

## Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

### COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

**Senator CROSSIN** (Northern Territory) (4.31 p.m.)—Professor Chalmers said to us while we were in Darwin that the story of petrol sniffing in Australia—as you are aware—is characterised by a series of inquiries and reports at the national, state and local levels. It would be true to say not only that I endorse the sentiments of my colleagues who were part of this Senate inquiry but also that there is a very sincere feeling among all of us that this should not lead to just another one of those reports. You have heard it said a number of times this afternoon, but for the first time in a long time there is cross-party support in this chamber for ensuring that this report does not sit on the shelf and gather dust. There are comments in the introduction that this ought to be the start of a new beginning for governments in this country.

As we left the Mount Theo program to travel to Yuendumu and then out to Mount Theo, Peggy Brown, the wonderful women who instigated that program, pulled me aside and said to me: 'It's up to you now. You have to take our message back to the rest of the country.' What is that message? It is this: that Aboriginal people are taking responsibility for petrol sniffing in their communities.

We have some wonderful examples here in the gallery today of such people from my own electorate. Larissa Granites, Louis Watson and Lance Macdonald have made the trip down to Canberra to be here today for the tabling of the report. Why is that? Because they are deeply committed to eradicating this problem in their community and because they have taken responsibility in their community. All too often in this country we do not hear about the successful stories, such as the Mount Theos or the Papunya communities. We do not champion the fact that Aboriginal people are doing something about this. But the story is also this: they cannot do it alone. This is a problem that needs the backing of state and territory governments and cross-party support. They need committee work and research to help them achieve this outcome.

The story is also this: for too long, we have funded programs with six months or 12 months of funding, so they start and stop. In the gallery today are also Blair McFarland and Tristan Ray from CAYLUS, along with Brett Badger, who also works out at Mount Theo. These are people who are doing an outstanding job in Central Australia. They are a highly professional, highly committed team of people who spend every waking moment of their day addressing this problem. This is the kind of organisation that needs not one-year funding but five- or 10-year funding. It needs millions of dollars thrown at it so that they can sit back and put a long-term plan in place to address this problem. They need to be reassured that their funding is long term and that they can tackle this problem with a long-term strategy rather than with the stop-start funding that we have heard about right around this country.

There is some fantastic research being done in relation to petrol sniffing, but more is needed. We heard from the Menzies School of Health Research in

Darwin that they still need to know exactly what impacts petrol sniffing has on the brain. To what extent can people be rehabilitated? What impact does this substance abuse have on people's ability to be able to get back on track? The work that they are doing significantly helps that. We need to collect more data. We do not know how many people die, whether directly or subsequently, as a result of petrol sniffing in this country. We need to collect that data.

We need to also spread the stories from Cairns to Perth to Mornington Island to Mount Theo about some of the good stuff that is happening. We heard in Cairns that more people want good stories and good examples spread throughout the country.

I strongly urge governments, particularly Tony Abbott and the people in the Department of Health and Ageing and in FaCS, to read this report and to get together and create a whole-of-government long-term strategy to eradicate this problem. This should see the beginning of a commitment right across the board to addressing this substance abuse issue in our Aboriginal communities. Let us hope that this is the last of the reports and the beginning of a new age and a new hope for Indigenous people.