

Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

Senator BARTLETT (Queensland) (4.21 p.m.)—*The incorporated speech read as follows—*

I am pleased that this report is being tabled prior to next week's National Summit on Indigenous Violence—I note that the recommendations emphasise the importance of working in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and yet, as was highlighted by the Democrats last week and at the Parliamentary Forum held here yesterday, there are no Indigenous leaders participating in the National Summit.

I would like to sincerely thank the other committee members for their enthusiasm and for their willingness to avoid, as much as possible, regurgitating what has been said so many times before on this issue.

I thank the secretariat, led by Mr Elton Humphery for their work since last October and the Australian Democrats sincerely thank the many individuals, organisations and service providers who so willingly offered information, comment and insight to the Committee. Unfortunately, not all governments were as forthcoming, as is too often the way with this type of inquiry, which I note is the eighth parliamentary inquiry and comes after five coronial inquiries across three states.

Generally speaking, each of these inquiries, as this inquiry was told, has followed a similar trajectory of uncovering heart-breaking stories, exposing gaps in our collective understanding, chastising governments for inactivity, and celebrating a program (or two) as a local success story, before a series of recommendations is unveiled. A few months later the relevant Department or Minister announces how the government proposes to respond to the recommendations. The matter then fades from public view and very little happens to change anything for the families and communities bearing, almost alone, the burden of dealing with both the causes and effects of substance abuse. Time passes. Then there are more deaths and more media reports. The level of concern about petrol sniffing builds again until—later rather than sooner—another inquiry is announced and the pain and grief of Aboriginal people is trawled through yet again.

To date, this cycle has suited governments—both federal or state—because by the time another inquiry is announced either power has passed to the Opposition (and a newly-appointed government is able to point an accusing finger at the inactivity of its predecessor) or so much time has passed that it is difficult, if not impossible, to build on the findings of the previous inquiry in anything but the most superficial way.

And so we should not be surprised that some of the most damning evidence was not provided to the Committee. We have just learned that Nganampa (Nanumpa) Health Council has conducted an annual survey of petrol sniffing on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands since 1984. Nganampa provides health

services from nine clinics across 105,000 square kilometres in the north west corner of South Australia and their 2005 survey showed there were 178 sniffers on the APY Lands alone—that is nearly 7% of the total population. Their historical data shows that in 1984 there were between 150 and 170 sniffers. But neither they or the South Australian Government made this information available to the committee. It is exactly this kind of information which proves that governments must not be allowed to get away with more blame-shifting to Aboriginal communities—the call for help was made loud, and clear and often - but was ignored.

As Makinti Minutjukur, a community leader from Pukatja told the South Australian Premier when she wrote to him more than 2 years ago, “We have been asking all governments for 30 years to help us with these problems, to sit down with us for as long as it takes to find the way to fix these problems”.

The Democrats support the inquiry’s recommendations—we do not need more talk, more tub thumping, more reports, more chest beating or more promises—we don’t even need more consultation. What we need is a genuine and lasting commitment to negotiate—and I emphasise the term negotiate - solutions to the problems that lead to petrol sniffing—as recommended by the SA Coroner in 2002. Indigenous communities around Australia want, and deserve, to be treated as equals partners in the identification of both issues and solutions and this report sets out a number of ways that leaders—both black and white, and local, state and federal—can be part of developing both inspirational and aspirational actions. Anything less by any government than a fully funded, energetic response, done with, not to, Aboriginal people will simply repeat the cycle of previous decades and we hope that not one member of this parliament wants that to occur during their watch.

This report is titled ‘Beyond petrol sniffing—renewing hope for Indigenous communities’—and yes—we must renew hope—but we must also ensure that hope is not all we achieve for our first people. As citizens of this nation Aboriginal people want and are entitled to more than just rhetoric and the occasional glossy announcement—and this report makes an important contribution to a changed future.

I commend the report.