

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Anglesea—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

#### MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

**WITNESS**

Mr Geoff Caldwell, Director of Camping, Baptist Camping Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and minimise background noise.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I wish to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Ms Wendy Lovell.

To witnesses: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. 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. Transcripts will ultimately be made available on our committee website.

We welcome any opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Geoff.

**Mr CALDWELL:** Geoff Caldwell, I am the Director of Baptist Camping for Victoria. I am actually on the national board for Christian Venues Association Australia, which is all the Christian sites in Victoria. I am a member of the Australian Camps Association, which is the secular camping group to Australia. I am actually part of the Baptist church of Victoria and part of the alignment groups with Carey Grammar, Kilvington and Strathcona, which are the main Baptist schools. I am also a member of local BATA—Business and Tourism Anglesea—and I have been part of the community here for 25 years.

I have actually been in camping for over 30 years. Camping is a very diverse sector in the community, a very unknown sector in the community. With those two associations we have about 190 camps within Victoria: 145 of them are what we would call outside the ring of steel which was set up for COVID. We have 223 000 beds within Victoria, there are 6700 staff and we turn over about \$340 million within our sector—that is not Baptist camping, that is actually the camping sector within Victoria. About \$100 million goes into businesses outside of us—food, maintenance, program, transport, logistics, all those sorts of things outside of our sector.

Our Surf Coast sector here, which is just a small group of eight camps which we are part of, has eight camps. It turns over about \$10 million a year, invests about \$5 million into the associated businesses in town and the area, has approximately 40 000 people attending our camps every year and approximately 100 000 bed nights through that sector, and is a significant part of the town of Anglesea's economic community. I had a meeting last week, and one of the people at the meeting said, 'I came to camp in Anglesea'. That is part of the tourism that continues on after people come as schoolkids. Baptist Camping Victoria provides a religious service through activities of retreat, accommodation, food and activities. We are classed as a religious institution as ourselves. We are a not-for-profit charity. We have four sites in Victoria. We have 506 beds. We do 22 000 clients a year. We have 126 000 meals. We have 401 different groups attend our sites; 27 of those groups we class as ministry, through which we work with over 700 young people directly and 380 family groups. We turn over roughly \$3.8 million within our entity, and during COVID we lost over \$2.6 million through that break. We employ 72 staff usually. Through COVID we dropped down to 38 staff.

COVID operation was very, you would say, pressured for us. We were operating one day, we were not operating the next, and you would have heard that a thousand times. I employed a business manager on the Wednesday. I walked in on the Thursday and said, 'Do you really want to work with us?'. She came in on the Friday and resigned, and I talked her into staying with us for four months with no camps and no business. As

soon as the lockdown happened we set ourselves up with a tough regime. We knew it was going to be tough. We had done the homework very quickly. We had four weeks worth of income to live on, and that is putting aside all our staff benefits, all our deposits—everything was taken out of our income and put aside so no-one was disadvantaged if anything did fall over. We paid all our bills; we made sure our bills were paid through the process, and like I said, for eight months we did not operate. The stress on staff and the office was really high. I walked in on the Monday and put off 40 staff. I went up to our other camp and put off the other 32 straightaway. If they had leave, they went on to leave, but other than that we thought we were dead in the water and had nowhere to go. We transferred 256 bookings in that period of time. Our goal was to transfer them, not to cancel them. We had abuse, we had all sorts of things happening. With staff, I had staff in tears. The stress in offices was overwhelming.

JobKeeper saved us, as everyone knows. JobKeeper by the federal government saved us like every other camping industry within Victoria. We called back staff at our site and we did maintenance. There were some days we could not put petrol in vehicles. We could not buy a can of paint. We continued on moving forward. Our process from day one of our first assessment in that first week was how we were going to reboot, whenever that was going to be. So we put a plan in place that all cancellations we would transfer to next year, as many as we could. We would not take a cancellation; we would want to transfer them. We are struggling with staff in kitchens, cleaning—low-end staff. I lost a whole lot of top-end staff through COVID. We have just replaced some of them now. Within that, we have got a couple of temps filling in for us because we cannot get staff, and we are working through that process now.

Camping in that process: we lost 75 to 90 per cent of our business across Victoria, where significant staff levels are just not coming back. Especially in the outdoor sector it affects the casuals and volunteers. All my horse staff walked out on me. They went and got jobs elsewhere. Some have gone back to teaching, some have gone back to working in farm equipment and things like that, so we have had to rebuild the whole horse program on one of our camps.

We struggle a little bit. The federal government was strong with JobKeeper. We felt the state government was not really strong with supporting our industry and did not know our industry—what we are. We did not even know what sector we fitted into. Did we fit into accommodation? Did we fit into hospitality? Did we fit into education? Did we fit into tourism, or were we a religious organisation? So we struggled with that whole entity of who we were within this process of all the regulations that were being put out. One of the examples that our sector does not fit in was the government was giving out \$1125, I think, for a booking for the hospitality area. We were told that a booking was a camp. We had 166 kids booked in, and we got \$1125 or a portion of that. We actually went in to bat at government levels, and we got that transferred over. We were going to get about \$10 000, and we ended up getting \$87 000 to help balance our organisation within that process. No-one understood it. No-one understood that we are large-group accommodation.

We are still struggling at weekends with church groups and community groups. The schools have come back in huge droves; there is no question of that. The schools' demand and the mental health, unity and team building that we supply has come back hugely through Victoria, but weekends are still struggling. We are probably better off in our organisation than some others, and that may be because we worked really hard at transferring groups across and building relationships with groups in that process.

Understanding our organisation, you cannot open on a Monday and expect schools to be there or say you are going to open on a weekend and schools will be there on a Monday. It is months to organise a camp, and that was something else that was neglected too—how we responded to things. Decisions made in school holidays—schools had already pulled out in the last week of term, so coming back in the fourth term was very hard for most of the organisations and sector through Victoria. We had different information going out. The education website had a statement to say that camping was just on hold, that we would be working it out and further notice would be given, and then we had Barwon education, for instance, saying, 'All camps must be postponed, rescheduled or, if there's no other option, cancelled for the year'. And yet we did not know what tomorrow was going to bring, let alone the year, and that put a whole lot of pressure on us and our sector through the state.

The snap lockdown—I understand for health reasons that we do that, but in our sector, for us personally, that was a \$166 000 hit for four days, and that is hard to recover from. That is probably our profit for the year, so it is hard to come out of that. We are a not-for-profit charity; we do not have bucketloads of money. We give everything we have away or invest back into ourselves.

The 2021 recovery has been a good thing for camping for us and the sector through the schools. The schools have come back stronger. Mental health, and physical, certainly have helped us grow in the school sector over this period of time.

Like I said earlier, we are still struggling with staff. A lot of the camps put on apprentices, as per the government illustration. None of us have seen any funds yet, as far as I know, supporting that, which is tough for us, because we put actually extra staff on to help young people and we are relying on that money to come through to help us balance our books, and at this stage we have seen none of that in that process. We have got probably nine apprentices through our organisation, so that is something that needs to come up. Housing for our staff is always an issue in the community. We have houses on site which most of our staff have, but housing in Anglesea is very difficult to get for low-paid staff. By that, we would be talking low-paid programmers, low-paid kitchen staff, cleaners—all those sorts of people. And we do split shifts, so it is very hard to live out of Anglesea and do a split shift—you are away for an hour or 2 hours and you have got to be back and driving into Geelong and back. There is no point. So we struggle with low-cost housing for our staff. We have five houses on one site in town and one house on another site for our management staff and our trainees. All our trainees live on site to help that process with them.

In hindsight we cannot change what has happened; we can only learn from it and grow from it. Sixty per cent of our work is schools and 40 per cent is community church based and our own ministry programs, so when the school sector pulls out it is a huge loss to us, and that would be different for all other camps or associations within our sector. We have a lower school base because we have a higher community and church base within us. For others it could be 80 per cent schools within that process. So anything the education department does affects us greatly. We struggle with the fact that the recreation department only has one outdoor ed person in there, yet we are a \$340 million group within the community. David Strickland is our contact through the government department there, and he is the only one that works in that sector, our sector, and has a voice for us. So that is something that we would like to rectify a little bit.

**The CHAIR:** No, I really appreciate the feedback, Geoff, and I know the challenge it has been for the non-profit sector and faith communities and especially outdoor activities such as camping. You are at the intersection of all those, and education, and I totally understand. That feedback is not unique from other providers we have heard, and I have been contacted as a member. Carey is in my electorate, and I have noticed a few of the alumni have contacted me to raise some of the challenges that they have had. It is a really tough one, definitely, so I am sure you have got all of our sympathy, and we will take that on board when we go through the transcripts and start making our findings and recommendations. You have done an amazing job. It sounds like the recovery is happening, but it is obviously going to take some time. On that point I might hand over to questions because I am wary of the time. I might start with Mr Barton, then Mr Gepp, then Wendy, and if we have time I might ask a question too.

**Mr BARTON:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Geoff.

**Mr CALDWELL:** No worries.

**Mr BARTON:** I am just interested—you were saying that the schools have all come back strongly now, and I am assuming that is filling up your week: what is your demographic on the weekends?

**Mr CALDWELL:** The demographic on the weekends for us, being a religious organisation, is mainly church groups, and they have been heavily, heavily hit and still struggle with that. The restrictions on groups of 30 was just devastating and has even devastated us this year with church groups and youth groups. They can all go to school and they come on a school camp, but they could not go on a youth camp or be part of our holiday camps or holiday programs because of all the restrictions on church groups. So that was a really hard, tough thing for us to balance out. All our holidays we run our own camps, so we reach out to welfare kids and we reach out to street kids, disadvantaged kids, within the mix of everything else. We have youth camps, single-parent camps, mother-daughter camps, family camps, craft camps, disadvantaged kids camps—all those sorts of things come in with our weekends, other than schools demographics.

**Mr BARTON:** And what are the restrictions now?

**Mr CALDWELL:** We are only restricted by the square-metre usage in the buildings now. I think we were allowed to be fully operational as of about a month ago.

**Mr BARTON:** Okay. I just want to talk about the staff issue, because no matter where we travel to it is becoming an issue that people cannot get staff. It is insecure work. In my view I think we are underpaying them, and obviously we just cannot build houses to satisfy businesses or entities just because they are badly paid. I would like to see their pay come up. What do you think you could tell us that we could go back and suggest to the government in terms of getting staff and improving this insecure work we have going on?

**Mr CALDWELL:** Sure. So we actually have a traineeship program for all our outdoor ed. We have five first years and three second years working this year, and we actually built a self-contained housing unit and training unit for them. The idea of that was to help us be diversified in what our thinking was—train up people that we would have and keep them, and if they're good enough, they get a second year until they're actually good enough that they become full-time staff to us. So it is a process that we have built in. We are actually doing that in the kitchen as well, because in the kitchen with cooks and that—I have just lost a kitchen hand today after 20 years working with us. She just came in today and said she is out. All the old people—I am sorry—in my age group, 60-odd—

**Mr BARTON:** The mature-aged ones.

**Mr CALDWELL:** The mature-aged ones have struggled out of COVID and their work-cycle life has become less. There is no question about it across our industry. Anyone in my age group is looking at not being here in two years time, which will be a knowledge base that will be hard to fill within the process of our organisations, within that.

But getting back to housing, that is how we have got along with it. All our sites have got houses on for staff, and we try and build them in. We have tried this apprenticeship program, hence why we are looking for this funding to come back to us. We have had our traineeship program operating for 12 years. We have put 96 students through that in that period of time, and they have all been of benefit to us in that process.

**Mr BARTON:** Good stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Gepp.

**Mr GEPP:** Not so much a question—Rod has asked the question. It has been a common theme today, and I am firmly of the view that I think we have got to change our thinking about these jobs, and I think we have got to change it dramatically, because if we all cast our minds back to lockdown, the 16-week period, it was those people that kept the place going, and yet they are the most undervalued jobs, I think, in our economy. So I think we have got to start shifting that game because in addition to the visitor economy—and other witnesses, we have heard from them that they are having the same issue about staff retention but also attracting people—I think the model is broken. As long as they are low paid, as long as it is insecure, they are not going to come. Why would you? So I think there is a significant challenge for everybody who works in the visitor economy to come up—and it sounds like you are applying your organisation to a different model, trying to break out of that nexus. So all props to you.

Just the other comment, Chair—if Geoff wants to respond, then that is fine—is in relation to the lockdown itself. I mean, I get the frustration. No-one wanted to do it, and we are all able to quantify, I guess, the economic cost of that lockdown—I think you said \$166 000 or thereabouts. I guess my retort to that would be: if we had have got that wrong, heaven knows what that cost would have been—and what is a life worth? Try as we might—we can see from South Australia, where somebody was quarantined for 14 days, came back here for four days and then suddenly tested positive—just when you think you have got the model right, there is another variable.

**Mr CALDWELL:** Yes. Variables are happening all the time. Part of the training problem is the regulations for outdoor ed. We have to have more staff for no more income. So the levels in the water, the levels in canoeing, the levels in rock climbing, the levels in hiking—like, we have just hiked the last two nights kids from Bells Beach, and they then at Eumeralla camped overnight. Well, we had to have four staff on that hike. So the staffing levels on the business are increasing, but our income is not increasing at the same rate and our capacity is not increasing at the same rate.

**Mr GEPP:** So these are new regulations that have been imposed through the—

**Mr CALDWELL:** These are regulations with the outdoor ed sector, and look, they are for safety reasons, but it is just more pressure on businesses to come up with solutions to get more staff in place so that we can run the activities that the groups are requiring us to run.

**Mr GEPP:** When did they come into play—those regs?

**Mr CALDWELL:** So July last year some of the regs came in. It was during COVID. I do not know exactly the dates.

**The CHAIR:** It was a tough time.

**Mr GEPP:** Yes, they were pre-COVID, but they came in during the year.

**Mr CALDWELL:** Yes. It might have been earlier in the year.

**Mr GEPP:** Right. Okay. So you have come back—right. Okay.

**Mr CALDWELL:** So there was a change. They are always changing regs and uplifting regs, but it is becoming harder to get the number of staff that you require to run your activities.

**Mr GEPP:** They must be resilient kids if you have hiked in the last couple of days. It has been challenging.

**Mr CALDWELL:** Yes, very challenging.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I might pass over to Ms Lovell.

**Ms LOVELL:** I am just simply going to ask: if you were the Premier for the day, what are the two things that you would do to help your sector to recover—the two best things you could do?

**Mr CALDWELL:** I think if I were Premier for the day I would put more staff into the outdoor ed sector in the government department so they understand us better. We do not seem to have a voice within our sector that covers the outdoor ed exactly. People do not understand large group combinations, so as a premier I would be sitting down and trying to understand the sector better, because we are a \$340 million entity within the state. Even our town did not understand how we put \$10 million into the town.

**Ms LOVELL:** We are hearing that from the events sector too—that they are not understood as a sector as well. And is there a second thing?

**Mr CALDWELL:** Probably that I would communicate with the education department a little bit, because we were not even thought about in their processing when we were talking to them through COVID. It took us months to get actually up on their radar that we are a vital part of the education section, that we are used by education—we felt like we were used and abused a little bit in that process. So that would be my second one. I would talk to the recreation area and I would talk to the education area.

**Mr GEPP:** Has that changed, Geoff—sorry—since you have—

**Mr CALDWELL:** I do not know. We have just been surviving. We are only just taking a breath now after a really busy first term. So now it is time to reflect on where we are at, how we negotiate and how we work with groups. I know as an outdoor sector it is always hard to talk to government. We are not on the agenda of anything. Through the camping associations—

**Ms LOVELL:** You're not a 5-star resort.

**Mr CALDWELL:** Yes. And if we want something, it is usually through a second or third party. We do not have a direct link for such a big organisation.

**Mr GEPP:** I understand.

**Ms LOVELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that feedback and your interactions with the different departments. We will definitely pass that on. On behalf of the whole committee I just want to thank you and Baptist Camping in Anglesea for all the work you do and all the kids. I reckon my education-based camping was important in developing a well-rounded individual—I think that is important—and also the community spirit. So keep up the work, Geoff. But on that note, we have got our next witnesses here, so I'll conclude this section.

**Mr CALDWELL:** No worries. Thank you very much. Have a great day.

**Ms LOVELL:** Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**