

Hello. I would like to make some comments about the issue of petrol sniffing in the community in which I work. Ngukurr is located in South East Arnhem Land, on the Roper River, about 300km from Katherine.

Firstly, I am disappointed to see that yet again more resources are being squandered on yet another inquiry. This subject has seen millions of dollars spent on research, analysis, inquiries, and studies, yet virtually none of it has resulted in any real action in the field. From where I sit, it looks like one big ploy to keep non-indigenous people in jobs. As our Council President recently commented; "we are not guinea pigs".

Earlier this year our community held a public meeting to address the petrol sniffing problem. At the time we had around 50 young people identified as sniffers. That's quite a lot in a community of 1500. The community decided to implement a three strikes rule. When caught for a third time, any petrol sniffer would have to leave the community to go into rehabilitation. It was then my task to find somewhere for these young people to be rehabilitated. So I telephoned the NT Government's Department of Health Drug & Alcohol Services. Every person I spoke to was unable to assist. I spoke to 17 people altogether. Each said things like; "sorry, I can't help you, I'm just a researcher", or "I'm just a policy analyst", or "its not my area", and so it went. Eventually I spoke to the head of the section, who was very sympathetic. I said, "whatever you do, don't send another researcher". I explained that we needed field officers. People to work with the kids in the community. People to help these kids resolve the unresolved issues in the background that underlie the petrol problem. You see, many of the chronic sniffers have big issues. Some have been sexually abused, some have been physically abused, others have no parents, and others have parents with their own substance abuse problems. What we wanted was a social worker. Just one would have been good. The end result was the Department of Health sent their Drug & Alcohol Officer from Alice Springs all the way to Ngukurr, a round trip of 2600 km, for one day. She had a look around and said, "yep, you have a petrol sniffing problem", gave us some glossy pamphlets, and left. And that was the extent of it. No field workers, no social workers, no psychologists, no anything.

I then contacted an agency in Darwin, CAAPS, that I had been told might be able to offer rehabilitation for petrol sniffers, but they were full and could only put our young people on the waiting list. That was eight months ago and to date we have heard nothing.

Since then, and after some red-tape struggles, we have introduced Opal fuel, which has had a dramatic effect. Sniffing has all but disappeared, but cannabis use has escalated enormously. I'm told by locals this is a typical pattern for this time of year anyway. Petrol sniffing will return in the wet season and despite Opal, petrol will be available as people bring it in from Mataranka and Katherine. It is sold to sniffers for about \$30 per litre. \$30 is a lot more affordable than the \$100 per gram that cannabis is sold for here.

Of late, I have come to a new realisation about substance abuse issues in this community. Whether it is petrol, grog or ganja, the root cause is the same. Hopelessness. Job opportunities are very limited. Career paths are non-existent. Housing is in such a crisis that around 20 people are sharing a three bedroom house designed for four people. There is no furniture in the houses. There is virtually no support for self-employment initiatives. People die here thirty years younger than the average Australian. It is a dreadful situation and the responsibility lies squarely with you, the Government of Australia.

You continue to perpetuate a colonialist culture which ensures indigenous Australians remain at the bottom of the barrel. Just look at all the non-indigenous people engaged in the field of indigenous support. You have the ICC, ILC, NLC, IBA, ABTA, NT Govt, Centrelink, and on and on it goes. Lots of non-indigenous people on fat salaries in fancy office buildings and brand new vehicles. They come out here in their droves. They fill out forms, write reports, express all sorts of sympathetic attitudes, then go back to their neat offices

incapable of actually making a difference. I see it every week. Millions and millions of dollars spent on bureaucracy, with very little actually reaching this community.

And you wonder why the kids sniff petrol?

There is no high school or technical school here, yet half the population is under 16. The few attempts to start an enterprise while I have been here have been met with amazingly bureaucratic hurdles that even the most educated would find alarming. One could be excused for thinking there is a conspiracy out there intent on denying Aboriginal people the opportunity for advancement.

For instance, one couple I know are keen to start a food van business in this community. They want to create jobs for their kids. They simply want to sell food, snacks and drinks from a van, after hours. So the man from IBA came to town and asked for the business plan. They gave him three that had been prepared over the past few years. Not good enough he said. Where is the market research? They said they are not doing market research. Then he said he needed a SWOT analysis and proceeded to hand them a whole lot of forms in complex English. He then arranged for them to do a course in business. They came to see me last week and said that the man from IBA wants to teach them to be whitefellas. They said, sarcastically, that he'll probably want them to do a course in tying shoe-laces and making beds. Anything but give them the real support they need to start their own business. You don't learn to drive a car by sitting in a classroom. You learn by doing it. Same goes for business. Courses for Aboriginal people who want to start a business are a great way to keep Whitefellas in jobs, but have no lasting impact on the real world of small business in remote communities. Mentoring would be far more effective.

On the issue of enterprise, it might interest you to know that a number of older stockmen from this area have been trying to get a cattle industry up and running. They need a section 19 Land Use Agreement from the NLC, without which they get no Government support. They have been waiting for SIXTEEN YEARS for approval to farm cattle on their own land! They're old now and some of them are dying. But you need to understand that this is what happens when bureaucracy takes control.

There are many many more stories, but the theme is the same.

But I digress. The point I am making is that kids are sniffing petrol because there is no opportunity in sight. What little there is being obscured by public servants intent on frustrating their aspirations. If you want to make a difference, put a high school or technical college in Ngukurr. Free up the money for enterprise. Provide funding for apprenticeships (our STEP application was recently declined), help these people create jobs. Give them an acceptable standard of housing. Stop the oppressive colonialist behaviour of the Police and other authorities. Let them know that this is their land and they can do as they wish and that they have the full support of the Australian Government. Pull down the bureaucratic empires that deprive these people of the real help they need. Put the resources in the communities, on the ground, in the field.

I regard the Aboriginal people here as some of the finest human beings I have met, and I have travelled the world widely. They are kind, gentle, caring people. They have a wonderful sense of humour, a generally placid demeanour and a happy outlook on life. Their culture is very different to mainstream Australia. They believe it is wrong not to share – regardless of the circumstances. They open their homes to all and sundry. They cherish their kids. They have simple wants and needs.

But they are very misunderstood by non-indigenous Australians, many of whom have simply not taken the time to understand.

When you stop the institutional abuse of Aboriginal Australians, fuelled by negligence and ineptitude, maybe then we can move forward. Maybe then we can help lift these people out of their third world living conditions and elevate them to the rightful status as the true custodians of this entire country. Restore their dignity. Be respectful. Listen to what they have to say. And then the petrol sniffing will stop.

The community would welcome you, should you wish to visit.

Four Corners have accepted our invitation to visit the community too. They are looking at the bigger question of why kids sniff petrol and I think they will agree with most of the above, especially once they have filmed it for themselves. Needless to say, it will be a sad indictment of you, the Australian Government. But something has to be done. No one is listening to me either!

I trust in your conscience. Please, make a difference!

Andrei

PS. I am desperately trying to get a bakery started here. It means jobs, nutrition, enterprise. We need \$50,000 to pay for the equipment, \$50,000 for a baker for a year, and \$50,000 to fix up the building. Believe it or not, I can't find one Government agency or Department to help. I can't get the ICC to do an SRA on it. IBA are not interested. ABTA say too small. The NT Government's Dept of Business and Economic Development (\$80 million/year budget) has a whole \$300,000 to support indigenous enterprise throughout the whole of the Northern Territory, so they can't help either. But do you see what I mean? Here is something real. It could provide jobs for about 12 young people. It would provide fresh bread, pies and pastries to this community and several others in the region. Bakeries work in communities – look at Dargaragu. But our bakery doesn't seem to fit the criteria, whatever that is. Frankly, I'm ready to give up. I'm tired. You win.

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