



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Aspects of family services

DARWIN

Thursday, 6 November 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Members

Mr Andrews (Chair)	
Mr Barresi	Mr Randall
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Mr McClelland	Mr Kelvin Thomson
Mr Melham	Mrs Vale
Mr Mutch	

Matter referred to the committee for inquiry into and report on:

the range of community views on the factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown;

those categories of individuals most likely to benefit from programs aimed at preventing marriage and relationship breakdown;

the most effective strategies to address the needs of identified target groups; and

the role of governments in the provisions of these services.

WITNESSES

FISHER, Mr Peter John, Director, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821	892
MURDOCH, Mrs Susan Kathleen, Family Skills Worker, Anglicare/Resolve Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821	892
WURRAMARRBA, Mrs Dilyumara, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821	892
WURRAMARRBA, Mr Murabuda, Community Leader, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821	892

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Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr McClelland

Mr Kelvin Thomson

Mr Mutch

The committee met at 1.38 p.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

FISHER, Mr Peter John, Director, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821

MURDOCH, Mrs Susan Kathleen, Family Skills Worker, Anglicare/Resolve Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821

WURRAMARRBA, Mrs Dilyumara, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821

WURRAMARRBA, Mr Murabuda, Community Leader, Anglicare Top End, PO Box 36506, Winnellie, Northern Territory 0821

CHAIR—This is the public hearing of the committee's inquiry into aspects of family services. This inquiry focuses on factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown, programs which can prevent such breakdowns and the role the Commonwealth government should play in supporting the programs. We have travelled to many parts of Australia to collect evidence for this inquiry, and this is one of our last hearings. We expect to be able to present a report to the parliament in the first half of next year.

We are particularly pleased to be here in Darwin to consider any particular issues that arise in the context of indigenous communities and look forward to hearing about the project which is being conducted at Groote Eylandt. If there are particular needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people then this is one opportunity for us to hear about them and, therefore, consequently, to be able to make recommendations to the Commonwealth parliament about such issues.

I am obliged to tell you that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself, for giving of false and misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

Peter, we heard evidence from you when you appeared in Melbourne with Ms Kirkegard from the National Anglican Caring Organisations Network. Subsequently, you have made a further submission to the inquiry. Would you like to make some opening remarks in relation to those matters?

Mr Fisher—My appearance at the inquiry in Melbourne was as a member of the executive of Anglicare Australia, as it is now called. My presentation there was speaking hopefully on behalf of all the Anglican agencies nationally. I think here there is an opportunity to be more focused on the work of Anglicare in the Northern Territory and, more particularly, I would like that focus and your interest to be on the needs of Aboriginal people.

CHAIR—Our first term of reference is, in effect: what are the causes of marriage and family breakdown in Australian society? Putting that in the context of both the Territory and the indigenous population, can you comment about that? Are there peculiarities of this Territory and this population that we ought to take note of?

Mr Fisher—Without going, generally, into the causes of marriage relationship breakdown, I believe there are a wide variety of causes. I think those causes are impacted upon by certain elements that exist in the Northern Territory. I took the liberty of getting hold of the statistics supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as at 5 November 1997 on marriages, the number of marriages and the number of divorces in the states and territories. It is interesting that in the Northern Territory the figure in 1996 was 787 marriages and the number of divorces was 486. I think they are quite extreme statistics and really say what we know in the Territory—that there is a high level of breakdown in marriages and in family dysfunction and problems within the family. I think the rate of homicide is also high compared with the national average.

So the Territory itself has particular pressures on families and on marriages. One of the pressures is, I believe, the isolation away from extended families. I am talking generally about the non-Aboriginal community. I would really rely upon Murabuda and Sue and the others to tell you about what happens in Aboriginal communities, both urban and remote. But in the Northern Territory—and we find this in all aspects of Anglicare's work whether it is young people who are homeless or families that we deal with through family counselling or through mediation—there is an incredible amount of pressure on the family that I think relates to the isolation and to the separation from the extended family networks. Any other elements I think are, generally, more the elements that contribute towards family breakdown nationally.

CHAIR—I think I said this when we were discussing matters in Melbourne—and I do not have the figures before me—but my recollection is that the statistics for de facto relationships in the Northern Territory are way ahead of every other state and territory. I was reading in Saturday's *Weekend Australian* the latest census figures in relation to sole parent families. I note from those figures that the number of sole parent families has increased substantially since 1986 but, once again, the Northern Territory has a larger proportion than any other state or territory.

You said in your submission at one stage that the rate of de facto relationship breakdown appears to be significantly higher than in other parts of Australia. Taking the figures for marriages and divorces last year, is the rate of formation and breakdown of de facto relationships, in effect, compounding those figures, if we were to put them all together?

Mr Fisher—The answer to that is, obviously, yes. It must do. The other aspect of the breakdown of relationships, whether they are a de facto relationship or a marriage in the legal sense of the word, is the involvement of children. In the Territory, when there is a breakdown of a relationship, it often means that one of the parties moves interstate. There is a great deal of movement in and out of the Northern Territory. If you add young children to that scenario, then the children tend to go with one of the partners. Often they either go with a partner to another state, or they stay here and the other partner moves. Then there are all sorts of problems with regard to custody and access. That is still allowing for the focus being, as it should be, the benefit of the children.

CHAIR—Before going to the Aboriginal issues more particularly, are there therefore particular needs here in the non-Aboriginal population—perhaps not exclusively—that are not being met in terms of government programs? For example, what is the range of services on offer, in terms of marriage education, marriage counselling, family mediation and parenting programs?

Mr Fisher—On offer is a family mediation program that is an Anglicare care program, and an AMFT adolescent mediation and family therapy program—Anglicare run that program. There are the equivalent of two counsellors in that program. Mediation has a full-time person and several sessional people. I give you the numbers of staff because it gives you an indication of the size of the service. There is a family skills program in Darwin and Sue is the person employed by Anglicare Top End to provide that program. There is a half-time staff person in the marriage relationship education program. Then we have an access handover centre run by Centacare in the Northern Territory. Relationships Australia have funded counsellors. I am not sure of the number—two or three. That gives you an indication of the range of services in Darwin.

CHAIR—Are there many services outside Darwin?

Mr Fisher—Outside Darwin my knowledge gets a little grey, but in Katherine they have some funded counselling service, I think.

Mrs Murdoch—I would like to talk on that because part of my job is also to look at overall needs within that family skills area and not just for Aboriginal and non-English speaking background people. The networking and consultation that I have been doing for the last three months has looked at that. Many of the services that are provided are not adequately supported. There are one or two counsellors to deal with issues that are so grave and so numerous that people are in waiting lines; therefore, they either drop off or have a bigger crisis. The crisis lines are pretty well packed. There are no referral crisis areas for men identified in the Northern Territory, which I have identified in Victoria.

The growing number of people who are in services is not adequate to deal with the enormous proportion of problems that are out there. That is only talking about the non-Aboriginal side. With all the other cultures the thing is so overwrought that we cannot simply cope with the pressures that are there. You have so many people with burnout and stress. They do not have the time for debriefing from a lot of these problems. Therefore, we are not looking at setting up. I have just returned from a men's health conference, and I have been to a women's health conference. The issues relate around all these problems of not being supported, and counselling is one of the biggest areas. The mediation process to help families settle disputes is not being supported enough.

The general thought among a lot of the people is just the wellbeing of the family. Their emotional needs are not being addressed, so we have the breakdown in a lot of the families. Men and women are working in family violence areas, alcohol areas, but there are just not enough counsellors and people there to help them through the work.

CHAIR—What is the waiting time for marriage counselling here?

Mrs Murdoch—Sometimes it can be days and at other times it can be weeks, so these people are left in stress. Our mediation services are actually referrals from the courts over custody; that is growing and our staff at the moment are very much under pressure.

CHAIR—Does the Family Court here provide any mediation services itself?

Mr Fisher—No. It is unusual that we do not have a mediation service connected to the court. The other thing I should mention is that Sue is one of our family mediators.

Mr McCLELLAND—Why are there no mediation services provided through the courts? Is it lack of funding?

Mr Fisher—I am not sure. I think it was more a matter that Darwin was one of the last cabs off the rank. Maybe there was a decision there to provide a mediation service in Darwin and a decision made that it was best that it was in the community. I suppose that is connected to your question in that it is a matter of resources.

Mr McCLELLAND—That casts more burden on your resources, of course?

Mr Fisher—Yes, that is right.

Mrs Murdoch—Our administration staff that do the intake have to be taken into account as well. I was talking with a gentleman from Tasmania and he said their mediation services have been running for 20-odd years and have got a very big build-up and support system set in there.

Mr McCLELLAND—A support system from the government, the church or the community?

Mrs Murdoch—From all aspects, yes, but it has been running for 20 years and running well. They have a good network and a lot of people involved. I have not got all the facts and figures here with me, but just as a general comment, that is one that I found out has been running longer than most others in Australia.

Mr McCLELLAND—What do you need to relieve your burden? Do you need the Family Court to set up a mediation service or do you think that your organisation could adequately cope with that, on top of the education function, if you were given more resourcing?

Mr Fisher—With the resources, then I personally would like to see our service expanded. Darwin is a small town in a way and the senior mediator is actually a lawyer, which is a good thing—some of the staff are social scientists—because he has done a very effective job of networking out there in the community and the program is very much accepted within this community by the legal fraternity, as well as the community services agencies. The system is there to work and it does work very well. Some of the lawyers around town are sessional mediators who work with us too. I think it is a matter of expanding that network and that support.

To add to something that Sue said earlier about the pressure, the other dimension to that pressure is the fact that often—if you take for example, counselling—we are dealing with the people at the bottom of the cliff. Often, because we deal with people in a crisis situation, they are the first people who come to our attention. Because we are strapped for resources we are dealing with families who have got to a point where they have really been in dysfunction for a long time.

It would be easier for us to get those people at an earlier stage—not only earlier in counselling, but

also earlier in terms of education programs. I know the intention of the government is to support education programs and to put resources into that, and I think that is a good thing, to really stop people getting to that point and to stop families breaking up and disintegrating.

Mrs Murdoch—Ross and I have been working on building up workshops and interest within the Aboriginal and Islander community for sessional mediators, and training and making awareness programs there. The non-English speaking background people are very interested in getting into that area, but the time restraints in being able to set up these training awareness programs is fairly hard at the moment, with only Ross being there and the small staff that we deal with. I have got my other side of the work to do as well in being a part of that—setting it up and making the contacts. It is an area that wants to grow, and needs to grow, because of the amount of people that are coming through to deal with it. I would just like to add that that is in process and that we are doing it with what we can at the moment.

CHAIR—In relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, can you tell us about the project at Groote Eylandt, how it is developing and what the aims are, et cetera?

Mr Fisher—I will speak and then, perhaps, Murabuda can tell you more about that. We are funded to provide a marriage relationship education program on Groote Eylandt. The department was, I think, very practical and forward thinking in that, rather than giving us money to go in and provide a program as of day one, we used the first year's allocation of funding to go and consult, to work with the community, talk about what that program may be like, and to develop the blueprint for a program. They also asked us to document the way that we consult and work with the Aboriginal community, so there is a double-barrelled aspect to that too. I think that was very necessary because it is very important that the program be appropriate. The first thing we did was to say to Murabuda and the other people that there was an opportunity for us to have some funding for Libby Morgan, who is the worker who works with us, to come in and work with them to design this program. We asked them, 'Is that something you want to happen and something you want to participate in?' The answer was 'yes', and that is why we are here today and you are asking the question, I suppose.

We are just at the stage still of developing and talking. We are not at the stage of running the program, so there is a lot of talking happening: talking with Murabuda and with the women folk on Groote Eylandt as part of the community. Perhaps Murabuda can tell you more about how that is going.

Mr Wurramarra—I just want to trust myself with this broken marriage and things like that. We have been living many years back and we have had no problem amongst Aborigine people. I am not drinking. Since I was born I can see all the situations way back in my babyhood time until today. Broken marriage is really typical for Aborigine people. It is really typical and very dangerous. Even though the white society, wherever we live in Australia—I am talking about in the Northern Territory, so it is my territory as well as your territory—affected me. All those things I can see with my own eyes: dying; living a moral life. We never had those problems before in my younger time. That is why we just want to try what we had many years ago with this program. And this program is getting alive again into our phases in your world. So we are just trying to fight this. We do not want to settle down these things because it is too late, maybe later on. We can have a program somehow, but already we had those programs. It is the kids when they get born—broken arm, leg, low blood—that I am worrying for. In my time we had healthy child, healthy Aborigine people,

healthy white society people, but now it is getting typical. My knowledge is working that fast. This is what we want to try to have.

We want to try to fiddle around with this program so we can put all these things on the table. Then we can see and you can see what is happening. This is why we want to try to have the program. It is already being done in Nuckies Lagoon. For many remote area people scattered around their marriages have broken down, are dying and they are frightened. We want to try to let you people know this because you are our government. I am just praying to you and ask you to give us an opinion on what way we can go about this. You can believe me or not.

CHAIR—Murabuda, what has changed over your lifetime? Why are many more marriages of your people breaking down now compared with when you were a child?

Mr Wurramarrba—I do not know your custom, but under my customs, if I married a very close relative, my blood would be thinner and the baby would be mad, lunatic and those things. We want to try to start a program so our kids can learn about this. This is what we wanted to try to let you know. I have been working with these people for many years. I have been working very closely with them.

Mr McCLELLAND—That problem you speak of of marrying close to the family because there is a limited number of people on Groote Eylandt, is that more a problem for Groote Eylandt because there are not a lot of people to marry outside the family?

Mr Wurramarrba—There are some people in communities away from us. So we can start it in communities like Maningrida, Milingimbi, Nhulunbuy and Groote Eylandt. We are starting those things. Gradually, if we have this program spread wider and stronger we can spread it more.

CHAIR—What do you hope to do with the program, Murabuda? From your discussions what sorts of things do you think might be in the program?

Mr Fisher—The Aboriginal community's culture works very well and has worked very well for a long time. There is an extended family system which I am only beginning to understand. It is very clever and very special and I think we have something to learn from that. That worked well, but what came from the outside was our culture with its video, its R-rated stuff on the television, white man's law and, more particularly, alcohol. Because of all those things there has been a disease that has got into their structure and eaten away at it. So you have, as Murabuda said, people marrying the wrong people in terms of their structure that has been in existence for a long time.

Libby's discussions with Murabuda and with the community at this time are really only just giving pointers about the way they will go. The thing that I have emphasised before, and I know Murabuda would emphasise, is that we take the time. If we rush it we will kill it and lose it. If we really take the time to consult the people, to process what we are talking about and come up with a model, it will work.

One thought at the present time is that it will be a person who is acceptable in the community—it may even be a non-Aboriginal person—who will come in and provide education about a whole range of

things in terms of relationships that is acceptable to the Aboriginal people. Like our respite care program, where we have two Aboriginal women—Dilyumara is one—from two moieties who can then cope with the carers out of those two family groups and see that the right person cares for the right person, we will perhaps have Aboriginal people within the community who are in the right relationship with certain people to do certain things.

Murabuda should be saying this, I suppose, but the way it works, if I understand it, is that if there is a breakdown in the family between a husband and wife, perhaps because of violence—and we have not mentioned violence yet and that is a very important thing we need to talk about—then often what might happen is that, if it is violence towards the wife, the wife will go back to her family and someone in her family is appointed who then goes and talks with the husband's family. So there has been a lot of structures set up to deal with things. I think our society has a lot to learn from them. But it has been eaten away, complicated and handicapped or hamstrung by the influx of some things from our culture that have not been too helpful.

Mr Wurramarrba—We are trying to work with these people to let them know what we had, which has been spoken about now. Half of the whites decided that a certain person will have a program somewhere in Darwin for black and white people. That cannot be. Later on we never know. Black and white marriages are broken or relationships are broken. How are we going to fix it and market those things. We have not got any medicine to mend it. It is only a program we can have.

Mr Fisher—I think a lot of it is supporting the roles of Aboriginal people, clarifying that and supporting the structures that they normally have to deal with.

CHAIR—Peter, is it in a sense, and tell me if I am wrong, trying to understand the culture and the customary law and reinforcing that as the means by which the traditional structures can be assisted?

Mr Fisher—Yes, guided and managed by the Aboriginal people. I am sure, as we do that, we are going to come up with a conflict in how we do things and how they do things, but that is the nature of the problem that exists at the present time. So it is a very difficult line to walk.

CHAIR—How much is it partially or perhaps even equally a health issue? Factors like alcohol and violence can be looked at from a health perspective and also a relationship perspective. Is there a sense of having to integrate those two?

Mr Fisher—I think so. It is a many pronged approach and the relationship education approach is one of those. Health too is an issue. You are causing me to think further about it, but if we do have an educator there that is working with the community talking about relationship issues, if health education can piggyback on that then that is fine, but health is a real issue. It is really sad the health standards that exist within Aboriginal communities.

Mr Wurramarrba—We already have a program across culture. I have given them a lecture and it is working very well with the white society. They understand what is going on with the Aboriginal society life. That has made me really proud because I have given them a lecture. Those whites down south have never

seen the black society phases, so I have given them a lecture across culture. They like it and they want more. We are willing to teach those people by giving a lecture in the Darwin area.

CHAIR—Are there particular cultural barriers? Let me give you an example. I think there is a cultural barrier in white Australian culture to education about relationships. There is a type of mythology that exists that somehow we innately know from the day we are born how to relate to each other. Is that true of Aboriginal culture as well? Are there different cultural barriers to education?

Mr Fisher—I am not sure about the answer to that. Our worker Libby works with Murabuda and the Aboriginal people there, focusing on this program, and they are very excited about the concept. They are beginning to see what the needs are and which issues they need to be educated about.

Mr Wurramarrba—Lately we are working very slowly on that.

Mr Fisher—Do you think the Aboriginal people are happy to learn or do they have a problem with that?

Mr Wurramarrba—Of course, yes.

Mr Fisher—Because that is part of the culture, passing on the stories, culture, songs and things like that.

Mr Wurramarrba—Not from anyone. But Aboriginal people have decided that we need to have backing of our culture too. It is good for us to have.

Mr Fisher—Murabuda's role within the community is as a culture man and that means teaching the culture. Different people have different roles and responsibilities. Anglicare is working with the Aboriginal community in a community development role. This is just one aspect of our work. We work in the areas of respite care, substance abuse and aged care and we are presently doing some work with the community—a similar functional process—to develop a model for an aged care nursing facility.

The Aboriginal people have said that their totem is a swordfish. Already plans are being drawn up. If you look at the plan of the building it is in the shape of a swordfish. I understand that it can be functional as well in terms of dealing with people within the building. We also have a health approach and we see all of these things fitting in together. We are not the experts on how they will fit in. It is very much a case of the Aboriginal people advising us about how all these things fit together.

CHAIR—As I understand it, a lot of your work involves dealing with the urban Aboriginal population. Are there differences there or peculiarities that we ought to be aware of? I use that in the sense of differences.

Mrs Murdoch—They differ in programs, location and resources, et cetera. I will give you a bit of background. I have been working in remote areas with our people for over 10 years in the family violence area. I have identified a lot of the needs in the communities.

Health is the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to get that back is an enrichment of our culture. Urban Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people who are on the mainland who are regarded as half-castes are trying to live in different worlds; trying to see where they belong. They feel a loss because they do not belong to the traditional black people or to the traditional white people. They are in the middle of everything. They are still very traditional in their thoughts.

At the child abuse and neglect conference that I went to, they said that doctors had proved that by the time a child is three years old they have set attitudes. If you look at the attitudes that the children in the stolen generation may have had by the time they were three years old—and then their children and grandchildren—it means going back into their set attitudes within an urban setting. They have lost a lot and it has caused a lot of bitterness. It has caused them to have bad attitudes. People might say they are radical or they speak out too much. They feel they have a lost world that they are working with, but fully support their full traditional people's needs more so than their own.

In an urban setting, you get lost in the mainstream services, so you say, 'We have been educated here and we just have to cope; that is how it goes.' They identify as Aboriginal communities within bigger and wider mainstream communities. Although, when funding programs come up, because we have been trying to identify an Aboriginal community within a Darwin urban setting and it is not related, we cannot get funding for it because it is not regarded as a community.

The majority of people living in Darwin, in Alice Springs or in Katherine—in the major centres—are not regarded as traditionally remote in terms of getting funding for a lot of services because they are in the mainstream. Therefore, they will get left out for housing, health and everything else and they are pushed into the mainstream. They probably cry the biggest and try the most because there are more of them. Their family breakdown is terrible and it is getting worse. There are no counselling services put in place.

I have been involved for over 10 years in fighting for Aboriginal counsellors to be trained to deal with these issues, and it has really been a hard battle to get this in front. It is something that we do strongly need. When programs are set up, they have to be identified as something that people own so they can run with them and protect them and really put in all the energy that needs to be in it.

When I came on board with Anglicare I was very glad that my director let me run it as I see fit for the needs of the people. Now I regard everybody, not only my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in that class. I am finding the same issues are coming up. It is also a very big problem with the non-Aboriginal people who are low-income workers. There is no support system and there are a lot of gaps that we are not filling. I have been looking at gaps that are not being filled by the mainstream services to identify and look after these people who are hurting.

Most of the counselling services that they do attend are for middle-class people so that, again, is another issue. Those people are hurting also, but they are accessing the services in great numbers. The support systems that are put into most of our programs are very short. Victoria has programs for teaching and helping men to be dads, programs for men to talk about their health, their wellbeing, their needs and to get counselling, et cetera. They are programs that run for 20 weeks or so. Then they have support programs put in place.

They have a couple of houses that are there for men to take nine months out of their relationship and deal with their problems while they also have that support system where they go to a couple of nights of courses. They do their job, but are still connected with their family. That service also looks after the women and the children on that side. It is family wellbeing for the whole lot of us—not just for men. It has been identified as that. We do not have those services for any of us, whoever it is.

The strong need for urban people is that services that have been put up have been knocked down and not supported. We need to see that there are ways for dealing with our cultural ways as well as learning to live in the mainstream. Most of us have probably married into European families so we have that on the other side to deal with in our marriages and relationships.

Most of our young people are lost, like Murabuda was saying, and it is marrying into wrong skin. We do that even in our urban situation by marrying into wrong families and wrong skin. The skin groups are not traditionally looked at. That is a grave sin when it is dealing with culture. Then the children feel out of it because they have no support systems and they also need counselling, just like the grown-ups.

There is a lack of support for our young gay people, but that happens in all societies. There are no good support systems out there. I have talked to a lot of gay people to get their views about how they feel and what is happening with them. Those children are outcasts from their families. Their families do not really care for them very much. You get some genuine ones, but otherwise those children are lost. They are lost children. That is part of our population that we are ignoring as well. That is happening in our Aboriginal communities and is growing.

The number of incidents of child sexual abuse and incest is growing, as is family violence. Health has to be involved in all of these issues because it comes down to spending a lot of dollars in patching people up, but not putting the preventative and intervention programs to work. With the damage that has been done in somebody's life for so many years, it needs time and a flexibility of programs. We are seeing more and more people addressing that now, but it is a grave concern that when programs are set up they are too concrete and there is no flexibility for dealing with different cultures—it does not matter what culture you are, whether you are Scottish or English or whatever, there is a culture there too that needs to be identified from our upbringing. There are a lot of things that I am concerned about.

CHAIR—I think we have a picture of it. Obviously, there are a lot more. I do not know if any of my colleagues have any particular questions they would like to ask.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—If you put yourself in our shoes, we have to make recommendations to government about the factors that are contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown and what we might be able to do to address those factors. What would you say? What should we be recommending or saying about what ought to be done to address those problems?

Mr Fisher—First of all, I think we all accept the existence of the problems. We have emphasised the pressures in the Territory on people within the large communities, which is exacerbated or more difficult for Aboriginal people in remote communities. The resources need to be there, not only in terms of repairing the damage through counselling services or mediation services, but also in terms of services that help support the

community development through education—education about relationships, health and so on.

Mrs Murdoch—It needs to go into the schools as well.

Mr Fisher—Particularly in the case of the Aboriginal communities, not coming in and providing the service, but really working together with Aboriginal people—saying, ‘You are the experts’—this man, Murabuda, is the expert, I am not—‘you know your community, you know the culture, you know what the needs are. Let us work together to help to get you the resources to make a change.’ The degree of isolation and resources needed is greater than anywhere else.

Mr Wurramarrba—You can find it right over to Western Australia. But there are two moieties. They are very special. If Yirritja wants a marriage, there is a proper way for it to happen. If I am a Yirritja girl or a Dhuwa girl and I want to be married I can find my skin group. I have to get married to the right woman, not a Dhuwa. There is a certain woman I can take, so the blood will marry strong blood. That is how Aboriginal people work it out. But now a lot of kids in the Northern Territory—in Arnhem Land—have lost all those things. That is why we want to try to have a program and we ask about the things we are talking about now so we can have those things.

The white society has a law too. You can marry a long way out, but that is not enough for you. That is okay. But my situation is very difficult and dangerous. I do not want to kill the nature or the culture. So this is what we say on this area. Yirritja are very important men. Dhuwa are important men. I see that a Dhuwa married a Yirritja. I cannot call my wife because she is Dhuwa, no. There is a certain woman I can take as the right woman.

Mrs Murdoch—I am Yirritja, so it would be wrong for me and Murabuda to have a relationship. We have children crossing over, going to school and everything else. It is getting all mixed up and the families are not having that control again with the elders for the stories.

CHAIR—Do I understand that the consequence of two people from different clans, moieties, marrying—

Mrs Murdoch—Yes, moieties between Arnhem Land region.

CHAIR—Do the children subsequently lose the family structure and supports? Is that right? I am simplifying it.

Mrs Murdoch—And they leave deformed children and disabled children. That is what Murabuda was explaining before about children and the blood running thin. As he explains, there are deformities in children now. The girls are marrying younger and the boys are being fathers younger and there is a need for that control back in the community.

CHAIR—Are they marrying younger because—

Mrs Murdoch—They are having relationships younger.

CHAIR—Okay, are they having relationships and/or marrying younger because the traditional disciplines or controls of the community are breaking down? Is that accurate?

Mr Fisher—Using sway, I think they are assisted by alcohol and those sorts of things.

Mr MUTCH—Mr Wurramarrba or Mrs Wurramarrba, who organised the marriages under the traditional system? Who says who marries who?

Mr Wurramarrba—Organising the marriages is a promise system. In the beginning, the old people or the old woman would say, ‘This is your husband’ or ‘This is your wife. You’re going to be married.’ So the promise system will keep going on. But for Aboriginal people it is an event. A man can have a wife or two or three women. He can grab it because it is his system. It is not greedy, but it is the custom. Today, a beautiful Yirritja woman can walk around in the street and he will grab it and after they can have baby. Maybe the baby will have weak blood and it might be a lunatic later on when it is 16 or 17 years of age. That is how we understand Aboriginal people today—our customs and how the system is. Anyway, that is the type of thing we are worrying about because a lot of children today are dying because the marriage system is breaking down because they grab Yirritja, Yirritja and Dhuwa, Dhuwa. We need to have a very special program in the Northern Territory and Arnhem Land. We just want to try to put it in the one table so we can look at it. This is what is worrying us today.

CHAIR—Can I thank you? Obviously, we could go on for a lot longer, but time is limited. Can I thank you for your submission, and particularly for coming and discussing it with us today—and in particular to Murabuda and Dilyumara for coming from Groote Eylandt. We appreciate that, because it gives us some sense of what I think is the beginning of a project in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and gives us some sense of being able to hopefully say something positive and supportive about it in terms of our report to the government. So we appreciate that and the other things that you have discussed with us today. Thank you.

Mr Fisher—Thank you for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned at 2.30 p.m.