to go into the future, and a decision was made that (1) we should have a political arm and a political agenda and (2) that we would re-affiliate with the Australian Labor Party. But over the journey, pick a church, pick a political party and we have been party to it, and those decisions have been made. At the moment we are affiliated with the Labor Party, and we are big on outdoor rec.

Jeff BOURMAN: As ill as it makes me feel, I have got to say the Greens are the only people that never moved on that ABCC, no matter what your view is on it.

Troy GRAY: I cannot be a hypocrite on that. They were stronger than anybody on that issue.

Jeff BOURMAN: No, I just wanted that out there; it is one of the criticisms I have seen come time and time again. Back to the progressive stuff: do you see hunting at odds with being progressive, in general?

Troy GRAY: Again, I am fortunate that I have lived in regional areas and organised all over the place. I see it as part of your DNA. In some people it might be a bit more absent than in others, and there is probably a spectrum and a pendulum, but I do not see it as being – whether it is woke or is not woke, I just think it is part of people's right to go out there and do it. People want to label things and not label things.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is funny, because I have seen a list of what are considered the top 25 progressive countries in the world, and I think we are number 11 or some such thing. All of the progressive countries – all of the other ones – have hunting in some way, shape or form; obviously regulated. Even Japan has bird hunting in some way. I mean, they are not what I would call a hunting society. I guess I am just trying to flesh out –

Michael WATSON: I think there is probably a way of putting it: that if you are involved with the outdoors, if it is used, if it is managed, if it is looked at, it will be kept better. It will be in a better state than if it is not. Bush that is closed turns to rubbish. Now, it is important to have undisturbed wilderness for certain animals and things, but the general nature is: the more the bush is used safely and sustainably, the better it is. A better environment is a progressive aim, and hunting and animal management is part of land management. So there is the link between the two there.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. I am going to wind up with one last question: we have talked about the decline in the Latrobe Valley. Now obviously that is my patch, and we have seen the Opal paper mill go down. We have watched the end of the native timber industry. Can you give me your perspective on – I mean, even more than the rest of the state – how important it is for the people in the power industry who are also on the way out in the Latrobe Valley? How important is it to have a recreation to help the workers when they are facing such uncertainty?

Troy GRAY: You are right, and I have spent a lot of time in Geelong. But no patch has been hit harder than the valley: from the privatisation of the SEC to a lot of manufacturing going out there and everything that comes from that – suicides, unemployment. The whole economy implodes. Some good things – renewables are

starting to go down there, new jobs will be created, we will be lobbying hard for manufacturing plants and generators and that. But do not take away their outdoor rec. That is about all they have got left down there at the moment, and it will be the final nail in the coffin to areas like that if you take away their outdoor recreation and things like hunting.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. I think I am done, Chair – I will cede my 45 seconds.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Bourman. Mr Gray and Mr Watson, thank you so much for coming in today and for your evidence. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings in about a week for review before it gets published on the website.

And with that, we will take a short break until the next witnesses are ready.

Troy GRAY: Thank you, all.

Witnesses withdrew.