

Senator MOORE—by leave—I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

In moving this motion, I wish to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of members of the communities from Central Australia and the Northern Territory and also members of the organisation CAYLUS, the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service, without whose assistance, support and commitment we would not be standing in this place today talking about a report that means a lot to many people in this chamber.

Some people would remember that in June 2006 many of us stood in this chamber and talked about a report that we had done for a community affairs inquiry which looked at the issue of petrol sniffing in our community. Many of us in giving contributions on that day said that we hoped we would never have to give another report on the evils of petrol sniffing in this community. Today we are again talking about petrol sniffing, but it is an entirely different report. The report before the Senate today actually acknowledges the work that has been done across Australia, particularly in the Northern Territory and Central Australia, on acting cooperatively and positively to see what can be done to wipe out the evils of petrol sniffing in the community. The report does not say, of course, that all has been successful and it does not say that there is no petrol sniffing in Australia. What it does say is that some of the recommendations that were made in the earlier inquiry report and some of the work that was done by governments across Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia along with the federal government have produced effective results. In particular it says that we must continue the work. In fact, the essence of this report is that not only must we continue the work but it must be resourced and there have to be better lines of accountability and a continuing acknowledgement that this issue is a

priority. It cannot be dismissed. Most particularly, as we did put the focus of this issue at the federal level in 2006, it is not good enough to say that we have now dealt with petrol sniffing. That was the reason, in many ways, that this report was necessary.

I speak in deference to the people who told us in their large numbers in 2006 that they were tired of having reports. In fact, I still remember—and I have mentioned this a number of times in this place—the community of Balgo threatening to bring a wheelbarrow to our committee filled with all the reports that had been written about what was wrong with petrol sniffing. I remember someone saying, ‘Someone should do something about it.’ That has stayed in my mind and, I know, in the minds of many of the other committee members, who have had the privilege of working with the communities in those regions and talking with people directly—people who have given up their lives to work effectively in a professional manner to make sure that others are engaged in the struggle and acknowledging the horrific results of petrol sniffing in communities, not just for those who sniff but for their families and their friends, and the way it causes communities to disintegrate.

We have before us today a clear message to governments, and in particular to the federal government. We have made a number of recommendations, and I ask the community, although there are 18 recommendations, to please continue to read the report. I know it can be quite alarming to pick up a document that has 18 recommendations, but I assure

people that many of these relate particularly to the information we received and are in support of the work already done.

When we met in the communities in 2006 and again over the last 12 months, one of the things that came before us consistently was that it is not good enough to just say that petrol sniffing should cease. It is not good enough to put in place medical and rehabilitation help and help for communities to respond to the medical conditions that people who are sniffing petrol have. The real underlying issue is the need to relate to the causes, to look at why young people in particular in communities turn to petrol to help them to get through their lives, to black out what is going on, and why they have no hope for the future. We consistently heard that word 'hope', and we have to engender real hope that there is a positive future. We used that term a lot. One of the clear things that came out of our previous inquiry was the need for diversionary programs to be put in place across communities so that people had options, so that there was something worthwhile, so that there was not a sense of uselessness and failure and so that people did not feel that their lives were not important. What we found was that there have been diversionary programs funded in many communities, and we talked with many people involved in those things. Our report says that these clearly need to be strengthened, that a long-term solution needs to be put in place and that, most importantly, any programs that are introduced have to be introduced with the full involvement and engagement of the local community.

The message is that communities want to be involved. They certainly do not want to have people coming in from outside telling them what should happen and what they should do. They need a sensitive, effective and well-resourced program of funding that engages communities, uses local knowledge and makes sure that that sense of hope permeates the whole community, in particular in the young people, who are most often the immediate victims of this scourge.

One of the other aspects that I think is most important in this report is that we should not forget the people who have already had their lives affected by petrol sniffing. The call is for rehabilitation programs, for retraining and for simple things like education programs to be provided for older people in communities. They are part of what we need to engage in in an ongoing focus on all the efforts to look at the issues around petrol sniffing.

This report is entitled Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the petrol sniffing strategy. I know that is not a particularly catchy title; we tried to be more clever. However, the real success story between 2006 and 2008 is the story we have heard about the success of Opal in Aboriginal communities across Australia. When we came here in June 2006 it was a relatively new program. We encouraged that program to be rolled out. We said that we would work to see whether a fuel that did not provide the option of sniffing would work in communities, whether through the Opal roll-out program there would be discernable improvements in the quality of life and in the numbers of people who are involved in petrol sniffing. There is no doubt: one of the success stories of Australian engineering and ingenuity is the development of Opal fuel. One of the success stories of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and in Central Australia is the way in which they have welcomed, indeed demanded in many cases, Opal fuel being wound out in their communities and also the way in which communities have worked to ensure that Opal is put into their communities and kept there for the future.

We have had evidence from the department about the amazing success of the rollout in the increased number of outlets serving Opal locally. One of the negative aspects of this report is that some outlets continue to refuse to stock Opal fuel. This has been taken up strongly in our recommendations in the report. I think it is a message for the wider community. When we have evidence clearly on record about how something can work, it is a worry that, for various reasons—and it is very difficult to truly understand why—some outlets in Central Australia still refuse to turn to Opal fuel in their commercial enterprises. It is a concern for our community that that continues to happen, and one of the clear recommendations of our report is that that needs to be made public; it is not commercial-in-confidence. People who refuse to accept the use of Opal fuel should be named, and in fact over time we think measures should be put in place to make it mandatory for that to happen. There is a difference of view about how this should occur, but without doubt in the communities and in our committee there is absolute support for ensuring that Opal fuel is used and sold.

I want to acknowledge, as I know other people do, the amazing work of the committee secretariat. As always in our community affairs committee we extended the secretariat and brought in Toni Matulick and Alice Crowley, who came on board with Mr Humphery and the other members of the community affairs secretariat. They are an essential part of our committee. They do not just provide for the secretariat; they are a part of our committee and they continue to give us the assistance we need in the way that we operate. This report is important. To the community members who came to share with us and the people from CAYLUS, thank you very much for your help and assistance.