

Submission by Gary William Meyerhoff to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee inquiring into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities.

What is causing despair in Indigenous communities? Petrol, Cannabis or Apartheid?

By Gary Meyerhoff, 03rd April 2004

Australian governments always blame some demon for causing the devastation in remote indigenous communities. This week it is petrol sniffing, last week it was cannabis. A month ago it was alcohol.

The shifting of blame from cannabis to petrol has occurred after 5 youth suicides, and 8 attempts in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia in the space of 3 weeks. The deaths have sparked national and international interest. Even the pope has asked after the welfare of the indigenous community.

This interest has meant overtime for government spin-doctors. A blame laying frenzy has occurred across Australia over the past fortnight. The Queensland government has banned retailers from selling solvents to people suspected of using them as inhalants. South Australia has ended self-government on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in the State's remote north-west and in Western Australia, the government has urged a Kimberley Aboriginal community to work with Government agencies to curb petrol sniffing among its youth.

Nothing, however, can beat Northern Territory Country Liberal Party Legislative Assembly member Jodeen Carney's proposal to prohibit petrol sniffing. The proposal to make petrol sniffing an offence in the Northern Territory is a sick attempt to take the focus off the ongoing Apartheid in Australia. Typically, it has received bi-partisan support, with Labor's Len Kieley and John Ah-kit supporting the proposal.

White governments in 4 jurisdictions are all blaming petrol sniffing for the high rate of youth suicide in indigenous communities. However, the Nganampa Health Council, responsible for providing health services in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands has issued a statement saying continual reporting that the deaths were linked to petrol sniffing is completely false.

The Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands situation has parallels to the Tiwi islands north of Darwin. In 1999, 4 young people completed suicide after climbing up power poles and electrocuting themselves. In this case, cannabis, not petrol, was used to take the focus off the third world conditions experienced by the residents of the Tiwi isles.

In his 2000 report, coronor Dick Wallace* said that "cannabis was a cause, not a factor in the deaths."

Speaking in Sydney in the same year, Australian drug czar Brian Watters said “I was horrified to learn that the Tiwi Islanders, with a potentially idyllic lifestyle, have the highest levels of youth suicide in the world - higher than anything else in Australia.” Watters claimed that he had learnt this from community elders during a visit to the NT that year.

That year, I was employed by the Danila Dilba Aboriginal Health Service in Darwin, as an illicit drug project officer. It was in this capacity that I was called on by the then CEO Pat Anderson to meet with Watters, and Nick Gil, from DASA in Alice Springs. DASA is a drug treatment agency, and at the time, was the only agency in Australia to be running specific “Cannabis dependency” programs. Watters and Gil are both members of the Australian National Council on Drugs.

Watters asked me something along the lines of “what do you think of Nick’s proposition that Aboriginal people can’t handle Cannabis as well as white people?”

I was quite shocked to hear this, but anyway, a year later the ANCD was reshuffled, and started a back to the fifties cannabis campaign that has been adopted wholeheartedly by the Northern Territory government, who now boast the highest indigenous incarceration rates ever.

This anti-cannabis nonsense has been used to jail the 54 year old indigenous grandmother Margot Laughton, while white pot growers, caught with kilos of cannabis continue to be given suspended sentences. We are told that cannabis today is much stronger and more dangerous than the cannabis our politicians smoked while they were younger. We are told that “aboriginal people can’t handle it” and “it is devastating aboriginal communities.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. The politicians need cannabis and petrol, and sometimes alcohol to whitewash the ongoing apartheid and genocide occurring throughout Australia.

So if it isn’t cannabis, petrol or alcohol, what is causing the high rates of youth suicide and despair in remote indigenous communities?

Perhaps it is the massive unemployment in remote communities. These communities are left out of unemployment figures as they are “employed” in schemes such as CDEP, where you get \$20 more per week than the dole, and you get 2 weeks holidays per year. CDEP people do real work, gardening, labouring, reception work, health work etc, however, they don’t get paid real wages, and remain trapped in remote areas without the means to travel.

Maybe it is because there are no high schools in remote communities. If you want to

go to high school, you have to go to Darwin, Alice Springs or maybe even to Melbourne or Sydney, to a christian school to have the opportunity to do high school. This is a major culture shock for indigenous young people who have grown up at a remote community and where english is a second, third or fourth language.

And how can we get high schools in remote communities when the christians are using their boarding schools in urban centres to make a profit off the backs of indigenous young people.

Whilst I was employed by Danila Dilba, I had the pleasure of participating in a meeting between staff from Kormilda College and Danila Dilba to discuss health issues of the indigenous boarders. The school had a “business manager” who was present at the meeting.

Kormilda charges roughly \$2000 per term. This is paid by Abstudy directly to the school at the beginning of each term. However, if the young person is expelled before the end of term, the family is billed by Abstudy for the \$2000. The school can then fill that place with another student, and be paid another \$2000 by Abstudy for the next one. When you see that they expel 20 students in the first term of the year, it is obvious that the christians are just lining their pockets.

Maybe the despair is due to the racism faced by indigenous people in urban centres. The NT government has started a new program, aimed at sending the “longgrass” people, people who live in the scrub around the city, back to their communities. Well, they are only sending the indigenous long-grassers back, and then they recoup the cost of the airfare from the person’s Centrelink payment.

The magistrates are even banishing indigenous people to their communities, making it a condition of their release from prison that they remain in some remote part of the NT, as far away from white civilisation as possible. I have been found guilty of 3 offences over the past 18 months, but they haven’t banished me yet.

The Labor government has increased funding for the “night patrol” service in Darwin so that it can now operate around the clock. Night patrol started as a community initiative, managed by an indigenous community based organisation. Now, it is run by the christian mega-organisation Mission Australia. They still hire blacks, but they prefer them to have a security license.

These patrols apprehend people who they believe are under the influence, detain them like animals in a cage on the back of their van, and take them to the watch-house, or if it isn’t full, the sobering up shelter. The “night patrol” only arrest indigenous people, and their arrests are always unlawful.

The Darwin City Council has discussed the possibility of a permit system, so that

indigenous people would need a permit before they come to Darwin. The council also continues to burn people's belongings and harass and fine people for "illegal camping" every morning. It is a war on sleep.

Why are there so many refugees from remote communities in the urban centres of the NT? Is it the inadequate transport in and out of the community? The lack of roads? Massively inflated grocery prices (I paid \$10 for 6 potatoes at the Daly River store once) ? Massively inflated alcohol prices? 100% markup on cannabis (in communities people are paying \$50 for 1.4 grams of pot)? Some communities have 30 people living in one house – could that be the reason people leave?

Maybe it is to get away from the Tuberculosis, or so that you don't have to see more and more of your family members succumb to renal disease?

Maybe it is to get away from failed "dry communities". Daly river is a great example. The white owned pub is metres from the "dry zone". There is a field in between the community and the pub, so you can get as pissed as you want, and then head into the "dry" community. "Dry" communities are another joke and another part of this whole whitewash.

Maybe it is because some communities are being run by facist dictatorships, especially as they succumb to pressure from the Federal and Northern Territory governments, mining companies and Australian and US military interests.

It is about time governments, federal and state/territory were taken to task and forced to address the real issues here, rather than feed us bullshit about petrol and cannabis. Government ministers need to be held responsible for the pain and misery that they continue to perpetuate. Indigenous communities need real community control, free of interference from bureaucrats, politicians, christians, policemen and the military.

Apartheid must end in Australia if we really want to stop the genocide of the indigenous community.

**As a footnote – Dick Wallace is the same magistrate who sentenced 5 people to between 14 and 21 months jail for their role in a peaceful protest at the NT parliament. The group were protesting against the NT governments "drug house" laws, that were used to target indigenous people in Darwin.*

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