

Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

Senator MOORE (Queensland) (4.10 p.m.)—I present the report of the Community Affairs References Committee entitled *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, together with the *Hansard* record of proceedings and documents presented to the committee.

I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

I move: That the Senate take note of the report.

In moving this motion I want to restate that this committee was not looking at the evils and the horrors of petrol sniffing. All too sadly, that information is well known to the Australian community, and over more than 20 years a series of reports have itemised the damage that petrol sniffing has done to communities across our country. So, as a community and as a parliament, we were aware of the evils of petrol sniffing. The terms of reference of this committee were quite clear. We were looking at the effectiveness of existing laws and policing; the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities; and, most importantly, lessons that can be learned from the success that some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing. We were also looking specifically at the issues around the impact of non-sniffable Opal petrol.

Our committee was privileged in its deliberations to hear evidence and have submissions from people from across the country, and we are joined this afternoon by a number of those people who gave to our committee of their time, experience, energy and loyalty to their communities so we could learn. But also, by giving those emotions, by giving that strength, they had to acknowledge a sense that in the past there has been betrayal. We have known of the horrors of petrol sniffing for so long; we are also aware that the things that could have been done by a community to react to these issues were there, and we as a community were not effectively working with the people whose knowledge we should value to address these issues and to ensure that the horrors are put to rest.

During the committee process the members of the committee were supported as always by the wonderful work of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee secretariat. Again I put on record this afternoon the support we received from Mr Elton Humphery, Ms Christine McDonald, Ms Kerrie Martain, Ms Jeannette Heycox, Mr Tim Watling, Ms Leonie Peake and Ms Ingrid Zappe. Without their help and support we could not do the job the parliament has tasked us to do.

Now the message is clear for our community. We cannot rely on words alone. The people of Australia deserve and must have more. Our committee has itemised the response. There needs to be consistent, long-term, effective funding and resourcing in communities so that we can work cooperatively with all levels of government to address petrol sniffing. Petrol sniffing is but a symptom. There

must also be acknowledgment that the issues of disadvantage and the lack of hope which is entrenched in some of these communities cause people to turn away. The title of our report, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, contains a message for us all. There must be a renewal of hope and energy, and that must include people at all levels of government and the community, and look at things like education opportunities, employment opportunities and a renewal of community.

None of that is new, and that, somehow, is the worst message of all. It is not new. We know what we must do as a government, as a parliament and as people who share this pain. As a committee we accepted the challenge. When we were met at one of the communities, someone said clearly to us: 'Don't you fellas know how to read?' There have been so many committees held and so many reports written. We have a responsibility now, which belongs to all of us, to accept that we are beyond reading; we now have to act. We have a sincere responsibility and we all have a role to play.

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.

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' 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.

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (4.21 p.m.)—I am extremely pleased to be able to speak on this unanimous report, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. First off, I would like to say that the representatives of Yuendumu and Mount Theo who are listening to this have come a long way to hear this report being presented. I acknowledge the work and the effort that they have put into encouraging us in this report. Five minutes is a very short time for me to speak on the report and go through the extensive detail that we heard during the hearings in this inquiry, but I would like to touch on a few important issues.

There has been a long list of reports looking at petrol sniffing, substance abuse and the impacts of disadvantage and despair. The message has been very clear: we do not want just another report that sits on the shelf, we do not want a badly thought out, knee-jerk reaction that makes things worse and we do not want another short-term or pilot program that only addresses the symptoms and runs out of funding before it starts to have an impact. What we want is for this to be the very last report on petrol sniffing.

There is nothing particularly special about petrol sniffing. It is a cheap and nasty drug that is easy to get hold of and it is the last resort of the most desperate and disadvantaged. It is the last place to go to escape, when any escape is better, no

matter what the cost to your health, your family or your life. That is why rolling out unsniffable Opal fuel is absolutely necessary but it is not sufficient.

The report recommends the further roll-out of Opal fuel, and I very strongly support that. I also strongly support the call by CAYLUS—the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service—for its roll-out into what they call the northern central region, for those remaining Central Australian communities that are affected by petrol sniffing and want government support. This will become one of the two new focus regions for the delivery of Opal fuel and sustained youth services.

Rolling out Opal fuel is necessary to give the communities the breathing space to be able to turn around sniffers' lives. We need to get the kids off petrol and give communities a break from the trouble and grief that eventuates from it, so we can tackle the underlying causes. We also need to give kids something to do, some source of hope, so they can turn their lives around.

Make no mistake. If we do not treat the underlying causes, we will not break the cycle of abuse and this will not be the last report. This is what the NT coroner meant when he said that youth services should be considered essential services in remote communities. Just yesterday I heard the example of Papunya, where they have been rolling out Opal and have stopped petrol sniffing. Now they are saying: 'We need a youth worker. We need to give our kids something to do—and something to do beyond football. Football and other sports are great, but we need more than that. We need truly extensive services and things for kids to do—the same as in any other community.'

We need to put time, resources and effort into giving these kids meaningful and worthwhile lives. We need to deal with the underlying causes and deliver services and support. We must provide to Aboriginal communities the basic services the rest of us take for granted. Government agencies have always had this responsibility. We need to encourage them to make sure they are fulfilled. We need to look at and learn from those programs that have been successful. They all combine community engagement, strong agency support, skilled on-the-ground staff and well thought out intervention, and they work with the strengths and limitations of the community and its culture.

Many top-down programs have failed where they have been unable to communicate and engage effectively with local communities. Many bottom-up programs have failed where there have been poorly trained and poorly resourced community members who have been placed in extremely difficult situations and given positions of responsibility where the level of demand is overwhelming and they feel unable to intervene effectively. However, communities in crisis need even stronger support from us than they have been provided with in the past. We really need to make sure that we are supporting these communities. We need sensible, balanced, long-term partnerships.

In conclusion, I would like to say how pleased and proud I have been to work with this committee in developing our unanimous report. It is now up to government—federal, state and territory—to do the real work to implement these recommendations so that this is truly the last report dealing with petrol sniffing.

The Greens are committed to implementing these recommendations and supporting all positive moves that are taken to end petrol sniffing and end Indigenous disadvantage in this country.

Senator ADAMS (Western Australia) (4.26 p.m.)—I, too, am very proud to have been part of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. We have worked very well, travelled to some fantastic places, seen the communities and talked to the people first-hand. It has made such a difference to be able to go and sit down and have some time to really talk about the issues that matter.

My fellow committee members have commented on a number of issues. I will talk about some of the basic things that I think can make a difference. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge our friends in the gallery who have travelled from Yuendumu and Papunya to be with us here today and see the report presented. I think that is really good.

I also congratulate our Senate Community Affairs secretariat, led by Mr Elton Humphery. They have had to follow us around, and sometimes the suggestions we have given them of where we wanted to go have quite horrified them. They had the challenge of trying to get charter aircraft and work out which was the best way to attack places like Balgo and Halls Creek while we were up in Darwin and how to go from Alice Springs to Yuendumu and out to Mount Theo. It was a great experience and I think it is so important that we had the opportunity. On the trip to Mount Theo we had a number of the media present, and that was great because at least it gave them an opportunity to see what it was all about. They were the practical issues. We also had people from the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin travel to Balgo and Halls Creek. These people would never have been able to get there by themselves. Their research is that much richer for the opportunity that the committee gave them. We and the communities will certainly benefit from that research later on.

Finding the solution was one of our goals as we travelled around remote areas of Australia. The communities that we visited have obviously had enough of inquiries, meetings, workshops, seminars, reports and committee meetings on sniffing. I feel that real action is necessary now, and Senator Siewert has certainly made a very strong point on that, as I do—it is just so important. We have done enough; there is enough research there. Now we must get on with it. I think Minister Brough is keen to follow up on our recommendations and enhance where we have been and what we have done. We really can take a step forward for the people sitting in the gallery.

In South Australia, we met Mrs Mona Tur, who has been an interpreter for the past 30 years. She gave us a lot of insight into the communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands. I spoke about a program last evening that had run out of funding. It was such a great program, but where does it go? Mrs Tur said:

I saw program after program start and then abruptly stop because there was no more funding left, there were no more staff and the community eventually lost

interest in trying to keep programs going. They were getting stressed and sick themselves. No-one was there to help.

This is the fundamental thing: we must have that support behind these programs.

When I look at our friends from CAYLUS up there, they are the key to Yuendumu being able to reduce their petrol sniffing. It is so important that you have those people to support the people who live in the communities. Without them, there is no way that the programs will work. We have to keep people in the communities longer. A three-year program is of no use whatsoever. If a program is successful, somehow we must get that program extended and keep the professionals who are there. As a professional person, if you know a program is going to end in three years, after 18 months you are going to be looking for other work because you are not sure as to where you are going to go next. This is the trouble and it has happened time and time again, not just in Aboriginal communities but in all the other areas in which we have great programs.

This is something that I would be working very hard on to see if there is any possible way to continue good programs. Programs must be evaluated to ensure that dollars are being spent the way they should be. If it is evaluated and it is successful, for goodness sake let us not reinvent the wheel. As has been said, there is no short-term fix to petrol sniffing. From my observation, communities need as much outside support as possible to help them find a solution.

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.

Senator WEBBER (Western Australia) (4.37 p.m.)—Thank you, Mr Acting Deputy President. That is exactly what I was planning on doing, but I will do it at the end rather than right now. In commencing my remarks I, too, would like to thank the Community Affairs References Committee secretariat and also each and every one of the committee members who participated in this inquiry. I note that, although we all do not get time to speak in this tabling session, nearly all of us are present for this debate. It must say something about the permanent

members of the Community Affairs References Committee that it manages to come up with a reasonably cooperative and harmonious approach to tackling some of the major social challenges that face our community, which you would not necessarily expect in a political process. I would also like to particularly thank Senator Adams because, when we were travelling the country, examining potential solutions to this problem, her constant refrain of 'I'm interested in practical solutions' really did help keep a number of us focused on the real challenge ahead—and it is a significant challenge.

The tabling of this report this week is particularly timely, given the government's proposed summit next week that is looking at addressing some of the ongoing challenges facing our Indigenous communities. I therefore urge the government to have a look at some of the practical solutions that our committee has highlighted in this report and see if they cannot take that as a model for tackling some of the other significant challenges.

The committee, as I said, adopted a cooperative approach. It is only by adopting a cooperative approach to this significant issue that we as an Australian community will be able to come up with real solutions. If we do not come up with real solutions, we as a community and we as the Australian parliament are all diminished. We would have failed in our fundamental job. Real solutions are not just the solutions that our recommendations outline and the remarks that others have made about the need for collaborative approaches between the various levels of government; they are solutions that move away from funding pilot programs. They are solutions that move away from models built around personalities in communities. They are solutions that say that, as the Australian parliament and as the Australian people, we are in this for the long haul and we are going to find a real solution to this problem. But, having said that, I know there will be, of course, like anything else in our community, no one solution. And I can guarantee you that there will not be one single solution if we do not work to find those solutions in coalition with our Indigenous populations. The solution is not to be found in this chamber; the solution is to be found out there, working with those communities.

As a West Australian, I would also like to endorse the remarks of Senator Siewert about the need for the roll-out of Opal. I would particularly like to thank those who work in the BP refinery in Kwinana for the hard work that they have done in developing that fuel and for the time they made available to educate the committee in that process. As I have said, the work of this committee is quite unique in that it does look at having a collaborative approach to things. I would like to thank the committee and the committee secretariat for taking the trouble to come to Western Australia, where we tend to feel a bit overlooked and we all get very parochial. I would like to thank them for taking the trouble to visit two communities: Halls Creek, which is a community facing significant challenges at the moment—I am trying to avoid using the word 'crisis'—and, of course, Balgo, which has faced significant challenges in the past. It was a good way for the secretariat and committee members to be able to have a look at some ongoing progress.

I, for one, hope that this is the last ever report on petrol sniffing. I hope that we can agree to adopt the recommendations and find the real solution so that none of us here ever again will have to stand up and talk about yet another inquiry and yet another report. If we do, we will have failed what is in the title of this report, which is the need to renew hope for our Indigenous communities. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.