

FACING THE REAL PROBLEMS: SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

BILL EDWARDS

Paul Toohey's article in *The Weekend Australian* (November 24-25, 2001), *In your face: The town ruled by petrol sniffers*, featured Pukatja, an Aboriginal community in the far north west of South Australia. According to Toohey 'this shabby desert town of filthy tin houses and office buildings', with a population of 400, including 60 petrol sniffers, has the most blatant petrol-sniffing problem in Aboriginal Australia. Young people with cans of petrol held to their faces roam around the community at all hours with non-Aboriginal staff and other Aborigines living in fear of their violence and destructiveness.

Can this Pukatja be the same place as the one where I spent 14 happy, challenging and rewarding years from 1958 to 1972 as Superintendent of the then Ernabella Mission, before living for a further 5 years as Pitjantjatjara Parish minister for the Uniting Church at both Fregon and Amata communities? If so, what has led to this change from a place of productive work and relative harmony to one of such apathy, despair and violence?

While some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents have challenged the balance of Toohey's article, the central thrust of the seriousness of the problem of petrol sniffing on such Aboriginal communities is indisputable. No mention was made of the Ernabella Arts industry, the oldest continuing Aboriginal art centre in Australia, the AnTEP teacher training program of the University of South Australia which provides on-site courses for local Aboriginal people, the efforts of the Women's Council to provide a variety of services and the fact that some non-Aboriginal people still find Pukatja a desirable place to live and work.

Toohey perpetuated stereotypes about Aboriginal missions when he wrote that 'Culture suffered at the hands of missionaries who built churches and got inside heads', although he does acknowledge that their work is now seen in a kinder light in view of recent developments. Ernabella Mission was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1937, largely through the advocacy of the late Dr. Charles Duguid. Duguid was concerned at the indiscriminate entry of a variety of white adventurers, 'doggers', and prospectors into the Pitjantjatjara lands and the effects of the movement of some of the Aboriginal people to fringe towns and camps in search of the new foods and other goods. Ernabella was founded as a buffer settlement to stem this movement and provide a place where the desired goods and services could be obtained in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Ernabella did more than any other agency to enable the survival of Pitjantjatjara culture and language.

Duguid's policies of minimal interference with traditional culture and the use of vernacular language by the missionaries were instituted. Ernabella had been a sheep station for a short time before the opening of the mission and the sheep work was retained to provide employment as shepherds, shearers, well-sinkers, and fencing contractors. The women adapted a traditional method of spinning fibres to spin sheep's wool. The craft industry was developed with the use of this wool in hooked and woven rugs and the use of local designs in a variety of art products. A school was opened in 1940 with a program of Pitjantjatjara literacy. By the late 1950s Ernabella

was a largely self-sufficient settlement of 400-500 Aboriginal people and a staff of seven whites. Staff houses had well-tended and colourful gardens. Most of the women were employed on the craft work or in the school, clinic and kitchen. Many of the men worked in the sheep industry, gardens, maintenance, store, artefact making and hunting. Young men were encouraged to work as stockmen on nearby cattle stations. There was little government financial support. Wages were low but the available resources spread for the maximum benefit of the community.

As permanent residence at Ernabella placed pressure on supplies of water and firewood, an outstation was established at Fregon, 60 kms south-west of Ernabella in 1961. Responding to the interest of the young men in stock work, cattle were introduced at Fregon. A staff of four supervised the pastoral work, clinic, school, craft and garden. In the same year the South Australian government established Amata settlement on the large Aboriginal reserve to the west of Ernabella. During the 1960s the sheep and cattle industries were further developed, a local Aboriginal man operated a water drilling plant, men were employed on brickmaking and construction of a new school classroom, pre-school, and in the early 1970s on a new store, community centre and an Aboriginal housing project. Attendance at school was regular. Despite limited resources, Ernabella was a place of purpose and activity. There were no problems associated with substance abuse and little violence. When disputes arose they were usually settled in a ritualised manner. Traditional ceremonies were maintained and people encouraged to visit and keep in touch with traditional sites. Ernabella was commended by anthropologists for its liberal approach. In his memoirs, *Felicia*, Don Dunstan wrote: 'The best of the situations in the north-west were at Ernabella and Fregon. This was the outstanding Christian mission for Aborigines in Australia.' The Ernabella Choir won acclaim on visits to Alice Springs, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Fiji.

What then, has gone wrong at Ernabella over the past three decades? The developments outlined above took place in the era of assimilation. In the late 1960s it became obvious that both internal and external pressures demanded a change of policy. The church was to the fore in advocating a change to self-management of Aboriginal communities and the granting of land rights. The increased involvement of the Commonwealth government following the 1967 referendum led to greatly increased spending on Aboriginal programs. The Presbyterian Church handed over administration of Ernabella (Pukatja) and Fregon (Aparawatatja) to local incorporated communities. from 1 January 1974. The same process was followed later at Amata and Indulkana government settlements and at communities established on former cattle stations at Mimili and Kenmore Park. From the mid-1970s outstation or homeland communities were established further west as some people returned to traditional sites. The Pitjantjatjara Council was formed to negotiate for the recognition of land rights. This led to the passing of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act in 1981.

It is paradoxical that despite these policy changes which aimed to liberate and empower the Pitjantjatjara people, they have been entrapped in this cycle of destruction, violence and aimlessness as described by Toohey. What are some of the other factors which have accompanied these changes and which may help to explain the unforeseen consequences?

While the rhetoric supporting these changes assumed a change from mission or government to community control of these settlements, the communities have been dependent on increasing government finance. This has constrained local decision making. The communities have been dependent on advisers and other outside employees to provide services. While these have included many with a commitment to serve the communities and implement the decisions of the people, stories of manipulation, corruption and financial scandals abound. Inevitably, Pitjantjatjara people have been caught up in some of these events. Some of the people now say that they were not prepared for the overwhelming influx of bureaucratic demands and structures. The demands of supplying administrative, health, educational, and infrastructure services led to an escalation in the non-Pitjantjatjara population in the region. This includes Aboriginal people from other regions who have moved to Pitjantjatjara communities to live with partners, to seek renewed contact with traditional culture or to find new opportunities. As they bring knowledge and skills acquired in other areas some have taken up roles and jobs, thus limiting opportunities for long-term residents. Local community members have been increasingly marginalised.

Other factors have adversely affected the participation of local people in employment. Whereas most were formerly employed in meaningful work, there are many now who are unemployed or working minimally on community projects. Changes in methods of livestock control and in pay structures on cattle stations in the late 1960s abolished this opportunity for employment for young men. This was followed by the availability of unemployment benefits for Aborigines living in remote communities. This undermined the motivation for employment. Pukatja community was one of the first to experiment with a Community Development Employment Project (CDEP). By agreement of community members, the benefits were paid to the Community Council, which then paid them out in return for work on community projects. However the scheme has had varied results. Fathers who were stockmen once provided a model for their sons who drew cowboy hats and boots on water tanks and aspired to wear these articles of clothing. A boy may now have the model of an unemployed, drunk and violent father. The Aboriginal historian and lawyer, Noel Pearson has identified similar problems in his community of North Queensland. Pearson sees Social Welfarism, a policy that is beneficial in a society where a small percentage of the population are recipients, as having a devastating effect when a large percentage are dependent on it.

Employment opportunities have diminished despite the influx of capital works funding because work on the projects has to meet specifications or be completed by a due date. Whereas local men once made and laid bricks, mixed cement and laid foundations and sawed and hammered timber, much of the construction work on new schools, hospitals, stores and even Aboriginal housing, is now done by outside contractors. Truckloads of rocks for sewage drains have been brought 1500 kilometres from Adelaide, while local men sit idly amongst the rocks of the Musgrave Ranges. When the Education Department assumed control of the school at Ernabella in 1971, an official of the Department advised me that they would build a new school. I asked if it would be possible for the mission to submit a tender for the building work as we had men employed on other building projects. The reply was that this would be impossible as the work had to meet government specifications. My response was: 'What is the use of the school if there is no work for those who complete their schooling?' These words were prophetic. School attendance figures

issued in South Australia in 1999 indicated that Aboriginal schools had the highest levels of absenteeism in the State, with attendance levels at Anangu schools varying between 41.7% and 52.2%. (The Advertiser, 16/6/99)

What then has this to do with substance abuse on Pitjantjatjara or Anangu communities? Apart from one or two isolated instances there were no problems with alcohol until the 1970s when it was introduced by some staff on communities and when the availability of more cash, motor vehicles and liquor outlets on tourist roads adjacent to the Pitjantjatjara lands increased alcohol use by Aborigines. By the late 1970s there were frequent episodes of violence and disruption at Amata and other communities. I interpreted at a meeting at Amata when community members requested government representatives to have nearby liquor outlets closed. The people were told that the outlets were needed for tourists and that they should use their traditional methods of social control to stop the problem. When a man responded that he would do this by spearing and killing the next person to bring alcohol on to the community, the government officials warned that such action would lead to police intervention. A stalemate ensued. Although the senior Pitjantjatjara people insisted that a ban on alcohol on the lands be written into the Land Rights Acts, the supply of alcohol and associated abuses have continued.

Petrol sniffing was first observed at Ernabella approximately 1971 when two or three youths engaged in the practice spasmodically. It may have been introduced by a youth brought from Alice Springs to remove him from problems there. When questioned by a staff member as to why they sniffed petrol, the youths replied that 'It made the grass look greener' and 'It enabled them to stand up to the whitefella'. It was not a serious problem and those involved initially soon ceased the practice and became respected members of their communities. By the late 1970s, it was a greater problem at Amata, where we were then residing, and at other communities. The practice was usually confined to older boys and most of those involved came from families where specific problems could be identified. However during the last two decades with the changes in demography, increased alcohol abuse amongst adults, decreasing school attendance and the decline of meaningful employment, the incidence has increased with small children and young adults involved. Peer pressure has entrapped children of the finest Pitjantjatjara families. Despite deaths and chronic illness the communities appear unable to combat the spread of petrol sniffing.

Substance abuse problems in the region, at first associated with alcohol and petrol, were further complicated by the introduction of marijuana. This drug was first brought to the lands in the late 1970s by some of the new wave of community staff for their own recreational use. It was offered to Pitjantjatjara people on the grounds that it was a safer alternative to alcohol. Its use has spread as, rather than being used as an alternative, it has been used in association with petrol and alcohol. Some concerned parents have brought their children to Adelaide or other urban centres in an attempt to remove them from the influence of petrol sniffing, only to find them exposed to marijuana and other drugs.

Spasmodic programs have been introduced in an attempt to alleviate the problem with the appointment of youth workers on communities or the establishment of isolated outstations. So far these programs have been largely ineffective on the Pitjantjatjara lands. Children who were not at risk responded to the presence of youth workers. Focussing on the petrol sniffers has tended to exacerbate the problem with

those involved enjoying the attention. Children taken to outstations to get them away from petrol sniffing environments, returned to communities on the first available transport. In his well-publicised paper on violence in Aboriginal communities in North Queensland, The politics of suffering, the anthropologist, Peter Sutton has dared to suggest that there are factors in the pre-contact cultures which when joined to post-conquest factors, tend to give rise to such problems as community violence. (The Australian, 7/12/01)

Firstly, in the case of petrol sniffing, whereas it appears obvious that an effective solution depends on a concerted approach by the Pitjantjatjara people themselves, traditional methods of social control offer no appropriate models. These structures were part of an over-arching world view which was expressed in The Dreaming stories. While this mythological complex provided examples which dealt with issues and disputes about access to sites, distribution of food and social relationships, it had no reference to alcohol, petrol and introduced drugs. A consistent response of the people has been: 'Whitefellas have introduced these things. Let them fix the problems'. As indicated earlier, when the people have suggested using traditional means, they have been seen as inappropriate by white authorities.

Secondly, in contrast to western societies, where in general young children are disciplined and taught appropriate behaviours before allowing more freedom during adolescence, in Aboriginal societies children had great freedom. Strict discipline was imposed as they neared adulthood. Thus parents find it difficult to exercise such discipline at a time when children are first engaging in petrol sniffing and they come under social pressure if they are seen to be hard on their children.

Much of the recent writing and radio talkback about petrol sniffing has ignored these historical and cultural factors. Sutton has described the alcohol situation in North Queensland as a crisis. The same applies to petrol sniffing in Pitjantjatjara communities. Having known many of the Pitjantjatjara people of a previous generation as strong, proud and self-respecting, my concern arises from seeing many of their children and grandchildren dying or reduced to human wrecks. Although it is over twenty years since I lived in the Pitjantjatjara lands, I am constantly called on to interpret in hospitals, courts and prisons in Adelaide to deal with the long term effects of substance abuse.

Throwing large amounts of money into the situation will not necessarily address the problems. If the money is used to employ outside workers on projects it will further marginalise the local people and serve only to exacerbate the problem. The situation is critical, not only at Ernabella but, as described by Pearson, Sutton and the community worker in Arnhem Land, Richard Trudgen in his book, *Why warriors lie down and die*, in many other remote Aboriginal communities. Toohey concluded his article with a dismal picture with the likely disintegration of these communities within a few years. If this is to be avoided it will require deep and painful measures. The Pitjantjatjara people as a whole must be prepared to take drastic steps. A recent letter in The Australian (2/8/02) from a teacher at Kintore school in the Northern Territory offers some hope that such steps can be taken. Kintore has a long history of petrol sniffing. Following the death of a 26-year-old man, community leaders inflicted traditional punishments on 'sniffers'. Petrol sniffing ceased, school attendance increased and the community became more peaceful. Members of Pitjantjatjara communities must have an assurance that national Aboriginal bodies and government

agencies will provide comprehensive and coordinated support to assist them in achieving a similar goal.

Bill Edwards was Superintendent of Ernabella Mission (1958-1972) and Minister of the Pitjantjatjara Parish (1973,1976-80). From 1981 he lectured in Aboriginal Studies at the South Australian College of Advanced Education and the University of South Australia. In retirement he is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University of South Australia.

Bill Edwards,