

Senator HUMPHRIES (Australian Capital Territory) (11.01 am)—I will only speak briefly to allow some time for Senator Boyce to also contribute to the debate on the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Grasping the opportunity of Opal: Assessing the impact of the Petrol Sniffing Strategy, but I want to reinforce the comments made by both the chair and deputy chair of the committee and emphasise that, in an area where very often the news is bad, we see Opal as having been a good news story about the success of a particular tool in the public policy armoury which has made a real difference. If senators are interested in recording just how effective Opal has been in changing the landscape of substance abuse in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, they only need to look at chapter 2 of the report to indicate some of those improvements. In July 2007 it was estimated that there were 244 petrol sniffers in the Central Australian area of the Northern Territory. In July 2008 the CAPSSU, drawing on advice from service providers, estimated that there were approximately 85 people currently or recently sniffing in the same area. Survey results showed the number of petrol sniffers in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands in South Australia had fallen from around 178 people in 2005 to 70 people in 2006. Other anecdotal reports suggested that petrol sniffing had been limited or nonexistent in the six months to August 2008. There were similar successes reported in lands in Western Australia. This has made a real difference, but as senators have already indicated it is not the only factor which needs to be built into public policy in this area to ensure that we drive down those rates of substance abuse.

I want to particularly mention two things. One is the absolutely vital nature of good, appropriate, well-resourced youth programs in these communities. As senators have indicated, there are some communities which do not have programs at all and others where the resources are too limited to provide good quality programs—for example, there is funding for a male worker but not for a female worker, and of course communities need both of those in order to bring male and female children into these programs. If we think of youth services in metropolitan areas of this country as being important, we should bear in mind that in remote Indigenous communities they are absolutely vital. There are not many other things for young people to do in these places. There are no cinemas or cool places to hang out. They need those services to keep them occupied and to give them a sense of direction and purpose, and I think that the importance of funding those programs properly cannot be overstated.

The second point I want to make is to reinforce the comments of others in this debate about the need to deal with those establishments still offering sniffable fuel at roadhouses. That is unacceptable. I am strongly supportive of taking incentivising measures to deal with these standouts, these organisations not prepared to sell Opal fuel. But at the end of the day, if those measures fail or if they do not succeed in a very short period of time, I want to assure the people who operate those establishments that there are plenty of people in the Australian parliament who will support legislation to make it mandatory for Opal to be sold in those establishments.

As a Liberal, I instinctively do not support the idea of legislation overbearing commercial behaviour, but in this case the arguments in favour of continuing to sell sniffable fuel are paper thin. There is no reason why people cannot use Opal fuel in their cars, where their cars are made for ordinary unleaded petrol, and the damage done to these communities because the sniffable fuel is still available is enormous. There is no good reason for it to continue to be available. So the warning is there to those roadhouses to get real and to ensure that that fuel is substituted as soon as possible. It may not be federal legislation

which succeeds in doing that, but I am very hopeful that state and territory governments involved will realise the value of stamping out those few places which still act as conduits for bringing sniffable petrol into those communities.

I want to close by simply saying that there are a great many good things happening in a number of communities which I think provide a sufficiently strong foundation for us to proceed in the knowledge that we have means of success here. We are not stabbing in the dark. We are not trying to cook up new solutions when most are failing. We do have ways of dealing effectively with these problems, and what stands in the way of that for the most part is adequate resources to get those programs rolled out throughout all the communities affected by this problem.