

# 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**

Port Fairy — 7 November 2014

#### Members

Mr D. Drum  
Mr G. Howard  
Mr A. Katos

Mr I. Trezise  
Mr P. Weller

Chair: Mr P. Weller  
Deputy Chair: Mr G. Howard

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic  
Research Officer: Mr P. O'Brien

#### Witness

Mr J. Serong, editor, *Great Ocean Quarterly*.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Jock, to the public hearings of the Rural and Regional Committee’s 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 could you please give your name and business address?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. My full name is Justin James Serong. My business address is 16 William Street, Port Fairy.

**The CHAIR** — You might tell us about your business and why you are located here in Port Fairy.

**Mr SERONG** — Okay. I have a law degree and I have spent the majority of my career so far as a lawyer. I worked in Melbourne as a solicitor and then as a barrister. When my wife and I started our family we came to a point when we thought, ‘How do we manage economically the number of children we want to have and provide them with the opportunities we want them to have?’.

**Mr HOWARD** — How many did you want?

**Mr SERONG** — That is the thing; we had not really worked it out.

**Mr HOWARD** — It sounds as if you were planning a big family!

**Mr SERONG** — We did know we wanted to have a reasonably big family. We thought that if we stayed in the inner city — I was working as a criminal barrister — in order to give our children the opportunities we wanted them to have and to afford a house and all of those things I was looking down the barrel of back-to-back murder trials for the rest of my life. That was not really where we wanted to go in terms of time management and all of those things. I have a very strong connection to the coast, as does my wife, and we decided at a point — —

**Mr HOWARD** — Is that through family background or is it just through activity?

**Mr SERONG** — I think just through our inclination.

**Mr HOWARD** — Sporting life and interests?

**Mr SERONG** — I think so, yes. We decided we would move down the coast, and that would free us up to have the lifestyle we wanted, and if we wanted to have a bigger family, to be able to do that. That was the initial reason for doing it. I had already lived in this town for a couple of years in the mid-1990s, and I had moved back to Melbourne to chase other professional opportunities. The obvious first choice for us was to come back to this town and settle here. We did that in 2004, and I went from being a self-employed barrister in Melbourne to being an employed solicitor in a firm in Warrnambool. I took up a partnership in that firm. From about 2007 I was a partner in that legal firm, and I started exploring my own interest in freelance writing. I was doing that in my spare time — at night and on the weekend — and I came to a point where the writing was really growing quite substantially. Again it is a time management thing, I think. It was becoming hard to accommodate that within the obligations I had to the firm, so I made the decision this year to leave legal practice completely and concentrate on writing full time.

My working environment is the front room of our house. I can admit freely that today is one of the first times in months that I have pulled out the suit again. That is the way it operates. I travel a fair bit to and from Melbourne and occasionally interstate chasing stories. The writing life is best described in four components. The first is freelance magazine writing; the second is publishing the magazine *Great Ocean Quarterly*, which you have a copy of; the third is doing little bits and pieces of corporate copywriting and ghostwriting, which I am really only just feeling my way into — I do not know the first thing about it, but I am trying to learn the craft; and the fourth is long fiction, and probably the whole reason I went into writing was to write novels and screenplays. The rate and pace of payment with those things is highly variable and bills are not; bills just keep coming. I try to use my freelance magazine writing and my copywriting to keep the meter ticking over, because it will be sometime until the magazine comes into profit. As for long fiction, who knows what you get paid or when? It is completely speculative. That is where I am up to at the moment professionally.

**The CHAIR** — This inquiry is about telecommuting and e-commerce. How do you engage with the people in the wider world that you have to in your business from Port Fairy?

**Mr SERONG** — Obviously with an internet connection to the home and a mobile phone. It is not at all necessary to what I do that I disguise my geographic whereabouts in any way. In fact it is an asset to what I do. I know of other people who work in various fields in this town for whom it is quite important that their location is neutral. That is not the case for me. I rely on those two sources. We barely use a landline at all. The only reason we have one is because we have small children and we think it is probably a safety thing that they have a phone to use if they need one.

**Mr TREZISE** — Jock, you talked about going to Melbourne a fair bit. Is there a way into the future when you will not have to go to Melbourne — you will be able to use ICT to telecommute from home in Port Fairy?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, I would like that to be the case. With writing the need for your physical presence is minimal. A lot of the time my going to Melbourne is about going to the airport, and I would like to keep that down as much as I can. The more you are on the road, the more risk you are at. The road is not terrific, as you probably noticed.

**Mr HOWARD** — In terms of infrastructure, do you find it meets your needs or are you waiting for a better broadband rollout and find you are a bit frustrated and limited in some of the capacity you have?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, there are frustrations. I am not particularly adept at telecommunications, and I need to be better. The struggle I have had over recent months has been that I spent most of my career with somebody else paying for my internet and managing it for me, and I now find that is my responsibility, and I keep going vastly over the data allowance and not knowing why. Telstra is my carrier, and they are completely unsympathetic. They just say, 'Bad luck; pay the bill'. Managing data effectively is an issue. I do not have a problem with speed or blackouts. Really I look at and produce words; I do not have a need for vast amounts of — —

**Mr HOWARD** — But in terms of your magazine, there are photographs and all of that. How does the magazine get published, and how does the technology communication work for you?

**Mr SERONG** — What happens is that there are two other partners. There is a commercial partner and an art director. The commercial partner is based in Barwon Heads; the art director is based in Jan Juc. We meet physically maybe every couple of weeks — mostly because we want to go surfing together. If you took that factor out of it, there is not much need for us to meet physically. I gather stories by email. I subedit them on my computer and forward them to the art director, who lays them up. The commercial director gathers ads in the same way. All of that is then sent electronically to a printer in Mulgrave. The printer sends the printed copies to a distributor in Port Melbourne, and out they go to the world in trucks. Really the entire thing could be conducted remotely other than for the fact that we like to get together now and then.

I consider myself to be a very pedantic proofreader. I go through the thing minutely. It goes up to an external proofreader who then finds 150 mistakes that I missed. It then rolls off the printing presses and you find more mistakes. There is no substitute for actually picking up the proofs and looking at them really carefully. With those reservations in mind, it could be an entirely remote process.

**The CHAIR** — I suppose what we are looking at is you as a success story. You have come here to Port Fairy and run a very successful business from our point of view. How do we attract and encourage other people who are not necessarily in printing but in other industries. What advice would you give? How would you go about attracting more people?

**Mr SERONG** — I think the answer lies in reconstruing the way towns are seen. My perception, rightly or wrongly, is that places like Port Fairy trade very successfully on their physical and cultural attributes — whales, lighthouses, bluestone buildings and nice cafes — and those things are terrific; but I suspect that in the mind of a person deliberating about whether to make such a move, what they are thinking about is: I know that stuff is the top layer, but is there enough substance underneath for me to have a meaningful life? Is there a community of people who think like me, socialise like me and are like me, and how do I tap into them?

If you look at the marketing of Warrnambool, I always think it is very heavily geared around whales, which is great, but it is limited. It will draw tourists and that industry will work successfully within its own confines, but it is important to communicate to people in the city that there is an intellectual life and a cultural life and that you can run businesses that are not necessarily whale-centric in these places.

**The CHAIR** — They are very diverse.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, and when I came here in 2004 — bearing in mind that I was not initially looking to make links with people in publishing — I found out after 18 months that I was living in the next street to a bloke who published a magazine and was looking for writers. But it took me 18 months to know he was there, and if there was a clearer and more effective communication of those sorts of assets, I think that would be invaluable.

**Mr HOWARD** — When you arrived did Moyne shire or anybody send you a new resident pack, for example, that might have had that? Are you aware of that sort of thing?

**Mr SERONG** — No, not that I recall, and by then the decision would have been made anyway.

**Mr HOWARD** — Yes, but what if the new resident pack at least linked into what your interests are, or some directory would link you into some of the people who might help you to build your business, some of the social linkages or other linkages you might have wanted?

**Mr SERONG** — I do not remember seeing one. To be fair, I think the shire does a good job of informing people about basic civic infrastructure. That all works really well, but what I am thinking of is the intellectual links between people who might be able to assist each other.

**The CHAIR** — This inquiry has heard a bit about coworking spaces and those sorts of things. If there had been one in Port Fairy when you arrived, there may have been opportunities in a coworking space.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, and it is still a challenge for me. Until the various things I am doing come into a regular revenue stream, I am not in a position to go and rent the top floor of a shop down in Sackville Street or any other form of office premises. I am pretty much stuck with the front room of the house, which is nice but has its limits. One of the things I think it would be great to see — if money was no object, and I suspect this is a very expensive option — is some sort of communal space where people can go and take office space, be around each other and share facilities that you do not need to have on your own. I think that would be really invaluable.

**The CHAIR** — Some places have what they call coworking spaces, or hubs, where you can go and get a hot desk for half a day, a day, three days a week or even five days a week. People work at home and do not socialise; if they go to these hubs, the socialising can happen there. You can actually make connections. As you have indicated, you can be surprised — you did not know there was another writer in the town until some 18 months after you got here. It is whether people would see a town the size of Port Fairy as one that would be able to sustain coworking or a hub.

**Mr SERONG** — I do not know the answer to that. I suspect there are probably a lot more people in my position than I realised. But again I do not know if they are out there.

**Mr TREZISE** — Jock, from a personal point of view, you have obviously gone from a pretty busy life working in a traditional office where you were surrounded by people to all of a sudden working from home.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes.

**Mr TREZISE** — How have you found that transformation?

**Mr SERONG** — It is good; it does not trouble me at all. The company is there when I want it. By definition what I am doing requires a fair bit of solitude, so that is probably okay. Were I in a different profession it might be an issue, because finding regular, stimulating company would not be all that easy, I do not think.

**Mr TREZISE** — Yes, as Paul pointed out, we are social beings and dealing and interacting with people is the strength of those hubs.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. One of the things I miss about a legal office is that when you drafted something or you were trying to think your way through something you could walk into the next room and say, ‘What do you think of this?’. It is not a formal process; it is just getting a bounce from somebody. The hub-type concept probably offers that.

**Mr TREZISE** — It would not necessarily have to be in a place like Port Fairy. Warrnambool is 15 minutes down the road, and that is a major regional centre.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. I suspect that for little places like Port Fairy, if you think of them in a modular sense with a regional centre, they suddenly have a great deal more reach. People in Port Fairy are rightly proud of the fact that it is a very self-sufficient, independent place. A lot of that can be attributed to the fact that there is a thumping big regional centre just down the road; it is there when you need it.

**Mr HOWARD** — One thing that was raised with us today that local government needs to be aware of is that attracting computer-savvy people to come to live here is one thing, but they also have wives and families. In your case, how has it worked out for your wife? Is she happy? Has she found the things that she needs to do, whether it is work or other things that meet her and the family’s needs?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, my wife is a nurse and a nurse will always find work reasonably easily, so that has worked well. My memory of it was that when we moved to the town, it was me that was pushing for it because I knew people here and I knew the coast. My wife was more careful about it — not reluctant, but careful. I was worried that she would struggle to make the links; she had very strong links in Melbourne. The thing that did it was small children; without a doubt that was the catalyst because there are mothers groups, there is kindergarten and then once you are in a school community, you are away. How it would go without children I do not know, to be honest.

**Mr HOWARD** — But then if she was a nurse who was regularly nursing, then maybe through the nursing cohort it might still work for her.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, true.

**Mr HOWARD** — But I suppose it depends on whether they can get work, if they are looking to work. They can get some social linkages that way.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. It is also surprising the degree to which the community knows about new arrivals. I know that every now and then Lill will say to me, ‘Some Melbourne people have moved into the house where old so-and-so was’. People seem to gather around them, which is really good to see.

**Mr HOWARD** — Yes, that is a great thing. Again, maybe that is a thing that local government could promote more — that within smaller communities there is often a better opportunity for linkage than there is if you move from one Melbourne suburb, where you never talk to your neighbours, to another and that sort of thing.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. An interesting dimension of that is the demographics in country towns. There is definitely a layer of old people, who have been there their whole lives and who are slowly moving into care or dying, and there are younger people who are taking up those homes without the town necessarily expanding in size very much in a physical sense.

There is a generational core in the town who are country people who hold to country values. Perhaps intermingling but not necessarily mixing completely are Melbourne people like me who turn up. The interaction between the two groups I think is really interesting. It is not inhospitable, but the two groups of people are pretty distinct. What that means for the development of country towns, I do not know, but it is a social question.

**The CHAIR** — You have moved from working for a company. You need a certain amount of solitude in the job you are in now. Do you find yourself more productive now? Can you discuss the reasons why?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, I do find myself more productive, although it is harder to measure because as a solicitor you operate in 6-minute units. I still grapple with this as a concept, but you can sell every 6 minutes of your day to someone. As a writer, it is unclear what has economic value, who you can bill for it and when, which can be alarming some days. But in terms of productivity, I think the genuine measure of that is that I can

sit down and lose hours and hours doing what I am doing. Unless somebody actually knocked on the door, I would not notice the time. To me, that is productivity.

**The CHAIR** — A lot of businesses say, ‘We won’t allow people to work at home because we don’t know how they will be working’.

**Mr SERONG** — Right. Yes, I follow you.

**The CHAIR** — We are interested to hear from people who have experienced this as to how they find themselves more productive.

**Mr SERONG** — When I was with the firm, each of us was connected by internet to the database of the firm, so we had all the client records, the time management and the billing details. Everything came to your home computer, and the firm paid for the home computer and the phone. There was never any pressure. The values in the firm were good and there was never any pressure to conduct a lot of work out of hours at home. Indeed if you wanted to spend a day working at home, you could do it. But to me there was a slow creep in that that I did not like whereby you were always half on attention and half not. I quite liked the clear definition of going to an office and being at work, and coming home and being at home. Having said that, I have gone and blurred it all now, but at that stage that was really important to me.

The other thing we found with working from home was that whilst the productivity was fine — I do not think anybody ever abused it — what you lost was continuity with the staff, which means oversight of junior staff, oversight of support staff and also that collegiate thing we talked about whereby you can drop into somebody’s office and have a chat. They are the things you lose, but in terms of relying on people to get their work done, it was never an issue.

**Mr HOWARD** — The other thing I was going to ask was in terms of your IT skills. It sounds like through the legal firm you would have developed a fair number anyway, but are there skills that you would like to be able to develop and it is a matter of finding out how do you gain the skills or extra knowledge about IT capacity?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes. I think more and more when you are writing it is not enough to produce good words and whack them on a Word document and email them to somebody. There is an expectation that you can dress the words in some way, that you can publish. Whether that is PowerPoint or a more sophisticated layout, people expect to see publication of your words in the one hit, and that is something I am still grappling with. For me in the front room of my house by myself it is a matter of trying to find it on Google. Knowing those things better would be a big advantage.

**Mr HOWARD** — Is there an opportunity within this region that you know of? Is there somebody who does provide those sort of skills, whether it be a registered training organisation or other facility?

**Mr SERONG** — There is a good TAFE in Warrnambool, and I would be sure they offer something of that kind. My failure to know about it is my own doing, I think. If I hunted it down, it would be there.

**Mr HOWARD** — That is often the case, I think. It is how you link the two, whether that is a job of working with local government to try, through the recommendations of our inquiry, or whether we can find ways of making those linkages so you get better opportunities for IT development in country areas.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, I think that would be really invaluable.

The other thing that I meant to mention was that I went on a writing trip a few weeks ago to Goolwa in South Australia. Goolwa is a member of an organisation called Cittaslow, which is an Italian thing. It is a sort of alliance. It is an accreditation for small towns whereby you have to meet certain standards in respect of respecting your heritage and your local environment but you have to have an intellectual and cultural life in the town. If you meet certain benchmarks in all of those areas, you are accredited as being a Cittaslow town, and it is then up to you how you leverage the marketing from that accreditation.

Goolwa has done it and done it very successfully. It was the first Cittaslow town in Australia, and I think the size is 50 000. I think you have to be under 50 000. It struck me as a really impressive way to attract brains to

country towns rather than necessarily passing tourists. There have been two more since then. There is one in the Blue Mountains — Katoomba — and I think Yea in Victoria might be a Cittaslow town.

Port Fairy won a livability award last year for towns under 20 000, which was a terrific thing, but that is a transient snapshot in town — a moment in time. I think accreditation like Cittaslow can then be used to encourage people to think of the town as a cultural entity. That is something I think is worth looking at further.

**The CHAIR** — You said when you were at the law firm that some employees were allowed to work at home. Was there a policy that the firm had, and did that include an occupational health and safety policy for what is required at their office at home?

**Mr SERONG** — No.

**Mr HOWARD** — Just a loose arrangement?

**Mr SERONG** — A very loose arrangement. Yes. My recollection of it was that we had never laid down a policy and we had never had a meeting about it. The lawyers were entitled to do it, but support staff did not. The other surprising thing was it was not taken up as much as you might expect. Perhaps it depends a bit on people's physical circumstances and their family life, but people were more inclined to go to the office and be in that head space.

Public transport is a bit of an issue here. I do not know the details well, but obviously there is no train to Warrnambool and buses are limited. People are slow to take up car-pooling. We did a little bit of it when I was at the firm. It means that for a firm of around 45 people you had a lot of people coming from outlying places every day to go to work, driving half an hour or an hour or even more. A couple of people came from north of Mortlake to work in Warrnambool. That is a lot of human beings on the road a lot of the time.

**Mr HOWARD** — Is it possible that the demand for working at home or working away from the office will increase as the age of the lawyers goes down, with younger, more IT-savvy people coming into the law?

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, you would think so. To an extent I think it is a reflection of the type of clients that a rural law firm might work with. My experience was always that country people treated a meeting with their lawyer much like a meeting with their doctor or their dentist, in that there was a ritualistic element to it. You would put on your good clothes and you would go and see the solicitor. A lot of those people were not so inclined to treat interactions with their lawyer in an unconventional way — you know, 'Let's videoconference this, or let's Skype it or do whatever else'. It was go in and sit down in a meeting room with the solicitor and hammer something out. Perhaps the clientele drove the behaviour for the firm rather than the other way around.

**The CHAIR** — Jock, have you got any final pearls of wisdom you would like to share with us?

**Mr SERONG** — I do not think I have any at all. No, it has been good. That is it from me. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much, Jock, for taking the time to come along and for adding very valuably to our inquiry. In about 14 days time Lilian will send you a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will be as it is.

**Mr SERONG** — Okay.

**The CHAIR** — Once again, thank you very much, and all the best with *Great Ocean*. I hope it is a success for you.

**Mr SERONG** — Thanks very much.

**Mr HOWARD** — And the other things. What is your genre with the fiction that you are doing? What are you into?

**Mr SERONG** — I have written and signed up a novel. I thought it was general drama, but the publisher told me it is crime, so it is crime.

**The CHAIR** — It is not one of your ex cases, is it?

**Mr SERONG** — Are we still on the transcript?

**Mr HOWARD** — That is right. I suppose you are in an area where you can make those linkages.

**Mr SERONG** — Yes, and the screenplay is about convicts.

**The CHAIR** — Good.

**Mr HOWARD** — Good luck with it all.

**Mr SERONG** — Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**