

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE**

## **INQUIRY INTO USE OF STATE FUNDING BY THE WEST AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL COMMISSION**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2020**

### **SESSION ONE**

#### **Members**

**Dr Tony Buti (Chair)  
Mr Dean Nalder (Deputy Chair)  
Mr Vincent Catania  
Mr Simon Millman  
Mrs Lisa O'Malley**

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**Hearing commenced at 9.28 am****Mr GRANT STEPHEN DORRINGTON****Commissioner, West Australian Football Commission, examined:**

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing today to provide evidence in relation to the committee's inquiry into the use of state funding by the West Australian Football Commission. My name is Tony Buti; I am the committee Chair and member for Armadale. With me today, to my left, is Mr Dean Nalder, the committee's Deputy Chair and member for Bateman, and to his left is Mr Vince Catania, member for North West Central; to my right is Mr Simon Millman, member for Mount Lawley; and Mrs Lisa O'Malley, member for Bicton, is an apology.

It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. While your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege, this privilege does not apply to anything you might say outside of today's proceedings. I would also like to advise that today's hearing will be broadcast live over the Parliament House website. Would you please introduce yourself for the record?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** My name is Grant Dorrington.

**The CHAIR:** And do you have any questions about your attendance here today?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** No, I did not.

**The CHAIR:** We do have a series of questions, but would you like to commence with a brief opening statement?

[9.30 am]

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Thank you, Mr Chairman. I would like to—and thank you for the invitation. I am appearing before the PAC following media coverage of an email I sent to Swan Districts' CEO, Mr Jeff Dennis. I would like to offer my sincere and unreserved apologies, as I also stated in my recent letter to you and the committee members, for the effects and implications of these comments. It was never my intention to impede or interfere with the inquiry to be conducted by the Public Accounts Committee. Rather, my intention was to suggest an approach which I thought would present a unified front for WA football to the public and allow us to resolve our differences internally and in private. I was coming from a position of trying to enhance football in Western Australia.

I would like to provide some context to that statement. I have spent a lifetime in football as a player, as a coach and administrator. I consider myself to be a true WA footy man. I am a life member at East Perth, and still go to the footy every Saturday. I have three grandsons playing every weekend and I am a fixture on the sidelines of their games. One commenced his lifelong footy journey the other day in the wonderful world of Auskick, another in the under-10 years modified rules, and my third grandson is playing WAFL league football for West Perth, after having progressed through our state's high-quality WAFL talent pathway. This weekly engagement with our game at the community and WAFL levels provides me with a regular view of how our game is being played and developed at the critically important community and WAFL levels.

I have been around football long enough to have been part of the major events that have occurred since the mid-1980s. At that time, the WAFL was basically bankrupt and was at the crossroads of extinction with major debt. The then Minister for Sport stated that his government would not provide further financial support unless football established a governing body independent of the

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WAFL clubs. This was the reason for the formation of the WAFC, the first independent governing body in Australian sport—and that includes the VFL at that time.

Shortly thereafter, the WAFC, led by the astute Dr Tannock and his commission, developed a vision that our great game would become national. The ABC TV show *The Winners* was the embryo for this vision. They then purchased a VFL club licence from a contribution of private stakeholders, as the WAFL had no finances—the West Coast Eagles were born. In the mid-1990s, the WAFC decided to buy another AFL licence, the Fremantle Football Club, to ensure that by having two strong clubs they would ultimately provide a greater financial return to WA grassroots football. Our two AFL clubs are the financial engine of our outstanding WA football family.

In my football life journey, the quality of commission chairs—Peter Tannock, Barry MacKinnon, Neale Fong, Frank Cooper, Murray McHenry and, today, Wayne Martin, along with the many skilled commissioners have been the reason why our game is where it is today. In the continual search for suitably skilled commissioners, there has always been a deliberate choice of key WAFL leaders, such as Merv Cowan, Peter Tannock, the late Tom James, Ross Glendinning, Brian Beresford, Neale Fong, Ric Gloede, Ross Kelly, Ian Taylor, Larry Kickett and, today, Neil Randall—to mention a few who have a hands-on understanding of the WAFL's importance within the WA footy family. I consider myself to be in that group of WA WAFL leaders and believe that that the competition is WA's footy heritage.

We have a football model in WA that is the envy of the rest of Australia that facilitates funds generated by our AFL clubs into grassroots football. We have two very successful AFL clubs that we own, are committed to WA football and reinvest significant finances into the levels of the game.

I offer these brief reflections as I have been involved at each step along the way in various roles and have developed an intimate working knowledge of WA football. I have always endeavoured to play a role in the development and promotion of footy in Western Australia. Today, like my fellow commissioners, I am volunteering time as a WAF commissioner, just for the love of the game. Given my history and position in football, members of the football community seek my feedback and counsel, as was the case with Mr Dennis at the Swan Districts Football Club. My experiences are there to be shared so that we learn from the past.

Footy is a passionate game and from experience there is often differing opinions and competing priorities, and it is not always straightforward to get things done. I have always been of the view it is more productive to sort out any differences within the footy family and not play them out in the public domain as it can often damage the brand and hinder progress. That is the position I was coming from with Mr Dennis. I was attending the opening of the Swan Districts women's football facility—and, by the way, can I say Swan Districts leads in that area and it is an outstanding facility—and Mr Dennis asked if I could catch up with him, so I was not going there for any other reason than the opening.

Our meeting lasted approximately one hour with the conversation being predominantly in relation to Mr Dennis's community concept. I clarified with him at the time that our conversation on this matter was confidential, and he agreed. I encouraged Mr Dennis to build engagement and trust with the WAFC in order to progress his initiatives and recommended that that be done behind closed doors.

In my time in football, I have never been involved in a process such as this parliamentary Public Accounts Committee and did not fully appreciate the scope, the role and actions of this committee. I did not fully understand that my interactions with Mr Dennis could be construed in the manner that they have been. That being the case, my choice of words and approach could certainly have been better. But, again, I stress my intent was to help him advance the community development he

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had developed. I was coming from a position of what I personally believed was the best way of continuing to advance football.

I generally liked the community concept that was being discussed with Mr Dennis. Again, I apologise for my actions and any perception that I might have been trying to impede or interfere with the Public Accounts Committee inquiry. I categorically state my actions were not a formal position or directive of the WAFC, but my own personal views based on my football dealings over decades. I would like to make it clear that the written submission from the WAFC and subsequent appearance before you by our chairman, Wayne Martin, and Gavin Taylor and Simon Moore-Crouch on 19 August 2020, has provided the formal response from the WAFC in respect to the terms of reference. It is not my intention to add anything further in relation to those matters on behalf of the WAFC. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Dorrington. You were previously chair of WA Road Safety Council from 1997 to 2009, so you have had dealings with government, so I presume parliamentarians?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Parliamentarians, yes. I think I had four or five ministers at that time—changes of government politics. I had never been to this sort of meeting. I was more an up-front media personality to carry the message of road safety into the community—picked by Eric Charlton. So my intimate knowledge of how Parliament works—I have a general knowledge, but not of the extent of what came out of this inquiry.

**The CHAIR:** Can we refer to the email of 14 July 2020, of which I assume you have a copy, that you sent to Jeff Dennis at Swan Districts Football Club. Towards the latter half of that, you state —

Your clubs support of this will highly political State govt review committee ...

I think you meant to say —

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes, not good wording.

**The CHAIR:** What were you meaning by those words?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I was giving a general statement, as I said, in a private and confidential meeting. My thoughts, the words now put on paper, I can say they are most probably not the right words—as I said in my opening address. I think everything to do with football in my life has a political aspect, so it was a general statement about everything with football. People are always coming from different angles.

[9.40 am]

**The CHAIR:** Just to let you know, this is not actually a state government review, it is a parliamentary committee review.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** As I said, I apologised in my opening statement. The words were wrong.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. If we go up towards the third paragraph, you say —

I share with you a saying an old wise friend/mentor of mine said to me “he who angers you masters you”.

What were you meaning by that, and why did you say that?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** There is a story behind everything. Years ago, as a young fellow, I met a wise old man, who was a mentor just in life. One of the things he left with me was that saying. I need that when I am on the roads at times driving, or different times when people might irritate you, and it is just a saying. When I was with Mr Dennis—remember the conversation was confidential and private—there was a lot of things said both ways, and the things that were said were generally about people who were blocking a direction for a concept. My comment to Mr Dennis was, “Look, you

need to reflect a little bit on what is going on, and confrontation may not always be the best way of getting where it is." So I was sharing an experience in my life.

**The CHAIR:** And before that you talk about a lack of trust being an issue. Then, immediately after that comment, you say —

The issue of trust and what's best for the entire WA footy family we touched upon requires you (your club) to support our games presentation to the Govt select Committee by indicating to Wayne of your clubs concerns but also stating for the sake of WA footy family you will not lodge papers.

So, you were requesting from Mr Dennis that his club did not submit a submission to this inquiry?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** No, I was not requesting. Again I say, those words in my email, in hindsight, I should not have put those words down.

**The CHAIR:** What were you asking him to do there?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** We were having a global talk about solving differences, and at that time the differences were related around the community project that he had. That was the main theme and it was about his views of some of the people that he just thought were stopping him. It was aware that we had your committee coming up soon. That became part of the discussion. It was all just a general view of what do you do when there is confrontation, what do you do when there are things—do you remain united, or do you split? Now, it was not a direction, not to Dennis.

**The CHAIR:** No. It may not have been a direction per se, because you had no legal authority to direct him. But you have got a comment, "he who angers you masters you". Right? Which obviously says or could be taken as: do not upset someone that may have a say in the future of your club—number one. You then make a comment—it would be best if you did not make a submission. Now, further down, you must have thought that that could be seen as seeking to interfere or to stop him making a submission because you state —

Could you please keep this request by me confidential because we don't need any media comments about the Commission seeking to stop your club.

So, obviously, you knew that what you said to him could be perceived as a request or persuasion or suggestion that he should not submit—that their club should not make a submission to this inquiry?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Again can I stress, and the reason I went through my history in football, there is no such thing as secrets in football, and a lot of the discussions to find a way forward involved a degree of trust. Because the communication coming both ways from Mr Dennis to me and me back to Mr Dennis, again, I say—and I did—the wording, in hindsight, I would not have put it that way. That was not the intent of the meeting in any way, to advise him not to put it in. Mr Chairman, I knew that the other clubs were all putting in requests as well. They can do what they want, or as our chairman said —

**The CHAIR:** Mr Dorrington, you have stated here —

Could you please keep this request by me confidential as we don't need any media comments about the Commission seeking to stop your club.

So, obviously, you were aware that what you were saying to Mr Dennis could be seen as trying to stop him from putting in a submission to this inquiry, otherwise, why would you say that?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, I understand that, but in the context of the meeting, you had to be there, that was not—mine was more of a generalised statement at 9.15 at night, that was after that meeting, summing up our meeting. If you look at the first part, it was all about praise of the

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concept and what was going on; it was not in any way—and the wrong words might have been used, it was not in any way a direction from me to Mr Dennis or his club. In fact, Mr Dennis cannot make it—his club, which I talked about as well.

**The CHAIR:** You did have a conversation earlier in the day with Mr Dennis on 14 July. He states in a statement that he has prepared that, basically, those issues about not making a submission to this inquiry was also stated at that meeting. Was that correct?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** No. That is not in my recollection, and remember there was a lot of talk, Mr Chairman, that went on. But I did not categorically state not to put it into this commission.

**The CHAIR:** No. But did you not say it would best for them not to make a submission?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I said “the best for football”, in that terms, part of them, not to make it, because that is what I believe in.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. But, at that meeting that you had with him, did you say to him that it would be best that there was only one submission that came from the West Australian Football Commission, from Wayne Martin?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** My personal opinion, from what I have said to you about what I have learnt in this 30-odd years of being in the game, yes, I did say that.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. So you also had a meeting on 18 July at the Swans’ president’s luncheon?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** And you had a conversation with Des Hardiman. Des Hardiman states in an email, which I am sure you have seen, that Grant —

... then asked if I was aware of the pending PAC enquiry and quite strongly expressed the need for the Club to present any issues it had to the WAFC and not direct to PAC.

- Any Club submission should be sent to the Commission so that a combined WA Football case could be put.
- He mentioned that State financial agreement was a complicated commercial one and not to be considered a State Grant. It was imperative that the agreement is protected by a combined submission presented by the WAFC.

So, that is another meeting that you had with another official—he is on the board, I think—Des Hardiman. Could that not be seen that you were requesting again that the club did not put in a submission to this inquiry?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, it could be seen by the words you are reading, but in the context of what happened, I was going to Swans. As commissioners you go to various clubs every week. Prior to the Tuesday meeting with Mr Dennis, I was down to go to the Swan Districts Football Club as part of that women’s opening. Ken Wyatt, the federal minister, was there. I do that every weekend. When you get to a game—like you politicians—they put you at a table. Mr Hardiman, who is a long-serving volunteer at Swan Districts, was my host on the table; he sat on my right-hand side. We had conversations about a whole range of issues, mainly from my point of view—how is your club going? How good the women’s football was—all the things that begin with praise. Then the conversation led to, “Earlier in the week, you came along or I saw you up here, Mr Dorrington, at the opening.” And I said, “Yes, I did. I met with Jeff.” “What was the conversation?” And the conversation said, “I’m concerned about the way football, and in this case, your club, is going to put submissions in. My advice is to talk about it and I am prepared to come to your club board meeting,”—which I think is on the email. And it was in no way—no way—because I think you will read at the last point, Mr

Hardiman said, “He did not comment as a commissioner; he was just giving, again, his personal advice.”

**The CHAIR:** No, he did not say that. He said, “I did not recall any mention of it being his request or that of the commission.”

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** You were there as a commissioner, though?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I go every week. I go as a commissioner. But can I say, Mr Chairman, it is important to realise—and I say again, like the politicians that you people are—you go along there and people either lobby you or you are seeking questions. That is part of the game—no-one has a problem. So, Mr Hardiman and I had a very good conversation about a whole range of things over lunch, an excellent lunch, and then Mr Dennis sought that out and put it out.

**The CHAIR:** Just going back to your email of 14 July to Mr Dennis. I am very troubled by that statement that you make. If you look at the context of the email, “He who angers you, masters you.”

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** And then, immediately after that, you go on about the need for them not to put in a submission to this inquiry.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** And I can understand how you link those together. But if I also wanted to say what Mr Dennis was saying about some of the people in the discussion, it was quite an open meeting, he was frustrated, annoyed—statements like, “We may pull out of all this.” The anger of that was directed towards seeking a solution from the community. It happens to fit under that letter, and I understand that next to it—I can assure you that has got nothing to do with that statement.

[9.50 am]

**The CHAIR:** I will repeat again, because you do, in your own words in this email, state that what you said could be seen as the commission seeking to stop your club.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Would it not have been better to say in the email, “That is not what we were trying to do”, or “That’s not what I was trying to do”?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, in hindsight, yes, and I did say that in that thing—the words I would choose a lot more carefully, for the reasons I have said to you.

**The CHAIR:** Because, Mr Dorrington, a few of the clubs that have come before us have expressed concern about what they felt was pressure being put on them by the commission, or certain commissioners. At one stage, one club wanted their evidence to be in confidence because they were concerned. That concern they had was based on representation from members of your commission, and in this case by your good self.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** One person in one comment. I have not spoken about this to any other club and can I —

**The CHAIR:** It was not one person. There are two people—Jeff Dennis and Des Hardiman.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I said “any other club,” Mr Chairman—Swan Districts footy club, which those two guys are with. I have been aware that our chairman, Wayne Martin, an eminent and prominent Western Australian, spoke to all of them and said, “Every club, every person is entitled to do what they want to.” I think that comes somewhere; I have not got it actually here. Again, as a commissioner, there was no direction given by our chairman in any form; in fact, I know he would

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know as much about these processes. His advice was: talk to no-one on the committee and make sure that you follow the guidelines, and people are entitled to do it. I do not have a problem with that. I do not have a problem, as a commissioner, with people writing in. I did not speak to them as a commissioner when I was at Swan Districts; it was about another issue that led to this.

**The CHAIR:** It is hard for you to say—I am not saying that the commission directed you to say this, far from it, but you were there as a commissioner. You were speaking in your role as a commissioner.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I was, but if you are in a meeting, Mr Chairman, and listen to the conversation that sets the tone of the meeting I was in, it was, “I’m here to help you break through a very good initiative that they had.” But Mr Dennis had some serious issues with people at the commission—management—personality issues that were expressed, and that was the sole purpose of me being there. I never went to that meeting to tell him not to put into the PAC.

**The CHAIR:** You went there for another purpose—granted—and you said that you were talking and he had concerns about people at the commission. Why was there any need to even bring up the inquiry?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** It is very hard in an hour and a quarter, an hour meeting, we are talking and solving the problems of the world, as you do in football. But when we were jumping around the conversation, I cannot put my finger exactly on it other than I was talking about a united approach to an issue Mr Dennis had with the commission management, and the analogy of the forthcoming PAC came up as part of that, and I gave my opinion. I do not believe football needs to go in there. I still believe that today, because what I have seen in my time in football, too often, usually through the media, our washing is hung out. It does not need to be doing that. We can solve it ourselves.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** It was not part of a quid pro quo, was it, with Mr Dennis: you can help him with the issue he has got with the commission, provided he keeps schtum on the Public Accounts Committee?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** No, never. It was not my intent. I do not know what Mr Dennis’ intent was, but I did not think he had that either. Again, it was just a good discussion about a range of issues, mainly, and I stress, if you look at that email again, the first component of it was purely about how good his project was and what I could do and how I could help him. I did go away in it and say, “My part of the deal to help you is I will open the door for management to have further discussions”, and that was what it was based on.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Mr Dorrington, in your email here on 14 July where you mention that your club support of this will be a “highly political state government review”. I think you can be right in asserting that a parliamentary committee which is dominated by one side of the political landscape, also highlighted in the media by the minister for sport saying that there needs to probably be an inquiry into how things are, I take what you say in terms of it can be political, even though this is meant to be independent as a review body. I tend to understand where you are coming from in that and where you want to protect football, so it does not become politicised or be used as a political football to suit a purpose on one side of government. But you can also read in the email from 14 July and what the Chair has been speaking about, I think, goes to the real issue of the public perception that exists when it comes to football in Western Australia through the West Australian Football Commission that seems to be not that open and transparent in the way the operations work, even when it comes down to how positions are being elected; the fact that the membership of the West Coast Eagles and Fremantle Dockers are not allowed to vote on the board. You can see how the perception is that there is a lack of transparency that exists.

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The whole point, I think, of this inquiry is to be able to make the perception or make Western Australian football more transparent when you do have public funds. I accept that this is a confidential email and that discussions that occur at a luncheon or prior to, you do say those in confidence, and I take what you say is trying to do what is best for football, but you can see how the perception is adding to the reason for the inquiry—of not being open and transparent. I suppose I just wanted to make that point that you are right on the political front that these things can become very political, but also the concerns about the email adds weight to the fact that the football fraternity is a secret cohort of individuals who have given their life to football, but it lacks that transparency for others to be involved, whether it is from a high level. But from a grassroots level, we are not seeing a lot of that filter down to, in my case, a lot of regional areas not getting the benefit of those funds that are set out by the commission that are meant to go right across the game of football. It is more of a statement than a question, but I understand where you are coming from. But, please, you can understand where we are coming from, how it does seem very transparent.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, can I respond to that, please?

**The CHAIR:** Of course.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I agree with the principle. I read in the paper today that the Eagles are now the top membership, over 100 000. The one thing about the great game that I am involved in is emotion, and it is unpredictable at different times. But when you have 100 000-plus people at the Eagles, and then the Dockers doing so well, and then you have the WAFL and all the footy family, as we call it, there is always going to be politics. I see you gentlemen as I move around the club land. It is part of our game—how you manage it, how you deal with it, with passionate people from all walks of life is really difficult to do. I will give you another example. Last week, the commission went down the south west. So we go out and meet the juniors at Eaton. I went with Wayne Martin, and the commissioners went out. We go to the Harvey Bulls; we go to all the different levels. You ask them, “What can we do for you?” All of them have that same perception of the people above not doing enough for them. I have not got the solution. The commission has not. What we can do is listen and try and change it, knowing that whatever you change in a big cake called footy, someone is going to be disgruntled.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Can I ask you this question then: in regard to the Eagles having the largest membership, and I only saw that today, of, I think, 107 000 members or something in that order; I do not know what the Fremantle Dockers have, but I would imagine —

**The CHAIR:** Fifty-odd thousand.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Do you believe for those members to be able to elect who should run the club, whether it be Eagles or Dockers —

**Mr DORRINGTON:** That is a personal opinion, and as a commissioner I am not really prepared to give an answer. Suffice to say, if you look at the outcomes with the business—by the way, they are companies. Gone are the days of my East Perth Football Club with a board of members running it in another era—a very successful era for our footy. Today, that is a massive company. It funds the game that we are all talking about here. When you look at the company, what are the outcomes of that company at the present time? They are the questions I think people need to ask versus what could be the outcomes of another one. I think what you would have to say at the present time, the way the West Coast Eagles and the Dockers—they will grow into a big West Coast Eagles, for the sake of WA footy—they are pretty good models.

[10.00 am]

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**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** I do not doubt that it has been successful and it has held up football, but do you think that it is time that that model—in developing the two AFL teams over a period of time, which have been a success off the field, one being more successful on the field, being the Eagles—perhaps needs to move with the times and go down the path of where eastern states football teams have gone or perhaps take some of the learnings from other AFL clubs and try to merge those two, whether it be half the board elected by the membership. I was gobsmacked, as perhaps other committee members were, when I was made aware that the board of the two AFL clubs were not elected by the members. I find that, you know, because we are all elected by members of our political party, and that keeps a sense of openness and transparency, which is probably the real crux of our inquiry—being open and transparent. Whether it is perception or reality—there is probably a bit of both—how do you try as a commission, as a football fraternity, to become a little bit more transparent, whether it even be half the board elected by the membership and half to make sure you can maintain a good financial model going forward for the two clubs?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Catania, I noticed that Trevor Nisbett and Simon are coming in next week. It will be a really good question. You will get a very good answer back on it.

What I can say, unsolicited, is most of the sporting clubs of today are moving to look for the skills you need in this very tight business world, find the best person and fill that business. Because ultimately the Eagles return an enormous amount of money that keeps our family afloat. I mean, if we, the football industry, did not get the money from those two clubs, I would not be sitting here today. What we do need to know is: how do we pick the best people? At the present time, I think you will find that those two clubs will have their answers on their business.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Can I just ask —

**The CHAIR:** You can, Vince, but just be mindful that Mr Dorrington is here really to talk about the issue about the email. It is a bit unfair to be asking him questions that really the commission has to respond to.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Fair enough.

**The CHAIR:** I think they are great questions, but it is a bit unfair because, as he said, he is really not speaking on behalf of the commission.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** I will just make one more statement rather than a question.

It is great that the Eagles have got a great financial model, and the Dockers, and has put the footing of Western Australian football on a great pedestal. When it comes to your junior clubs or your amateur clubs, particularly in regional WA, where you have got an issue where you cannot get volunteers—you cannot get the people to actually go on the board—that is a real problem. How do we address that? You have got a great model that helps the top, but the model at a local level is not working and is suffering, which, ultimately, in due course, will have that effect because you just do not have that player transfer. Simply, clubs cannot operate; they do not have volunteers. That is more of a statement than anything.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Catania, if you would like, I will get the appropriate person in that area to talk to you. It is a little bit different in some of the comments, but rather than do it here today, I am only too happy to brief you on that issue you have raised.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Grant, we have crossed paths plenty of times over the last 40 years.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Same haircut!

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** The first time you actually took us for training under Eddie Pitter's Teal Cup side.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I do remember that.

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**Mr D.C. NALDER:** And sponsorship arrangements with the ANZ Bank and all sorts of things. I find it interesting how we keep crossing paths in different contexts.

I just wanted to take this on a different path because one of the things that has come out through this and, therefore, I would appreciate your opinion, and it is a personal opinion, I accept. We have talked about talent development, and you have been involved at various stages over decades in this. I have raised the issue around the drafting age, and it is the biggest issue that I am confronted with, with people talking to me—a belief that we are allowing our young men to be drafted at too young an age. We see close to 50 per cent never actually get a game. We see the average life of a footballer is not very long; it is about 30-something games—just over one and a half years' worth of football, even though they make take four years to play it. Do you have a view on that, in a similar vein to what we were advised by the WA footy commission and others?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** The commission position, as I think has been stated, was it is too young.

I have a grandson, as I said in my opening address, who I have followed. I have actually been on that journey. I went to it when he was selected in the old Teal Cup, the under-18s. I saw his aspirations to be in AFL so clear in front of him, and you want that, but I also realised—I realised, not him—that he was not going to get there, in my opinion, first up. As a family, you do get involved in managing. I think if you have got a family around you that understands and does not get carried away by the glory of what could happen, you can keep the young people's feet on the ground. What I fear happens is at that stage in their life, 18, there are so many things going on. If you do not carefully manage it and keep in touch with them, they can lose, as you have said, Dean, what they are doing.

Can I say one of the great things that has not come up yet in my time. Most of the WAFL clubs have a chaplain. Now, that chaplain is not about getting you in any particular religion. It is about providing for you if you do not have a dad—and a lot of people nowadays, a lot of players, do not have fathers, which we forget. He can talk to you about the issues relevant to your life, not just your football. You cannot measure those because it goes on usually behind. I mean, Neale Fong was chaplain at the Eagles. The amount of conversation they had is unheralded, but I think an enormous part. A credit to the WAFL clubs is that, I think, nearly all of them, most of them, have a chaplain. They are also much more aware today, Dean, than back in your day about that when it was a sort of, "Suck it up, son; get on with it" type attitude. Nowadays, there is more. There is the availability of counselling. The commission has got Lee Walker, the former Eagles player, as a part-time player welfare. He spends all of his part time—he is a fireman—out at families, in their houses, talking to them about the issues you are concerned about.

Is it an issue? Yes. Could we make it better? Look, if they were 20, in my opinion, they would be a lot more settled in life skills. Now, we, the footy commission, have got a policy on making it older. It is a big battle because AFL clubs are generally greedy about getting their hands on talent. And that is why.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Is there an opportunity coming up for the footy commission to make a more public stance in that position in your mind, in the sense that most clubs are now facing smaller lists? There are going to obviously be financial constraints. Is there an opportunity for there to be a position? I think it is a more challenging situation for Western Australians because a lot of these kids are getting drafted and shifting interstate at a very young age. My concern is if the AFL is the premier competition—let us say it is a two per cent lower standard than what it was otherwise—it is still the premium standard.

I think if you look in other jurisdictions around the world and what we see in the NBA and the NFL, they put the majority through the college system. We do not have that, but we have premier competitions in each state that can play that role. There is still an element that your LeBron Jameses

or your Kobe Bryants can go straight through, but your 80–90 per cent go through and can get their education and can settle down a little bit so that they are very clear.

My concern is not actually just about those who make it; it is about those who are trying to make it. I still believe that when you see some of the examples of mature age coming through, I think a lot are lost to the system who do have the potential to actually make the AFL but do not otherwise because they believe they are not good enough and drop out of the system altogether. I think it is about keeping more people in community football if we can have a mature age, which I think is good for Western Australia.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I do not think anyone is going to disagree with you, Mr Nalder. I mean, I said at the front that is the commission's position. How we get it is another challenge. It is called lobbying the other way. We have got Wayne Martin who will be talking. I think conversations at a management level about what you have raised are always on the agenda. The issue we have got is a political issue. You have got a big demand from some very powerful AFL clubs, and we need to keep working at it for the welfare of our players.

[10.10 am]

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Yes. I just wonder on that, and it might be better positioned back directly with the footy commission—I asked the department this question because we have had the department of sport and recreation in here—whether or not government should play a role, working alongside the WA footy commission, to actually lobby the AFL to consider those aspects about development of our young people for the game.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** I think that would be an outcome that—with our chairman, Mr Martin—would be well worthwhile because it is a powerful issue for every youth in Australia, not just Western Australia. Any boy that gets drafted, Queensland comes to WA—same issue. We are very committed to having that and, yes, in partnership, we need to see what we can do to sway people.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Dorrington, I want to make sure you have had a complete chance to present your side of the story, because we talked about the Mr Dennis exchange more so than the Mr Hardiman one.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** There is an email, as I said, from Des Hardiman on 29 August 2020.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** He states that —

- GD —

Obviously which is your good self —

then asked if I was aware of the pending PAC inquiry and ...

That was a very different context than the one with Mr Dennis. I am wondering why did you bring that matter up with Mr Hardiman?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, to the best of my memory—as you are getting older, you cannot remember what happened yesterday!—the conversation with Mr Hardiman was, as I said earlier, a general conversation about issues. One of the issues on that Saturday was the meeting with Mr Dennis the prior Tuesday. In that, I had no qualms in saying what was the conversation with Mr Dennis about it. I let Mr Hardiman know as a board member my feelings, and I will not go over those again; I said them earlier. I let him know and I did, I think, in there somewhere say—I think he said, “I was quite prepared to come and have this discussion with their board as well.” Just generally,

from my personal opinion having, as I said to you, 40 years' involvement. There was nothing—there was no different link, it was just a conversation of talking to a board member about a meeting that had occurred earlier in the week that he was aware of.

**The CHAIR:** It seems that it was not in any context of anything else that was being discussed and that you just raised the issue and then you go on to say —

- Any Club submission should be sent ... to the Commission so that a combined WA Football case ...

“Should be made.” I am just wondering why there was the need to even raise this issue when it did not seem to be part of the conversation in the first place.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Mr Chairman, in the conversation, as I said to you, we talked about a range of issues. In fact, one of the issues was I was privileged to be there when they put a life membership on their timer—who had been, by the way, free of charge for 26 years—and we talked about that and I asked him for that person's name so I could send a letter to him on behalf of the commission to congratulate him. In that range of issues and given what I said earlier, that last Monday I had met with Jeff Dennis, I had nothing to hide to talk about Jeff Dennis, his CEO's conversation that we had. I am sure he was aware of it anyhow, so out of a range of issues—life membership, the talent program, “How's your club going?”, the women's opening of the thing—one of them was that comment about the PAC. No particular order; not me walking in there and thinking, “Well, today I'm going to sit near Mr Hardiman and get in his ear.” That was not the case. It was just a general—and it happens every Saturday when you go along to a game and people want to talk to you, as an independent commissioner, about their views of the world. They are entitled to it and it is not my role to sit there as a commissioner and give them an opinion of the commission, unless there is a commission position.

**The CHAIR:** He just states that —

- Although at the time I felt it unusual for his request for our submission 'about the — West Australian Football Commission —

... to go to them, I did not engage in ... obvious debate.

Anyway, I will leave it at that. We did receive that letter from Mr Martin, which of course I am sure that you aware that the commission —

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I think Mr Martin is conducting an investigation into this, right?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** So, that is being led by Mr Martin?

**Mr DORRINGTON:** That is being led by Mr Martin, and obviously, as you would all know, he is eminently qualified to do that and I accept that. By the way, can I say that is the outcome of the commissioner's governance requirements. No matter who we are on the commission, to maintain the solidarity and stop the sort of issues that can come in a highly political footy world, we have a code of behaviour—type thing that works on, “What do you do?” He is chairman. I have no problems in him doing interviews with me; I have got nothing to hide. I give him the details and I accept the outcome, and I think that is a credit to Mr Martin and the commission's code of behaviour.

**The CHAIR:** Does anyone else have any concluding comment? No, all right.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** Thank you for the attendance.

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**The CHAIR:** Thank you for the evidence before the committee. We will forward a copy of this hearing to you for correction of transcription errors. Please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of receipt. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be introduced 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. Thank you again, Mr Dorrington.

**Mr DORRINGTON:** My pleasure. Thank you.

**Hearing concluded at 10.16 am**

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