

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

REF : Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal communities

I am responding to the issues relating to petrol sniffing in Aboriginal communities and my concerns in regard to them. I have noted, with interest, the Terms of Reference in relation to the Inquest on the subject.

The comments I make under refer mainly to section 2 (b) of the matters to be referred to the Community Affairs References Committee; viz "the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities".

It is my view that this component which is listed in the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry has not been achieved for a wide variety of reasons and I have made some recommendations in the latter sections of this letter that back up this statement. I will also be keen to read the comments of other Departments and Agencies, communities and Aboriginal people themselves in regard to this as well as the other two matters that the Inquiry plans to review.

I would like to preface this letter to you by saying that I have been encouraged to do so from comments from Aboriginal people I know and am currently working with.

BACKGROUND

I have spent over thirty years in the Government sector with employment in the Department of Defence, PMG/Telecom/Telstra and for the last fourteen years the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission/Services (ATSIC/ATSIIS).

My work involved extensive travel to remote Aboriginal communities. At the time of provision of communication services to rural and remote areas in the late 1980's it was my role to visit all that were located in

South Australia and the Northern Territory. I have gained a great deal of respect and information on life of Aboriginal people in these communities and feel as though I have something to offer the Inquiry.

In the provision of services to remote Aboriginal communities, it was essential to understand the differing cultures, family groups and how people lived in their communities. I can say from personal experience that I saw petrol sniffers and the devastating effects petrol sniffing had and still has on individuals, the community in general and families.

In my varied duties, it was essential to understand the issues that confronted Aboriginal people in their everyday lives in their own and other communities. It is my feeling and firm belief that these must be fully evaluated in the course of the Inquiry because there is just not one factor involved.

I was involved with contractors (major construction works) and through cultural awareness workshops, media and training courses assisted in their education on appropriate ways in entering and behaving on Aboriginal Land, and the expectations of them in their work.

It came as no surprise that the effects of petrol sniffing was a huge problem going back over the last 20 years, and we tried to implement new measures such as diesel operated vehicles and work tools whilst conducting work activities.

It was an unfortunate side effect that a lot of the contractors had old equipment and gear that still needed to be "petrol driven" and even with all the good intent and training, youth in the communities seemed to find a way to be able to get to it. Along with all the rhetoric and reports over many years, it became, in my opinion, a "challenge" for sniffers to see "what's on board" and that started the never increasing rounds of abuse, vandalism and the problems we are still seeing to this day.

The sniffers knew what was occurring in their community and it was easy for them to interact between themselves to use sniffing petrol as their solution to everything. They became brazen in using petrol and became aggressive to the Elders who had, over a long period of time, become too frail and weak to continually stand up to the younger people. Respect of culture was lost or eroded.

Government Departments and their staff really spent little time solving the problems on the ground and funding programs grew with little or no support mechanisms to help and assist the sniffers. The loss of life, artefacts and stories is common and is something that may be

resurrected in your Inquest, but this may be difficult for people to report on if there are restrictions on their comments.

I have met many of the family groups and traditional owners as well as people from agencies living in the various communities and still have a good working relationship with many of them. Again, it comes down to commitment and guts to go to the next phase. The Elders have either passed away (and I know of some who have been killed by sniffers) or are getting older and they are very tired of trying to solve the problem because in the end, they become part of the whole process.

The living conditions, hygiene, health, boredom, poverty, education, and other issues are well documented and it is difficult for people to maintain their efforts in rehabilitation because of location, distances between centres, lack of ongoing medical health and of course resources as a whole. Committed people and healers themselves need help and it is often left to the few to maintain some sort of stability at the community level.

Glossy picture and educational material in local language, whilst not entirely effective at the community level (eg; the sniffers still seem not to get the message), are still good tools to have for the community to refer to. The main messages need to be re-enforced at early childhood and school.

Transport is much easier now than in the "old" days and people have become very mobile and this in itself creates problems. Because of the boredom, the youth seeking help can move from community to community, town to town and because of the lack of disposable income, become hooked into the seemingly never ending spiral that puts them back at risk. Traditional Law needs ongoing commitment at the local level – perhaps re-education to the kids, collectively, might be an initiative.

Dunstan report

At this point, I would like to refer back to a report made by the Premier of South Australia, Mr Don Dunstan, in July 1989 on issues relating to Aboriginal Government, of which I have a copy.

It states in one section on Health, the following:

(Quote) "Many reports have documented the appalling health status of residents of some Aboriginal communities in South Australia (high levels of diabetes, renal diseases, trachoma, skin diseases, respiratory problems, gastric diseases, hypertension, dental disease, alcoholism and binge- drinking. The causative factors are many: inadequate

power, water, sewerage, general hygiene problems, poor diet and social problems and in the Pitjantjatjara Lands, failure to adopt hygiene practices needed in their changed, (i.e. more settled and static), existence.

Unless the health status of communities is addressed, it is unrealistic to expect sick people effectively to manage their own communities. More money is not necessarily the answer. There is a need for a redirection of resources from the curative to the preventative model of health care, providing opportunities for people to resume a more traditional diet and engendering in community residents responsibility for taking care of their own health." (Unquote)

Further, in a booklet called "Patch –up or Prevention" produced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2003, there was a section that stated that in regard to Vulnerable Young People that (Quote) " Many have been victims of child abuse or neglect, and some come from families in which there are high levels of conflict and chaos and low levels of consistent support and care. The young people are often living in unsafe and unstable situations, in poverty, and with health needs that are unaddressed. Drug and alcohol misuse is common; violence is a backdrop to their lives; and most have experienced educational failure and alienation; and many are involved with the criminal justice system. It is also clear that their participation in the life of the (community) tends to increase their involvement in at-risk activities and also creates risks for others. Unless these patterns are interrupted, their future prospects are grim." (Unquote)

These comments are so very true and even after the passage of time and the amount of effort and money spent in these problems (of which petrol sniffing is a major component), the same issues exist today.

MY POSITION - CURRENT

I recently accepted a voluntary redundancy from ATSI after 14 years service, and whilst I was a little reluctant to leave, felt as though I could contribute more by being in the private arena and not being constrained by the various conditions in the Government departments.

I am working in a voluntary capacity with the Adelaide Healing Energy Centre (see later) and have continued sharing my knowledge with the Aboriginal people I know and hopefully bring some positive change to people's lives.

POINTS TO NOTE

It was in the past frustrating to see experiences and skills of people not being able to be fully maximised or utilised and even when asked for comments, comments usually were made on a file or fell on some Manager's desk only to gather dust and not be actioned again. I can honestly say that I saw, in my career, the wrong people going out and dealing with issues in Aboriginal communities that were patchwork only. Programs had a short life span and changed regularly. This was always a problem for Aboriginal people and their communities to accept and understand, because consultative processes were lengthy and hard for people to accept.

There have been so many programs introduced by Governments over the years to seemingly "assist" Aboriginal people and many of these should be re-evaluated to see if there is any worth in developing plans for the future that will work in the longer term.

How the incidence of petrol sniffing has again risen is alarming and a very big concern, and this needs to be highlighted and assessed. The elements of life in an Aboriginal community need to be carefully and culturally understood because this is the crux to the matter. The issues of lack of disposable income, debt, poor nutrition, boredom, education, health, drugs, gambling, lack of self determination, social structures and respect are all examples of what needs to be re-addressed. These are only some of the problems.

There have been many programs introduced by Governments to try and stem problems after the "horse has bolted" and satisfy National and International issues. Whilst these are very important and essential, they have been proven to become "unattended" and fall into a hole that then requires other patchwork initiatives and changes. Life at the community level simply cannot absorb all these things and meet the reporting requirements of the funding Departments and Agencies.

Aboriginal people on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands for example have advised me that they would see dust from the various Government agencies visiting (all in different cars, days, overlapping visitations), load them up with conditions and requirements unfamiliar to Anangu, and leave within a couple of days. In many cases the community was not directly involved. The next visitation would generally, because of funding conditions, be in the order of three months and in the meantime, people were left to fend for themselves.

Travellers would live on the goodwill of Aboriginal people and inevitably, there would be changes to personnel and it would mean the process would start all over again with little or no continuity of

advice. There have been many instances of contradictory advice given by personnel from the same Agency or Department.

The problems on petrol sniffing have escalated enormously and are now probably as bad as they were years ago. If petrol sniffing continues at its current rate, there will be another generation of young Aboriginal youth lost – these would normally be the Elders of the future, so it's too big to ignore.

The vast amount of funding that has been expended in Aboriginal Affairs over many years has been reported on over and over again, but we still see appalling conditions on the ground. Of course there have been some very good success stories, but these are generally confined to areas where there are real opportunities of work, training, education and healthy living conditions. If required, I can expand on some of these in more detail at a later date, from my own experiences.

A great deal of time and resources were spent in developing community plans, and although they were positive at the start, they became an instrument for funding. Again, it was the people and families that were left to make their submissions and solve their own problems and this in one sense created a loss of direction in their own culture. There was a duplication of services in many areas.

I witnessed first hand the violence and the way families had to cope with the sniffers. Although the male Elders made some inroads and harsh decisions, it was generally left to the women to solve the daily problems. However, they themselves had a history of abuse and in the end; it became hard to maintain control over any lengths of time.

There was great shame at the community level and many of the issues relating to sniffers was kept secretive at the community level. People (community) tried to keep petrol sniffing hidden from outside agencies and sought to solve it, culturally. I have some personal views on this and feel as though comments from the Aboriginal community, Health Departments and sniffers themselves would be more appropriate. Basically, there must be more data and options for recovery of sniffers provided to the Inquiry.

There have been some wonderful people I have met throughout my career that carry their heart on their sleeve, but in the end even these “healers” become frustrated through lack of ongoing support and simply give up.

There was a “buddy program” set up a few years ago in some communities – Indulkana in South Australia was one where a trial commenced. Basically, a sniffer was allocated a “buddy” whom they

respected from their own community to work and be a mentor. My last indications were that funding ceased (from FaCS) and so the sniffer was left without a soul mate to rely upon. It's very frustrating, in the extreme, to get something up and running and then see it disappear because of continuing support mechanisms not being committed.

Another example - AT SIS in its last year started up a family violence and substance abuse initiative to gain extra Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) placements in remote areas. It had the effect of increasing CDEP participant numbers only with the whole issue of assisting people in crisis (eg Sniffers) still in a hopeless position with a placement on CDEP with no real mechanisms and relevant assistance to change their lives. I would like to expand on this with you, if given an opportunity to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There has been a lot written on the subject of petrol sniffing, and they all need to be condensed into a form that would be useful at the community level. It's very frustrating that it takes inquiries such as this one to bring things to a head but unfortunately it has been a fact of life that real outcomes don't happen quickly enough.

Healing

In my time since leaving AT SIS, I have not been idle and am working in a voluntary capacity with the Adelaide Healing and Energy Centre here in Adelaide. There are plans to set up groups of trained healers at the community level and have an open door policy where Aboriginal people work with Aboriginal people in the healing processes – something that has been missed altogether.

It is my strong belief, and those of the Indigenous owner of the Centre (Lorraine Webb) to change the way people think and work at the community level and be able to provide a proper support mechanism whereby people at risk can turn to and participate in. It would be culturally significant by training Aboriginal healers and have life skills presenters within each community. There have been successful outcomes already in this field.

As a type of partnership to this letter, I shall contact the owner of the Adelaide Healing Energy Centre (AHEC) who has indicated to me that she is prepared to provide a separate input on her experiences and achievements in the field of healing to the Inquest.

I know that there have been very successful workshops conducted this year by the AHEC and some of these include work within the prisons

systems and Aboriginal women's groups. There was a grant provided from the State's Human Services Department to AHEC a couple of years ago and the AHEC provided assistance and services to 63 people (men and women) in the prisons system and there was immense frustration from individuals and staff at the Men's and Women's prisons when funding suddenly ceased. This always seems to happen with some programs.

There were many changes in indigenous programs can be detailed during my time in ATSI. This was very frustrating and although Regional Councils played their part in devolution of information at the community level, it became intolerable to properly manage at the community level when there were so many ongoing changes and reporting requirements.

I recommend that options for healing young Aboriginal youth in remote communities be explored and be given a chance to develop over a period of time. Something like this is what Aboriginal people have commended Lorraine on and they wish her healing programs could be trialled and introduced in communities where petrol sniffing is rife. It would involve funding of course, but there would be real, measurable outputs and something the community as a whole could be proud of.

A few years ago, I know she was very disappointed with the Department of Family Services in their Stronger Families and Communities Program at the time. She presented a wonderful case to assist in the healing of Aboriginal people and move into the areas where petrol sniffing had been identified. Her submission failed because the rules of FACS at that time only allowed funding to Organisations, not business entities such as hers.

This is something that needs to change if the Reference Committee agrees. The funding streams should be opened up to select business entities (as long as other conditions such as taxation can be worked through) because Indigenous Organisations in the main do not have the capacity of skilled personnel to be able to deliver outcomes such as those the Adelaide Healing Energy Centre can provide. Consultancy contracts, although an option, are not always the answer.

I recommend also that the Adelaide Healing Energy Centre based in Adelaide be given a chance to expand what is called their "Inner Child" workshop which is having very positive results in the community here in Adelaide and now in other States. Following this work, people can move through processes of positive parenting so they do not pass on to their children and families the negative parenting practices that are so common at the moment. Controlled programs to change the

way people think on petrol sniffing must be a major change in the future.

Communications

The other thing I wish to add as a suggestion is the establishment of infrastructure (buildings, equipment etc) at the community level that can house computer and internet facilities for the youth to access. Why, with the infrastructure already provided to the majority of the larger communities, cannot the major communication corporations open up centres like this to give the youth something to do with their time? They continue to lose opportunities to establish their own businesses because nothing really exists apart from stores and community offices – and there is very limited access to these. Of course, education and life skills through training need to be planned at a very early stage.

There simply needs to be some new directions and opportunities.

Boredom at the community level has been evident and is one of the things mentioned in reports on the subject over many years. Boredom, lack of opportunities and social problems continue to surface so people turn to drugs, gambling, violence and with the incidence of petrol sniffing on top of it all, the cocktail is lethal and deadly.

It is recognised that vandalism (and sniffers get blamed for a lot of this) remains a problem in the community and some pride and ownership should be placed back on the kids with some incentives and praise.

The down side here though is that when there are outside visitors (different groups, or people who deliberately exploit people for monetary gain) there is the fear of corruption and the escalation of drugs and sniffing is the inevitable outcome. It's been the way of the past, and kids see it as the way to the future.

Music and entertainment

What about the music the kids can create and sing? Give them the opportunity to be a hero in their community instead of being snuffed out. I believe there has been great success in this at a community called Titjikala, located just south of Alice Springs. Given a chance, sniffers can change their habits and with cultural assistance, move with their family groups and individuals back into a meaningful lifestyle.

Perhaps some communities could create a country and western type night once every so often with respected Aboriginal artists perform

week where the kids can interact. In the footprint of Imparja TV based at Alice Springs, perhaps it could be possible to overlap cultural stories and share information better than what occurs at the present time.

Petrol

The introduction of Opal petrol in the Central Desert region is to be commended but the only downside is that people who are in the cycle will, like they have been able to do before, find ways of getting around the supply.

Mixing fuels would not be difficult and there are still the people who know ways of getting the leaded fuel in without any difficulty. How to stop that will be the big worry. Also there are always the deviates who will exploit the system for cash – they need to be weeded out and I guess this is something the judicial system should investigate as one of the other matters listed for your Inquest.

Again, this is why some type of alternative, untried program of healing and proper education at the very start of a child's life could be so beneficial and cut the past problems completely off the minds of the people who become linked to this horrible problem.

Sport and Recreation

This activity has always been there and needs continued re-development on both gender sides. Recognise the youth and give everyone an equal opportunity (with key sportspeople on site) and I am sure the problems of sniffing can be reduced. Let's value-add to what has been started already. Maximise investment from other "partners". There has been huge involvement from Indigenous athletes over the last few years in assisting their own people and these people need to be commended at the highest levels and the assistance they provide be expanded upon even further.

Aboriginal youth love their sport and it's another way of beating the boredom. However, some youth seem to be excluded for differing reasons and there should be some sort of incentive for them to participate on a regular basis.

Nutrition

There have been several substantive studies on this subject and nutritious food is essential to all people living in a remote community.

With lack of sustainable income, people are simply in debt with some agencies and cannot possibly hope to come out of that cycle with the regulations that are in-force at the present time. No money, no proper food.....therefore sniffing becomes the norm and an easy alternative.

Health Retreat/Hospital

I would like the Committee to look at situations overseas to see if there is common ground to assist the sniffers themselves. It is simply no good to rehabilitate and send the individual back to where the problem started.

For example, in a recent trip to the USA, I visited several areas, one of them being sections of Navajo Indian Land in Utah, Arizona and other adjoining States. It was simply inspiring in seeing what the Navajo have done to look after their heritage and in particular, their children. They have a system where the child is cared for from the time they are born to their adulthood. I met some wonderful people there and we discussed (very briefly) the commonality of the Navajo compared to the Australian Aboriginal people.

It is my firm belief that there should be some investigation on how the Navajo (as one of the many Indigenous nations in the USA) have been so successful in their goals and how they manage their affairs. They were horrified to learn of petrol sniffing, and I bet that if it were a problem, they would find instantaneous ways to fix the problem. They just do it.

This is why I wonder why the Health system in this country could not change to allow for some retreat or adjunct to the current Hospital systems in the various States to build an area where the sniffers can be sent and rehabilitated with professional help from the various agencies.

If it meant the person being taken from their community, so be it. However, this would need to be managed very carefully as there must not be seen to be any connotations of removal like with the "Lost Generations". It might act as a deterrent to the individual and their friends that the problem is so serious that it would frighten them in even taking up the sniffing of petrol as their outlet to life. I am sure the Aboriginal communities and families have a thought on this and whilst common ground might not always be possible, they need to have some input into the process.

It is so important to gain opinion from the Aboriginal community in general on this to gain agreement on real alternatives, as always should be the case.

Again, I re-iterate that I am sure the Navajo and other American Indian groups would have some valuable contribution to this – even some partnership might be possible between indigenous groups in the world.

Can this be explored further? Anything would be better than continuing programs and what could be described as “patchworks” as exist today in many of our indigenous communities.

I ask respectfully that you take these comments to be constructive to your Inquiry and hope that I may be able to contribute further, if necessary.

I am willing at any time to discuss any of the above-mentioned points important to your Inquiry and can be contacted by mail at the above address or telephone 08 8396 0493

The subject of the Inquiry will have many people seeking results and positive outcomes both Nationally and Internationally. It is hoped a major report will be produced and make changes to the current “system” and have provisions to maximise resources and have meaningful outcomes on petrol and substance abuse, impacts and healing processes essential to recovery of lives.

I truly believe the healing initiative as mentioned above is the best and quickest way to start. Aboriginal people that have received training in this field have commented on the outcomes and need for a transformation, with healers at the community level being introduced, appropriately trained, recognised and compensated for their time (i.e. funded).

The whole matter, as you know is sensitive but I hope I can be of assistance to the process of needs of indigenous people in all States and Territories.

Yours sincerely

(Peter Rawson)
28 October 2005