

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE
REVIEW OF THE RACING AND WAGERING WESTERN
AUSTRALIA ACTS**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RACING AND WAGERING WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACTS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT BUNBURY
TUESDAY, 6 APRIL 2010**

SESSION THREE

Members

**Mr John McGrath (Chairman)
Hon Max Trenorden (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm
Mr John Bowler
Hon Alyssa Hayden
Mr Peter Watson**

Hearing commenced at 11.55 am

GARDINER, MR BRENDON STRICKLAND
Secretary/Treasurer, Bridgetown Harness Racing Club,
examined:

WATERS, MR GRAEME ANTHONY
Vice President, Bridgetown Harness Racing Club,
examined:

ABBOTT, MRS PATRICIA
Secretary/Treasurer, Busselton Trotting Club,
examined:

ABBOTT, MR DAVID
Busselton Trotting Club,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on the Review of the Racing and Wagering Western Australia Acts, I thank you for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in its inquiry into the Racing and Wagering Western Australia acts. You would have seen a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference. For the benefit of Hansard and those observing, I will introduce myself and the other members of the committee present today. My name is John McGrath; I am the chairman. To my left is Max Trenorden, MLC, the deputy chairman. On his left is Alyssa Hayden, MLC, followed by Peter Watson, MLA. On my right is John Bowler, MLA, and Matt Benson, MLC.

This committee is a joint standing committee of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal proceeding of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. Before we proceed I also need to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks very much for your attendance today. We will be talking to you about the activities of both of your clubs. Also in particular you will know that the specific purpose of these hearings is to look at the act under which RWWA was formed in 2003, and also whether the act and the operation of RWWA is working well and in the best interests of the industry going forward. So I would like you to comment on that, if you would, first. But I have got a statement here presented by Mr Gardiner; a submission. The Bridgetown Harness Racing Club did not actually make a submission to the inquiry, but you have brought one along with you. I would like you to just paraphrase some of the points that you made in your submission, please, Mr Gardiner.

[11.58 am]

Mr Gardiner: Yes. Thank you. As I noted at the start of the submission, there is little doubt that in many areas the conduct of the industry has improved. Stake money to participants has risen, and costs to race horses—the immediate costs of starting a horse in a race—have been reduced or eliminated. Also, particularly at tracks like ours, you will notice that the standard of race manners of horses has been significantly improved through the racing integrity section of RWWA. They have certainly done a good job in that regard. As a community club—that goes for Busselton as well as us—we are very concerned that there is a gap opening up between what RWWA refers to as the prime clubs and the community clubs. Through a lack of opportunity, particularly radio broadcasts, broadcasts of vision, the number of meetings and the number of races at meetings, and the policies of RWWA, we are having less and less opportunity in comparison with the major clubs, and we can see that in comparison our turnover is being reduced, particularly our offcourse turnover. Our product is not reliably on the radio, it is never on a television screen, and we are not racing very often.

We understand our role in the industry. We are not clubs that are there to race week in, week out. We are filling the gap for hobby trainers or less professional trainers, but we do feel that we are an important part of the fabric of the industry and that we should be, not allowed to continue, but actually helped to prosper. At the moment we have a fixation essentially on career penalty races at Gloucester Park, Northam, Pinjarra and Bunbury. If you add up the meeting numbers and the racing opportunities at those four venues, you have accounted for the vast majority of racing opportunities for career penalty horses in Western Australia. There is very little left. We are just getting the crumbs from the table, and the crumbs are getting smaller comparatively.

Our facilities, particularly at Bridgetown, in all reality, are terrible. They are 60 years old. They were built at no cost to the industry; they were built by community volunteers at Bridgetown, and they have reached the end of their life span effectively. We are doing our best to keep patching them up to provide a standard of racing and venue that is appropriate for the type of racing that we have.

The CHAIRMAN: How many meetings do you have a year?

Mr Gardiner: Two per year.

The CHAIRMAN: You have two meetings?

Mr Gardiner: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Are they TAB or non-TAB?

Mr Gardiner: They are TAB meetings.

The CHAIRMAN: With no Sky coverage?

Mr Gardiner: Certainly not.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you made an application to RWWA for funding for infrastructure improvement?

Mr Gardiner: We have been getting the mantra consistently since the inception of RWWA that there is no money for facilities at community venues. Effectively in the south west, even before RWWA was on the scene, we were advised by the racecourse development committee—this applies to Harvey, your last people; ourselves; Collie—“There’s no point putting in for anything. We’ve got to get Bunbury up to a standard.” Bunbury has been the recipient of some funds in the south west, and now we have Pinjarra being the recipient in a rather large way. For the remaining clubs, there has been nothing.

The CHAIRMAN: Historically, was there a time when Bridgetown used to get more than two meetings?

Mr Gardiner: We had up to 11.

The CHAIRMAN: Up to eleven meetings: how long ago was that?

Mr Gardiner: I honestly could not tell you exactly when we last had 11 meetings, but prior to about 1997 or the 1998 season, the club was holding five meetings. Sadly, the club was very thoroughly embezzled and lost its racing status completely for three seasons, I believe. We were very fortunate. When we went to the WATA on bended knee, the then president and I were able to successfully negotiate the return of two meetings, and we have been at two meetings since.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you tell us a little bit about those meetings? Where do the horses come from and what sort of crowds do you get?

Mr Gardiner: We had a meeting on Saturday of this weekend, which has contributed to all of this being fairly rushed for us. The horses generally came from the south west. There were maybe two or three horses that came from as far away as Perth. We had what was an exceptional crowd for us on Saturday. It is difficult to put a real number on it, but pushing up towards 1 000 people oncourse. We had an oncourse turnover, and bar sales and food sales and admissions that we were very happy with. As a club, the meeting will be very profitable for us. But we need to amortise all the costs of our club over two meetings per year. It is a bit of a job.

The CHAIRMAN: So how many meetings would you like to have?

Mr Gardiner: I do not think we are putting our hand up saying that we should have 10 meetings or 12 meetings. We are actually quite happy at two or three meetings. But what we do not have is any guarantees for the future. Each year you have got your fingers crossed, waiting for the race dates to come out to see if you have been wiped off the map or not. Financially, at the moment, the club is pretty sound, but, as Bruce just said, as a club gets chopped off the bottom of the ladder, you are one closer to the chopping block. As you will have noticed in my notes, I have been involved in trotting for a fair while—16 or 17 years as an administrator. Just in the RWWA period, we have lost York, Merredin, Trayning, Wyalkatchem, Cunderdin and now Geraldton. How much rationalisation

The CHAIRMAN: Were you surprised at the decision to tell Geraldton that they will not get any meetings after this year?

Mr Gardiner: To be honest with you, on a personal basis, I have never been to a trot meeting at Geraldton—I have been to the venue—but I was surprised when trotting was sent to Geraldton. It was a decision that I cannot say I totally supported.

The CHAIRMAN: Because of its distance from other trotting centres?

Mr Gardiner: I think at the time when that decision was made to go to Geraldton, other venues were battling, and it seemed to me to be a strange decision to go that way, when it may have been a more effective move to try to improve some of the clubs that we had at the time. But that decision was taken.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay. Can we just get a little bit of background on Busselton—whoever wants to make a statement? Basically, we know a bit about your club. You hold some very successful

meetings, mainly during the holiday period. Can you just elaborate on when you hold your meetings, how many meetings you have a year, and give the committee, for the benefit of *Hansard*, a little bit of detail about the Busselton Trotting Club and whether you have any ongoing concerns about your survival in this ever-changing industry?

Mrs Abbott: Yes, John, and everyone. Busselton has six meetings a year, which they are more than happy with. We have our opening meeting on boxing night, and we finish at the end of January, so we are fairly full on, with six meetings in virtually a five-week period. We exploit the public, because the public are in Busselton in the holiday time, and, yes, that is what it is about. We have good crowds—roughly 3 000 a night. We go roughly between \$50 000 and \$60 000 oncourse in betting, which is good for a little club. We are chock-a-block, but we are a small club and we know our place. We do not want to have umpteen meetings. But we do not own the premises; the shire does. RWWA, and its former WATA, have always, in my view, had the same opinion: you do not own the club, you do not get money. That is it. You manage with the facilities you have got. It has always been a battle to get things.

The CHAIRMAN: What you are saying is that RWWA have said that they will not put money into a facility if it is owned by someone else—that is owned by the council.

Mrs Abbott: That is the implication. You never get that in writing or anything, but WATA had the same policy.

Mr P.B. WATSON: That does not always work, because Albany owns theirs, and they get nothing, so that is —

Mrs Abbott: Albany have had more than we have had, I can tell you.

Mr P.B. WATSON: The philosophy has gone down the drain there.

Mrs Abbott: Well, yes—it depends.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Not your philosophy, RWWA's philosophy.

Mrs Abbott: Yes. There is always the threat, as Brendon said. Horses should not be going to the main tracks first up. In the former days, you started off at the smaller clubs; you got your horse educated. Then when it improved and learnt, you progressed. We are all certainly putting towards turnover. With no vision, and a problem quite often with listening on Racing Radio, you can turn over \$100 000 to \$110 000 a night, which, to me, for a little club is damned good. But you always get the threat, you know, like, "If you don't do this, we can still rescind your licence." That is, to me, rubbish.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Have you had that in writing, about the threat?

Mr Gardiner: I have had that in writing many times.

Mrs Abbott: In an email, yes. There was a new country cup series came in the year before last. We did not take part the first year, but we thought about it, because we were getting a bit of pressure and questions, for the season just gone. Prior to that, all clubs got one feature race subsidy per year, which normally is for your cup. When I asked, if we did not go in that series again for the season just gone, would we still get our feature race subsidy, I was told no. That is blackmail. And I did put that in writing, and it came back that they were not very happy being told that it was blackmail. But it is, and little clubs get this sort of thing all of the time.

The CHAIRMAN: What would you say to a comment that, for the overall industry to survive, RWWA has got to look at the big picture and it has got to make sure that TAB turnover is maximised, and that is obviously why they are holding more meetings at the bigger tracks—the tracks that will get coverage from Sky Channel? Against that you are saying that clubs like yours should also receive funding in terms of infrastructure and be given more assistance. The reason you are saying that, I gather, is that because you provide not only an opportunity in the industry for

people starting out or for horses starting out, but also something for the social fabric of your respective towns. Is that what you are saying?

Mrs Abbott: Yes. This year we were all given roughly \$4 200. The suggestion was that we, the smaller clubs, had six races a night. That is not viable. If you are open, you run seven.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes. So you have to top that up.

Mrs Abbott: We had to argue that we could even advertise for a seventh code. Their preference was, “Well, we’ll make it up from wherever.” It seemed to work for both Bridgetown and us that you put the seventh code in at fields. Then you ring up and see how your fields are going, and they say, “Well, you’ve got enough for eight races. Will you fund it?” Of course we will, because that is what we are there for, to encourage the fraternity and to support them. We all make money, but we do not do it for ourselves; we do it for the industry as a whole.

The CHAIRMAN: So what you are saying is that all you want is a little bit of recognition or appreciation, or whatever, for the —

Mrs Abbott: And a bit of help sometimes, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And a bit of help sometimes. You obviously are a financial club.

Mrs Abbott: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You must make good money out of your meetings; is that right?

Mrs Abbott: Yes, we do, and each year we put roughly \$40 000 out of our money back into our six meetings by increasing stakes, providing fuel vouchers, which we have done for years, to everyone that is not placed. Okay; that cost us less this year because of RWWA’s decision to pay down to six, but earlier, when they decided to pay only first, second and third at the smaller clubs, we opted to pay, from four to 10, a \$50 fuel voucher as well to just try to help them.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Can you just give us an indication of what your offcourse turnover is like—for both places?

Mrs Abbott: Roughly 70. It depends.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: And Bridgetown?

Mr Gardiner: Our offcourse turnover on Saturday was only \$38 000, but there were 30 meetings on Saturday.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Yes, it was a big day, Saturday.

The CHAIRMAN: Were you at night or in the day?

Mr Gardiner: No, we were during the day. I do not know how many of our races made Racing Radio on Saturday. I know that some did, but I strongly suspect that some did not. I was advised by a RWWA employee last week with a phone call, “You realise your races probably won’t be on the radio on Saturday.”

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Can I just follow up on that. You happened to talk about Busselton. That means, if you are turning over \$70 000, the system is at least earning, say, \$10 000 off you—somewhere between \$9 000 and \$10 000. Have they got a \$9 000 or \$10 000 cost to RWWA for stewards and all the rest? Would that cost be there?

Mr Abbott: No.

Mrs Abbott: No, I do not think so.

The CHAIRMAN: How many people do they send down to your meetings?

Mrs Abbott: Two.

The CHAIRMAN: Two stewards, is it?

Mrs Abbott: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You provide first aid and the ambulance and all that.

Mrs Abbott: We pay—and a vet. All of the small clubs pay their own —

The CHAIRMAN: And Bridgetown is the same—two stewards?

Mr Gardiner: Absolutely.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: So even if it is, say, \$38 000, you would have about a \$5 000 profit to the system.

Mr Gardiner: And \$38 000 was a fairly low offcourse for us. We have had offcourse at times up to \$70 000 or \$80 000, but not recently. I have been the secretary for eight or nine years now, and because of the intense competition for airtime and the sheer volume of meetings that are being telecast, our offcourses are declining.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: But I would still make the point, though, that they would have supplied you the same—two individuals.

Mr Gardiner: Yes.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: So the cost to the system for your club on Saturday was two individuals, and the vehicle and the petrol for the vehicle, basically.

Mrs Abbott: Not the vehicle. They do not provide that.

Mr Gardiner: No, the stewards' car.

Mrs Abbott: Yes, sorry—yes.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: But that would not be \$5 000, would it?

Mr Gardiner: I do not think stewards are paid that well.

[12.15 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Gardiner, from the submission you provided us with today, you made a couple of points that I would like you to elaborate on. The first was to do with your fixtures. You said a RWWA phone line from the commentator's position on course is incapable of functioning with current race-calling equipment and this impacts on the likelihood of having the race broadcast on Racing Radio. Is this the second meeting in a row that you have had this problem?

Mr Gardiner: It is the second meeting in a row with the current race-calling equipment. The race caller comes to the course and plugs in then tries to make contact with the studio. It is all lovely—beautiful signal—but after three or four minutes the signal gets weaker and weaker and drops out. As I said I do not know how many of our races got on Racing Radio on Saturday. But I can assure you that any that did get on were broadcast through the caller's mobile telephone.

The CHAIRMAN: He had to use his mobile telephone?

Mr Gardiner: That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you raised this issue with RWWA?

Mr Gardiner: I have. I was assured after the last meeting that it would be fixed. I have been there myself in my own time, plugged a telephone into that socket, phoned people at RWWA and they have said, "No, no, the line's fine; I can hear you; it's all lovely." But on our race day when the pressure is on, the line does not perform.

The CHAIRMAN: Albany Race Club had a similar problem I believe and on, I think, the cup race, which was telecast Australia-wide on Sky Channel, the caller had to use his mobile phone because there was something wrong with the landline. That might be a problem that is more widespread than just your course.

Mr Gardiner: It may well be.

Mr P.B. WATSON: But, that was just a one-off. It is happening here regularly.

The CHAIRMAN: The second point you made was that RWWA chose not to fixture sell eastern state night harness meetings to your oncourse tote. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Mr Gardiner: With eastern states night harness meetings which, by definition means a meeting that starts after 3.00 pm Western Australian time, our oncourse patrons were not allowed to bet on those races from our course.

The CHAIRMAN: Why not?

Mr Gardiner: Because someone at RWWA had decided that we did not need those meetings. I do not know who made that decision. Our tote manager was on the phone to RWWA as soon as the first bet was refused, and the RWWA person said, "Oh no, they're not fixtures sold to Bridgetown; you can't bet on those meetings." It would have needed to be loaded before midnight the previous night. The decision is irreversible on the day. Our tote manager—the same tote manager that Busselton uses—said to us that we lost at least a couple of thousand dollars from oncourse turnover there through people's bets being refused at the terminals.

The CHAIRMAN: Could your patrons see those races on the TV?

Mr Gardiner: Yes; many of them were broadcast on Sky, which they were watching.

The CHAIRMAN: And you could not bet on them?

Mr Gardiner: That is correct. It is slightly frustrating.

The CHAIRMAN: The third point you made was, but for a call from your tote manager earlier in the week your access to Sky Channel vision on the day would have been nil.

Mr Gardiner: That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: Because RWWA had not advised sky that our meeting was on

Mr Gardiner: Yes.

Mrs Abbott: They never do. Prior to our season starting every year, we have to get onto the Sky people directly and tell them, because it is never passed on from RWWA—never.

The CHAIRMAN: What is your opinion of RWWA's role under the act, which really is to foster, among other things, the industry; do you think you are being let down a little bit in that regard?

Mr Gardiner: I think we are being let down. We are being neglected. We know that our role in the industry is a small one; nonetheless, it is an important one. We are providing racing opportunities for horses that have not been good performers in the past, and maybe younger horses. If we immediately decide we are going to knock all those horses on the head, the industry will contract very quickly. And that is what everyone is trying to avoid.

The CHAIRMAN: Consultation between clubs such as yourself and the industry has been raised with this committee on a number of occasions. Do you think there is a component missing there that would give you better access to RWWA to reinforce these concerns and make sure that some of these little glitches are overcome? Do you think the system can be changed a bit?

Mr Gardiner: Yes; more open and free communication would be very helpful. Maybe I sound like a bit of a broken record, but certain people at RWWA, I am sure quite purposely, do not respond to my inquiries.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: You mentioned that the club did not race for a couple of years following an embezzlement. Both clubs can answer this. Should RWWA have the authority to have open access to your books at all times? That would take away some of your autonomy, but it might prevent what happened to you guys and almost threatened the future of your club?

Mr Gardiner: I think RWWA does have quite good access to our books. Part of our registration process each year is submitting an annual report containing the financial statements for the previous season. I do not know if the more major clubs have the same experience as us, but the request for the information always comes with a letter that says, “If you don’t send it, we’ll deregister you.”

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: I am talking about RWWA having access to your bank accounts.

Mrs Abbott: They do now.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: On a day-to-day basis and, if there is a problem, the capacity to come and sort out the problem.

Mr Abbott: They have audits so everyone is audited.

Mr Gardiner: In an environment where RWWA does not even want to disclose what other clubs’ turnovers are to clubs because they say there are privacy concerns, I think —

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Does RWWA say it is not divulging that information.

Mr Gardiner: Because it is protecting the privacy of the clubs.

The CHAIRMAN: Was that information available before the RWWA —

Mr Gardiner: It was previously available freely. In fact, it was sent out to all clubs by letter or fax at the end of each month.

The CHAIRMAN: Under the previous control?

Mr Gardiner: Yes.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Do you know of a good reason why RWWA would want to maintain the status quo?

Mr Gardiner: Why would we want to know that information?

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Why would RWWA want to maintain that position; what is it protecting?

Mr Abbott: Its agenda?

Mr Gardiner: We do not know. To be honest, from where we are; we have only a small slither of the available information.

The CHAIRMAN: I guess what Mr Bowler is leading to is that it is all about accountability. Who do you think RWWA should be accountable to, or should it be accountable?

Mr Gardiner: I think it should be accountable because I strongly believe that if it loses any more accountability, we will become a society that just bets on stuff we see on a TV screen. I think its preoccupation with the wagering product is overtaking its responsibility to administer the industries.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Do you think RWWA wants to see people sitting at home on computers betting, watching it on their TV and not going to race courses—a bit like banks do not want you to come inside any more?

Mr Gardiner: I believe RWWA has a vision that that would be a whole lot easier.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Bridgetown, in the third paragraph of your submission are you saying that WACHRA has vanished, basically?

Mr Gardiner: No, we have not vanished.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: It is not getting funded and is not being acknowledged.

Mr Gardiner: WACHRA is an excellent medium through which RWWA can deliver bad news, but there is not a lot of consultation before decisions are made.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Should that old system be revived?

Mr Gardiner: I would personally be very much in favour of that.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: What should it look like? There is your level of clubs, Busselton, Collie and Bunbury.

Mr Gardiner: Previously, the clubs were organised into three district councils—the three district councils that currently run the council derby for three-year-olds. Each area had delegates which went to WACTA, held meetings and WACTA had some political sway within the industry. Because of RWWA's very clearly announced intention that it will deal with clubs on an individual basis, when WACTA became WACHRA, the panelisation of clubs was changed. I do not think anyone was 100 per cent happy with it, but clubs were arranged into prime clubs, secondary clubs and community clubs and all the prime clubs had a representative. The secondary clubs, of which I think there were four, had two or three representatives and the community clubs had two representatives between them. The community clubs essentially lost their clout completely within WACHRA and, to be honest, WACHRA has lost its clout. It refers to itself as a toothless tiger with some pride.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: Is it fair to say then that you do not feel as though you get individual representation currently?

Mr Gardiner: Our representation at WACHRA has been —

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: No, to RWWA?

Mr Gardiner: Clubs can ring RWWA and deal with it on a one-to-one basis. That is fine but when RWWA wants to deal with us on a one-to-one basis to tell us we have lost all your race dates and we are going out of existence, it is a bit of a one-sided argument.

The CHAIRMAN: There is no recourse for you?

Mr Gardiner: There is no recourse.

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: But is that because there is no representation?

The CHAIRMAN: I just want to ask this question: are you saying that RWWA would be better to go back to the country council system and if you were in a certain country council, at least you would have some representation to a board there which would be dealing with RWWA on your behalf?

Mr Gardiner: Yes. That is how things were set out to start with. Let other people have their say but I think that was working for the country clubs with a greater degree of efficiency than currently.

The CHAIRMAN: Getting back to the specific point you made in here about things that were not done on your behalf, and Busselton saying you would like some money invested in your course or some support with infrastructure, under the old in which the Western Australian Trotting Association ran the show, did you have the same problems?

Mrs Abbott: Not as much.

The CHAIRMAN: You do not think you did?

Mrs Abbott: No, not as much. We got something before. Unless it is something RWWA tells us we have to do, we do not get anything. For example, we had to put up a new external perimeter fence with the mesh. We were told we had to do it but RWWA paid \$15 000 and it cost \$25 000. That is \$10 000 from us, but we had to do it or we do not race. That is how it works. RWWA does not listen. With the demise of what was WACTA, which is now WACHRA, RWWA has stopped listening. WACTA is there under the act but RWWA did not listen to it from the time it came in. I believe it is RWWA's fault that some of these problems have occurred. RWWA listens to people such as the harness racing owners group which might have half a dozen or so members. WACHRA, as it is now, stood for all country racing, not just a small body. The bodies in Perth are getting listened to. I am not talking about BOTRA. Smaller bodies are being listened to more than people who belong to harness racing clubs I believe. We know what is needed. Not everything is about the big owner-trainer in Perth who wants an immediate return on his investment from the sale.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: I have had it put to me privately—not in these hearings—that we should reintroduce that old system but make it so that the minutes and representations that come from those racing bodies have to go to RWWA and be responded to. Is that something you would be happy with? Would that be a better process? I do not want to put words in your mouth but we as a committee are wondering what we should do here, if we do anything at all. The message we get is very common but we are not getting too many answers.

[12.30 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Trenorden is asking: what sort of system do you think would make it better for all clubs at all levels in the country to have better representation with RWWA?

Mr Gardiner: Under the previous system, with WACTA and WATA, we had the three councils. The three councils had relatively even political clout and were running relatively similar numbers of meetings in each council. The north eastern council and, to a lesser extent, the great southern council have suffered greatly because of the reduction in the number of meetings they have, and the south west has prospered. Maybe the council boundaries need to be realigned to recreate three relatively equal councils and that system should be brought back in. I have worked under both systems for a similar amount of time and I believe that the previous system was functioning better. The Racecourse Development Trust was, in a lot of regards, a more equitable way to distribute infrastructure funding. Infrastructure funding, with the greatest respect to the people at Northam, Pinjarra and Bunbury, is a centralist approach. We are planning for a future where we have four harness racing clubs.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: What are those four?

Mr Gardiner: They are Gloucester Park, Pinjarra, Bunbury and Northam. They are the clubs that are receiving the focus of the infrastructure funding. I know that they will tell you that they need more funding and that Gloucester Park will say that it needs more meetings. It has said its objective is to have 200 meetings per year. If you believe that, you might as well wipe us off the map now, because that is where we are headed.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: They will have a meeting for every person!

Mr Abbott: As Bruce said, the cost of running a country meeting in Bunbury is nowhere near the same cost as running a meeting—with a bit more stake—in Perth. It costs a lot more. Why run the country meetings? I do not think anyone disputes the main club meetings on Fridays, but to keep getting more and more of a country penalty meeting when they are costing roughly \$6 000 more to run does not make sense.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think that the centralisation of meetings and of trotting, which probably began 10 or 12 years ago, has something to do with the demise of the breeding industry around the state? People used to breed horses on their farms and a lot of farmers raced and trained horses. Do you think there has been a slow erosion of that country ownership of horses, or do you think it is still pretty strong?

Mr Gardiner: There has been some erosion. It is a bit of a drain to a trainer like Graeme to have to drive 200 kilometres to race a horse.

Mr Waters: Especially to a country penalty race at Gloucester Park. When the facility is here, why not put it here?

The CHAIRMAN: The system used to be—this has been raised with our committee a couple of times—that you had to qualify for and come through the classes in the country and then you would go to the old qualifying stakes at Gloucester Park. In that way, some very good horses had some very good starts and won their first races at country tracks. Could we ever go back to those days?

Mr Abbott: RWWA will not, because WATA changed it. What you are talking about used to have a minimum C4 to go into those races; it is now C2. I think that has taken a lot away from racing.

The CHAIRMAN: You still have to win two races. Can you not go into the city at Gloucester Park without having won a race in the country?

Mr Abbott: Yes, some of them.

The CHAIRMAN: Or do you have to have won two races?

Mr Gardiner: You can nominate out of your class. If there are insufficient horses within the class that nominate for the race, you may be accepted into that race.

The CHAIRMAN: Would they be horses that, under normal circumstances, would be running around country tracks?

Mr Gardiner: Under the qualifying stakes principle, which must have been out of use for nearly 15 years, those horses were forced to race in the country at country penalty meetings until they reached a C4 assessment, and then they were eligible to go to Gloucester Park for a metropolitan-class race. We now have more career penalty racing at Gloucester Park than we have metropolitan front racing.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think this has all been driven by turnover and Sky Channel?

Mr Gardiner: It is driven by the politics of the harness racing industry.

Mr Abbott: Sky Channel does not matter whether it is broadcasting an RO race. That it is irrelevant to them, but it is the policy of our controlling bodies that are making these changes, and they are not necessarily for the betterment of the industry.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you saying that the city people in the industry have more clout?

Mr Abbott: Yes, I think so.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Mr Gardiner, you forecast the demise of both clubs. Do you think that you will need legislative protection as a result of this process that we are doing today?

Mr Gardiner: I hope not. I am a passionate supporter of the industry and I have no financial interest whatsoever in the industry itself.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: It is a part of your town, is it not, and part of the social infrastructure?

Mr Gardiner: It is a part of the town and a part of my being. I have been going to the trots for the whole of my life.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: How can you make sure that your prediction does not come true?

Mr Gardiner: I truly hope that it does not get to the point where we need legislative protection. I believe that it would be lovely for RWWA to have a look at itself and say that it needs to come up with a plan that has some security for country clubs. Contrary to what I have put in this submission, I have actually seen the review document this morning, post-arriving here, and I do not see anything in it about where country clubs will be in four or five years, and I find that extremely disappointing.

Hon MAX TRENORDEN: It does say on page 12 that they are going to reduce the number of races.

Mr Gardiner: That is for the immediate coming season, and it seems that is as far as we are allowed to look in harness racing. We do not plan for more than 12 months ahead.

The CHAIRMAN: What do you think is the future of harness racing in Western Australia? Some people are saying to us that RWWA has become more thoroughbred-racing centric because of the greater turnover on the gallops, and that the harness racing industry is under a great deal of pressure. What do you believe is the future of the harness racing industry?

Mr Gardiner: I think there will be a future because there will continue to be a group of people who are more interested in harness racing than they are in gallops racing. Personally, I would not get out of bed to watch a gallops race, even if it were the Melbourne Cup and it was running in my back yard. I am not interested.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: That is a bit harsh!

The CHAIRMAN: How about the Kalgoorlie cup?

Mr Abbott: It is imperative that RWWA pushes to provide vision. All our clubs need vision. Years ago, when Sky first came in, we were told by the hierarchy, but not RWWA—it was prior to RWWA—that we could not afford to do it. We could not afford to not do it at the time. Us little country blokes all had the vision but they shut their eyes and now we are in trouble. The small country clubs that you watch on Sky Channel—our small clubs—are no better than we are here, but because they are on vision, they are churning over their turnover. If people can see it, they bet on it—end of story.

The CHAIRMAN: With the fact that Western Australia has decided once again to not go down the path of daylight saving, there should be an opportunity, when the eastern states' races have finished, for Western Australian clubs to have vision.

Mr Abbott: They would just bring in more from overseas.

The CHAIRMAN: No. The point I am making is that if the last race in Melbourne is at 10.30 pm, that is 7.30 Perth time. The Busselton trots could be on to race two.

Mr Abbott: You are right.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you taken that to RWWA and asked whether you could get on television when all the others had closed?

Mr Abbott: They would give you all the costs involved and say that it was cost prohibitive. That is all you get.

Mr Gardiner: We are constantly hearing that it is just too expensive to put us on Sky. I find that argument to be quite pathetic. If I placed a bomb under the stewards' car when they got to Bridgetown on a Saturday and I blew them up, it would have been on the news all over the world by the time I got home. It is a matter of will, and RWWA does not have the will because it is just too easy to bring in a product from somewhere else.

Mr P.B. WATSON: It says on page 11, under “Enhance Positioning of the Harness Product” —

RWWA is negotiating with SKY Channel to ensure part vision of race meetings receive full coverage effective April 2010.

Mr Abbott: Yes, that is part vision of Sky meetings, but what about the rest that do not have it?

Mr P.B. WATSON: I am just asking whether you get any vision at all on Sky.

Mr Gardiner: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you recall the vision that was available a few years ago? What was it called?

Mr Gardiner: CFM.

The CHAIRMAN: Was that available to clubs like yours?

Mr Gardiner: No.

Mr Abbott: It was only in Perth.

The CHAIRMAN: But they did country meetings, did they not?

Mr Gardiner: They did some country meetings but they were beamed back only to Perth TABs.

The CHAIRMAN: Would it be possible for RWWA to look at something like that for clubs such as your own to at least provide you with some statewide coverage, even if it did not go around Australia with Sky Channel?

Mr Gardiner: I think that with the breakdown there are fewer TABs and more PubTABs. I do not believe that that coverage went to the PubTABs; it only went to TAB agencies in the metropolitan area. You are only catering for a very small sliver of the audience. The reality is that most of the audience are at home in their lounge room.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Taking up that very point, and given both clubs' almost strident advocacy of country harness racing, which I admire you for, what can you tell us about Racing Radio in Busselton and Bridgetown? You have already mentioned Sky.

Mr Abbott: It is pathetic. Either last year or the year before I was away and was listening to the Bridgetown Cup on the radio. Bridgetown jumped on time. I know because I checked it. There was no valid reason why it went off in the middle of the race to a dog race over east and then came back and got the last bit of the Bridgetown race. That happens time and time again. We do not get preference in our state to our own business. RWWA is not giving preference to our own races. Racing Radio belongs to RWWA.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: How extensive is the coverage geographically?

Mr Gardiner: The Racing Radio signal in Bridgetown, Boyup Brook, Manjimup and Nannup—they are essentially all the towns that surround us—is very, very poor.

The CHAIRMAN: It is non-existent. I drove through there yesterday and could not hear the race.

Mr Gardiner: It is very difficult. The car radio is the most effective means of picking up a radio signal. It is far better than a fixed radio in a home. It is very difficult to hear Racing Radio in Bridgetown. That does not matter whether you live in town, a few kilometres out of town or up the hill or down the valley.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Is it an FM service?

Mr Gardiner: No. There is no FM service available; it is an AM service.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Where is the tower?

Mr Gardiner: To be honest, I do not know.

The CHAIRMAN: There probably is not one.

Mr Gardiner: Last Thursday night I listened to the Wagin Cup. We had stopped playing tennis to listen to it. We jockeyed between 1206, 1449 and 1404, and we could get only a few words here and a few words there. In the end, I just rang my mobile phone and put it through my speakers so that people could hear it. We had a local horse that was racing and we wanted to know how it went.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: I am a victim. How did he go?

Mr Gardiner: He ran second.

Mr Abbott: When you are going to a Collie event, you might be on the way to the trots and listening to a race on the way, but when you get halfway up the hill, the signal goes. It is no better in town in Collie.

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: Collie and Kambalda are two bad shadows.

The CHAIRMAN: We have run out of time. As much as we have enjoyed chatting to you and we could go on a lot longer, we have a busy schedule this afternoon. Is there a final point that you would like to make before we close the hearing?

Mr Gardiner: Only to say that I feel that we are getting further and further behind the pack. We are getting further and further behind the pack because of a lack of opportunity. However, when comparisons are made between clubs, there is no allowance for the fact that you are up here and you are getting this and you have these opportunities but if you are down here, you are getting a lot less and you have a lot less opportunities. There is an expectation from RWWA that we should perform

the same as the more fortunate clubs. Until they start taking into account the opportunities that they give us, I do not think we are going to get a fair go.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Can you articulate why it is important that these community-based clubs or the grassroots parts of harness racing need to be maintained? With you putting that on record, to my way of thinking that may act as a bit of a summary of what you have said so far.

Mr Gardiner: It is like a good lawn: if you cut off the roots, pretty soon it is all brown and dry and there is nothing left. We are at the root of the industry.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for appearing before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence.

Hearing concluded at 12.46 pm