

**The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT, 2600**

Greg Miles

INQUIRY INTO PETROL SNIFFING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

The answer that dares not say its name

Introduction

I have been working in the Aboriginal world of north, west Arnhemland and Kakadu for the past 30 years. I am fortunate enough to live in a rural town (60% of the school being indigenous) where petrol sniffing is almost unknown. In addition Aboriginal kids here are generally happy and school attendance is relatively high.

This cannot be said of many other remote communities in central and northern Australia.

Why is it so?

Clearly petrol sniffing is symptomatic of many underlying ills. Any sane and intelligent person living a dysfunctional, remote community with no meaningful role in life would probably resort to some form of self abuse to get them through the day.

The root cause of petrol sniffing (and substance abuse in other forms) is a direct reflection of the plethora of problems associated with traditional culture readjusting itself in the face of the awesome power and omnipresence of the modern, western world. Petrol sniffers are the debris left behind after a battle of wills between their parents and grandparents and the western world - when there could only be one winner. In two generations so many young people in the geographic world of the petrol sniffer have gone from being perceived as being useless – to being useless in fact. Despite the best efforts of many good people there are currently no Govt. or non-Govt. policies in place that will save the younger generation from a future of destitution, worthlessness and entrenched substance abuse. One could fill pages on examining why this is so.

The answer that dares not say its name

Yet, in my view the answer is clear if unacceptable. To find this answer one need only look to the leafy suburbs of mainstream Australia. What if there were a group of white children habitually wagging school and sniffing petrol in Penrith (Sydney) or Burnside (Adelaide). The answer is clear. The authorities would quickly scoop them up and remove them from harm. This could be done in a range of ways. But this is not done at Papunya or Mutijulu because the horrors of the “Stolen Generation” are etched too freshly in our minds. It is my strong view that the cold hard reality is that petrol sniffers in Central Australia need to be “taken away” as they would be in white Australia. This

idea will of course be totally unacceptable to the armies of the politically correct, to some Aboriginal activists and the communities, families and individuals concerned. However, as we all can see, what is happening now is horrendous. Personally I am opposed to the policies of old. But in today's world there is plenty of opportunity to take children away in a manner that is negotiably acceptable to community and family and certainly in line with international and national laws pertaining to the rights of individuals and children. Indeed it could be argued that by not taking these children away the Govt. is in breach of sections of UNICEF's international convention on the 'rights of the child'. See <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>

Opal petrol

The introduction of Opal petrol is simply a sideshow to the core problem – like putting a new band-aid on a *Melanoma*. Neither Opal petrol nor Govt. policies will do anything significant to improve the life prospects of young indigenous people petrol sniffing communities. As with other drugs, sniffable petrol will inevitably find its way to sniffers – the only significant changes will be that Police will have a more difficult job and sniffers will pay more for 'the real thing'.

Boarding schools

Estimates in the media put the number of sniffers in central Australia at about 700. This is a tiny number in the scheme of things but symptomatic of a much greater malady. 700 children is about two schools. The Federal Government should 100% fund the construction and ongoing management of at least highly resourced boarding schools strategically placed in or on the fringes of Central Australia. These schools would cost a fraction of the actions currently proposed and would have a far greater effect in many directions. Petrol sniffers for all over Central Australia should be sent to these schools essentially to remove them from harm. For many the ravages of petrol on their brains will mean they will never achieve anything meaningful in an academic sense nor will they ever be employable. However they will be more likely to survive and cost their community and the Govt. much less in terms of medical maintenance. Maybe the schools will most benefit the very young. At the first sign of sniffing young people should be scooped up and sent off to these boarding schools. Getting them early may have a good deterrent effect back home and put clear young minds into a learning environment where they might be able to seriously engage with the educational system for core mainstream and life skills schooling. Unlike in the old days there would be parental access, home visits and numerous school excursions. Students would not be psychologically or even totally physically removed from their home communities.

Let's look at what would happen if we "took children away". The probable outcome of such a plan is interesting to contemplate:

1. Petrol sniffers would be taken into a caring environment with, safety, friendship, good food, accommodation and study facilities. Compare this to their home environment.

2. Students would rarely miss a day at school as there every heart beat will be in tune with the beat of the school drum. Unlike back in their home community where their engagement with the school is lackluster at best.
3. Back at home, would be sniffers will take one of two actions: (a) they will give up sniffing out of fear or being caught and 'institutionalised' or (b) having learnt from their older siblings that things are pretty good at "boarding school" they will choose to follow in the footsteps of their older brothers and sisters and voluntarily enroll in the new schools. Either outcome is good.

Contact with home

If we were to "take children away" then this would have to be made as palatable as possible. This can be done in many ways:

1. In common with other boarding schools, students would be able to go home over holiday periods, but unlike other schools they won't have the option to choose not to go back at end of holiday.
2. Parents will be free to visit but for limited times and duration. Only short term accommodation will be available for parents.
3. Computer video hookups between the boarding schools and schools in the home communities will be available. Students will have scheduled times to talk face to face with family and friends using this medium. This direct form of communication will held to dispel any community misconception that boarding students are in jail or similar.

The current situation is a national disgrace

Having lived and worked in the Aboriginal world for so long I find it an immeasurable tragedy to see scores of beautiful, young indigenous people being sacrificed on the alter of political correctness. In my time (and a view enunciated repeatedly by other concerned old timers) I have watched the decline of dignity, life skills and independence of Aboriginal people. In my experience these are all good people who have been let down by successive Governments (even though many of its policies were well meaning) and betrayed by many of their national leaders. It would take a strong Government to do as I suggest above, but encouraging statements are being made by some Aboriginal leaders, Noel Pearson being among them. It is people such as he who must take the 'bull by the horns' and push for radical reform untainted by the cries of Aboriginal extremists and 'southern do-gooders' who have no concept of what is really going on in remote Aboriginal Australia.

For your contemplation

Greg Miles
2 November 2005