

Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

Senator HUMPHRIES (Australian Capital Territory) (4.15 p.m.)—I believe that I have been able to take part in a very privileged process—that is, a process of hearing stories and witnessing the living conditions of Australians whose lives are a world away from those of the people who live and work in this building. It was a quite extraordinary experience to begin to understand the kinds of problems which petrol sniffing presents to communities like those that the inquiry visited in the course of our work. It is obvious that petrol sniffing is a problem which is tearing the guts out of many Indigenous communities around this country. It is a problem which is endemic. It is a problem which undercuts the capacity of those communities to create a future for themselves by virtue of it diverting young people from opportunities in employment and education. It is a problem that deserves serious, immediate and well-funded attention from the Australian government.

In the time available to me I want to make just a couple of brief points. Firstly, it is clear that there is no single reason for petrol sniffing. The inquiry heard a great range of reasons as to why a person—a young person particularly—might decide to sniff petrol. Those include the cultural, family and social disruptions that have resulted from dispossession and colonisation; boredom and frustration; individual psychosocial factors such as family breakdown and neglect; social isolation; peer group pressure; low self-esteem and the need for identity; lack of employment options; poverty; a statement of nonconformity; and an attraction to excitement and pleasure. We also heard that in many cases hunger was a factor, since sniffing petrol dulls a person's sensation of hunger. It is obvious that with such a wide range of factors contributing to the phenomenon of petrol sniffing it is very hard to identify a single clear remedy to the problem.

Secondly, it is very clear to me that the phenomenon of petrol sniffing in our community is bound up with the plethora of problems of Indigenous Australia which must at the same time be addressed. Petrol sniffing is a symptom of a broader malaise. We cannot solve one without addressing the other. The committee heard extensive evidence about the nature of what goes on in these communities. We heard that petrol sniffers are often polydrug users or can switch from one substance to another if petrol becomes unavailable. Limiting access to petrol, therefore, does not entirely solve the problem. Petrol sniffing is a social and in some senses even a seasonal problem. For example, people on Cape York do not sniff by themselves. When sporting activities, youth programs and so on become available, they will often abandon their petrol sniffing and engage in those other activities. This demonstrates that a very complex range of solutions need to be provided to this problem.

The third point I want to make is that the committee believe that Opal needs to be more widely available within Indigenous communities around Australia. We have recommended that the roll-out of Opal fuel be extended to the full extent of the 20 million litre capacity which it is possible to produce in the country at the

moment. We recommend identifying critical roadhouses and townships near Opal communities to make them also supply Opal. We recommend promoting a petrol sniffing prevention program to roadhouses and townships and identifying and combating barriers that prevent a complete roll-out of Opal to remote communities, particularly at the Top End. All of these things need to occur.

It is equally important to state that Opal will not solve the problem. We have heard that there are some circumstances where Opal cannot be substituted for other kinds of fuel, particularly high-octane fuels for high-performance vehicles. It is impossible to isolate a community from those kinds of fuels in some cases. Young petrol sniffers are fairly mobile, so it is important to acknowledge that we have to deal with other underlying causes at the same time that we deal with the supply of sniffable petrol.

The problem we identified as well is that government funded programs so often in the past have been of short duration. They have not been evaluated. They have not been refunded and they have not had the effect, very often, of building resilience in communities. Those matters must be readdressed quite urgently in order to deal with these issues. As the chair of the committee said, we simply cannot afford to make this report another in a litany of those which have added to the sum of knowledge on this subject without action of a tangible and comprehensive kind flowing from it. I strongly urge the Senate to consider this report. I urge all senators to read this report and I urge the government to take very seriously the recommendations unanimously made in this report.