

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Mansfield — 14 August 2013

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Ms U. Steedman, Creative Odyssey.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Uschi, to the Victorian Parliament’s Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. For the benefit of Hansard, would you like to give your name and business address?

Ms STEEDMAN — Certainly. My name is Uschi Steedman, and my business address is 48 Hunter Street, Mansfield, in Victoria.

The CHAIR — And would you like questions as we go through your presentation or at the end?

Ms STEEDMAN — As we go is fine with me; informal is good.

The CHAIR — Good! So if you would like to lead off?

Ms STEEDMAN — No worries. Starting with the first point in terms of identifying potential benefits for rural and regional Victoria — if people are able to work more remotely — I think I have been called in here as a slightly younger voice. From my perspective I am really interested in chatting about the potential to attract and retain more younger professionals in rural regions within Victoria. I think that is a key benefit that telecommunications and e-commerce offer for many reasons: obviously the desire to increase population in rural regions, but also to combat an ageing population in a lot of rural areas and also just the benefits that it brings to have a more diverse community in terms of younger perspectives and different ideas.

As a little bit of background, I might digress with a story about my journey thus far. I grew up in Mansfield and went to primary school and secondary college here. Like most young people you get to the end of high school and think, ‘Well, to do anything else, I’m going to have to leave town’. So I left town to study and headed overseas for a bit. I have always been a person who is intensely interested in the world around me — in international relations; I studied journalism — but I have never been one who has been comfortable in the concrete jungle. So when I was offered a position here with local government some years ago I accepted it despite the fact that coming back to a rural area at that time did feel like it would have a very large impact on my long-term career or job opportunities.

When I think about that now — and when I was thinking about what we could talk about today — I think that that has actually changed considerably in the last five years or so. So I now have a few friends who live in Mansfield like myself. I run a communications community engagement consultancy. In terms of a few other friends, they are doing web design from Mansfield; I have one who is running a record label from Mansfield; and they are all in that 27 to 35-year-old age bracket. Five years ago those sorts of people were few and far between. That is all predominantly because the speed and reliability of internet connections are improving in rural and remote areas.

I think what that contributes to a rural town is really considerable. So, back to — —

The CHAIR — So what could we do as a state government to have more of those businesses — to encourage more of those businesses to Mansfield?

Ms STEEDMAN — Another point I was thinking about is that a lot of the discussion focuses on: what infrastructure do we need? and all this sort of discussion about that kind of thing. So yes, definitely, reliable, fast internet is fantastic — —

The CHAIR — Yes, but other than that?

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes. Other than that, I think the thing to remember is that if I am a cultural creative living in inner city Melbourne who happens to like mountain biking and skiing and if I am thinking, ‘Oh, it’d be kind of cool to live in Mansfield’, I am not going to move there just because there is internet now. I need to still feel like I can come to a community that offers a lot more than just skiing and mountain biking. So all of that — the other policies focused on the community development aspects of rural and regional development — I think is really key. I do not want to leave inner city Melbourne, where there is, you know, awesome music on the weekends and where I can go to exhibitions and be involved in sustainability initiatives and then come here and

feel completely disconnected from that. I want to come to a community that still offers those things at a regional level.

Mr HOWARD — So how does that happen, and who is responsible for doing it?

Ms STEEDMAN — I think it is a multilayered thing — —

The CHAIR — And how can we assist?

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes. So it involves, I think — and this is already happening at a state government level — the continuing support for programs, cultural activities. I am trying to think of funding program names, such as Locals First now. All of those sorts of programs I think are really, really valuable and need to continue. I guess it is again — and this is still happening — about facilitating that connection between local government and community members who are really interested in getting things happening on the ground. Local government is the go-between to help communicate what the grassroots community is wanting to do and then help it happen. I think that is really important.

I guess for me the internet means you can still have that sense of connection with what is going on in the city as well. Another initiative that I think would be really valuable — and I think it might be happening in either Ballarat or Bendigo — is to imitate centres like Hub Melbourne where young professionals co-locate to shared office space. To have something like that in rural areas would, I think, be a fantastic idea to explore.

Mr DRUM — Like a business incubator, where you could move out of home and it would be your first port of call?

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes, exactly. Essentially it would be hot desks, but you could actually have a more permanent position at one of them.

Mr DRUM — With the hub, you are talking about hot desks more so than — —

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes. With Hub Melbourne you can come in on a casual basis. So I could be visiting for a month and say I need a desk for a month. Or it could be that I say, ‘No, actually I need a desk three days a week, year round’, and that is my desk. That creates that interaction and collaboration. I have loved setting up my own business, but I have found it a bit isolating, particularly because I am in a rural region. Having somewhere like that, where young professionals could remain in Mansfield but work together, you would get that cross-pollination of ideas. I think that would make it far more enticing.

Mr DRUM — Do you run your marketing company from home, or do you have a small office?

Ms STEEDMAN — I presently run it from home. I tend to work at clients’ businesses a bit because I do not like to be sitting at home alone. Otherwise you do feel like you are in a little bubble by yourself. I think they would be a couple of ideas that would be quite beneficial.

On a slightly different note, in terms of other state and federal-level policies and initiatives, one of the projects I am currently working on is for the Mansfield Mount Buller Regional Tourism Association in conjunction with Tourism North East. I do not know if Michael mentioned this previously, but Mansfield Mount Buller is soon to launch a revamped version of our tourism website. It is part of a regional platform called the regional digital platform and will involve 18 destination websites across the north-east. It is a fantastic initiative focused on helping to get operators into the online market to enable them to offer live online bookings and that sort of thing. But as Michael pointed out, if I am an operator who happens to have an accommodation business just outside of Jamieson, I do not have reliable 24/7 internet. So even though we now have this platform, I cannot use it to its full potential because of the patchiness of internet availability. In terms of that rollout of the NBN across the country, I think that is also key in terms of facilitating those sorts of opportunities for tourism operators.

The other thing I noted was in relation to workplace relations or occupational health and safety issues: I did not have any specifics to comment on there. I had, however, thought that if there were programs in rural areas that provided more assistance for young entrepreneurs wishing to establish businesses in regional and remote areas, that would be really helpful.

The CHAIR — So what would be needed in assistance programs?

Ms STEEDMAN — It is an idea that just popped into my head, but I guess it would be in terms of business mentoring and making those options readily available to young professionals living in country areas. I guess it can happen a lot more informally in the city because of the number of businesses around you and the connections you have. I know there are business mentoring programs out there, but I guess if some of them could be more specifically targeted at young professionals it might encourage more of them to locate to rural areas. It is just a matter of helping them to negotiate all the different things about starting up a business — the marketing aspects and legislative considerations and all that sort of thing — to make it an easier process.

Mr DRUM — Uschi, how savvy would you consider yourself to be in relation to using the internet to bring in assistance that you might need? You might need someone to help you work on an advertising program or you might need someone to help you do a prospective piece of work. How savvy do you consider yourself to be?

Ms STEEDMAN — In terms of sourcing the professionals I would not necessarily rely on the internet; I would rely on networks that I have developed over the years. You know the people when you have worked with them, and it is the same sort of thing. Previous experience or word of mouth from someone you trust — you would, I think, probably rate that above doing an internet search and saying, ‘This person looks like they’ve got a nice website’. However, in terms of then actually collaborating on work, using the internet is absolutely important. I was recently collaborating on a project with someone who works at Hub Melbourne, and we were facilitating some workshops for a client over in Shepparton. We were using Google Docs and Dropbox to do our planning and share documents in the preparation phase. We were then doing Skype link-ups with the client to discuss things. So, yes, all of that technology is integral to being able to offer a high-quality service to clients, despite the fact that you are in Mansfield.

The CHAIR — You spoke before about a hub. In your view, what would a hub look like in Mansfield?

Ms STEEDMAN — It could be many things. You could start at a relatively small level, but optimally — let us go for the bigger vision —

The CHAIR — Have provision for it to grow.

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes, you would have an open shared office space, and you would also have some smaller break-out rooms within that space. You might also have some very small offices that people pretty much just rent for themselves. I also see potential for the break-out rooms to be used for purposes other than just working. Mansfield, for instance, as a tree-change destination, has so many people with the most amazing backgrounds who have moved here. They come here, and we do not even really know about it. We have academics from goodness-knows-what sectors and industries, and we have people who have worked in the corporate area in various industries. I think there is such potential to use a hub like that not only as a shared working space but as a research and innovation centre within a regional area. Why on earth can we not do collaborative research projects on environmentally sustainable design, working with young surveyors and planners and people who have previously lectured at university on architecture? Why can we not bring those people together and use a space like the hub as a place where there is a three-month summer program in conjunction with RMIT in Melbourne? There is a lot of potential.

The CHAIR — The hub might also trigger some mentoring, if the contact is there.

Ms STEEDMAN — Exactly. I think with those sort of spaces, the magic of them is that once people are in the room together, that is when ideas about what it could be used for start to really blossom. We should create a space that feels inspiring and creative, because the look and feel of it is really important too.

On point 5, with regard to establishing potential productivity infrastructure and other savings related to people travelling less, I guess it is pretty obvious. Like any work-from-home or shared-office arrangement, the energy and infrastructure savings are going to be pretty substantial, but I think that kind of goes without saying. It is not so applicable to Mansfield, but if I am not commuting from Wallan and back every day, then obviously that is a saving too, but I think, certainly, from my own perspective, one of my reasons for choosing to continue to work at home was actually the energy savings. We have a very efficient home. We have a solar array on the house, so I thought, ‘Okay, I can rent office space in Mansfield in town or I can stay here and know that I am not duplicating those resources’. Obviously there is a massive potential for energy and infrastructure savings.

The CHAIR — In other hearings around the state, we have had people talk about how it is actually more productive.

Ms STEEDMAN — Working from home?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes and no.

The CHAIR — All right. Can you explain?

Ms STEEDMAN — It is funny. I developed this amazing ability to want to do cleaning the minute I started working from home, ‘I will just put on a load of washing before I start work’. Yes, you are, because there are less of the interruptions and there are less of the people floating past the door, saying, ‘Hey, Uschi! What did you do on the weekend?’. But then there is Facebook. I turn Facebook off! So, yes and no. I think there are no hard and fast rules on that. Possibly, the greater productivity gains came from the fact that I was working for myself and I could determine which projects I worked on and for how long, as opposed to having meetings eating up my whole day. Just that control over my time was what gave me the productivity gains as opposed to where I was working.

Mr HOWARD — Can I ask, Uschi, in terms of developing your business, how do you go about marketing your business and linking with potential clients?

Ms STEEDMAN — I am the epitome of the plumber with a leaky tap. I do a really bad job of my own marketing. I am the first to admit that. Oddly enough, and it is just my experience, the online sphere has been far less important for my business as opposed to the personal connections and work collaborations that I have had in the past. In a nutshell, that is what I have found to be key. That possibly depends on the industry that I am working in as well. Obviously for someone like Michael with tourism, absolutely, online is integral. That is how I researched my trip. If I want a trusted professional service provider, I am not just going to go off a website; I am going to try to ring people for testimonials or get referrals. I think it depends on the industry that you are talking about.

Mr HOWARD — Yes, I suspected that.

Mr DRUM — Uschi, earlier on you said, ‘Yep, sure you need reliable, fast internet, but you also need a whole range of other things, like you maybe need a little bit of sophistication’, apart from being close to the ski fields and close to the lake as well. For government we need to keep investing in regional amenities, and we also need to pressure other governments to invest in communications. We have a role to play in that as well. You have been a tree changer — you have moved back home, effectively. If I were to ask you to put a percentage on it, when you looked around the state to take up a position in regional Victoria, how important was knowing you were going to have the technology you needed to run your business and how important was it that all of those other amenities were close by? You might love the beach, so how important was that? How important was your love of the outback? How important was your love of the high country? Versus technology?

Ms STEEDMAN — Versus technology. The technology has to be there, because if it is not I cannot do my work, but that said, I am picking between Mansfield looking nice — we will make up a town — and this other little town that does not have mountains and is still, let’s say, a little bit more of a traditional, rural, agriculturally focused community. Yes, I have got my football and my netball on the weekend, but there are not as many other sports. There might not be a local theatre company. There might not be a Bracket and Jam session at a local cafe of a Friday.

All of those factors are going to make me swing towards somewhere like Mansfield, very much so. For me, if my choice were a city or a town that is still very much more of a traditional, agricultural, rural community, I think I would have had to make the really hard decision for me, because I love the natural environment, to stay in the city. I would have hated it, but I would not have come back, without a doubt.

Mr DRUM — So you are a product of the sophistication? You are feeling as though you are not actually giving up much at all?

Ms STEEDMAN — No.

Mr DRUM — You do not feel as though you are giving up anything to move back to the region?

Ms STEEDMAN — No, absolutely not.

Mr DRUM — But as you say, the technology has to be there as a non-negotiable, and then all the other things are the determining factors.

Ms STEEDMAN — Yes, exactly. It is interesting that now, when my partner and I go back to Melbourne, people our age say to us, ‘Oh, my goodness, your lifestyle is just absolutely awesome’, but there is still a perception in their minds that they cannot do what they want to do in terms of their careers in a rural area, so maybe that is another thing. Maybe we all need to focus more on getting the message out that times have actually changed — you can stay connected with the wider world and you can remain involved in your passions, in writing music, in international affairs, in sustainability or whatever it might be from a country town. Maybe we are not communicating that yet, even though it is possible. So that might be another thing that at all levels of government we can look at: how do we get the message out there?

It is a thing that feeds on itself. In about 2006, I think, or 2007 I went overseas again. Around 2006 my partner and I were living here, and we sort of felt like we were the only ones our age who were still kicking around. We got back from overseas a year later, and suddenly from that point I noticed that there was this increasing trickle of people around 27 years of age. They had done their thing in the city, and they had gone, ‘You know what? Life was pretty good in Mansfield’. It is feeding on itself — the more of them that come back, the more that it attracts others. So, yes, I think that it is good.

The CHAIR — Uschi, do you have any final comments you would like to leave us with?

Ms STEEDMAN — As always, I have written a swathe of things, but I have no idea what I have covered. The only other point that I was going to make, which you actually touched on a little bit with Michael, is that in terms of the potential benefits and importance of telecommunications I think the other thing that it has really facilitated is making it easier for professionals in rural areas to remain in touch with the latest training and knowledge in their industry. It does not feel so much like country areas are playing catch-up all the time in terms of there being a big lag between an innovation in the city and that practice in the country. I think that is in large part due to the internet. I do not necessarily have to go and attend a face-to-face conference or workshop. I participated in an international, online marketing conference, which was run from America last year. It was so inspiring. It was amazing. We were like, ‘Great material!’. Again, I think that is really a key benefit as well.

The CHAIR — Very good. Thanks very much for the time you have taken and the preparation you did for it. It is very much appreciated, Uschi. Within approximately 14 days you will get a copy of what you have said and Hansard has recorded. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will remain as it is. Once again, thank you very much and all the best with your endeavours based here in Mansfield.

Ms STEEDMAN — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.