

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.

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (10.51 am) —The Greens fully support the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the petrol sniffing strategy. It is a pleasure to work with the Standing Committee on Community Affairs and know that we were all working for the same thing in this inquiry. Once again, we have a consensus report— we all agree on the aims and objectives. While Senator Moore said we slightly differ on a couple of points, we have agreed on the recommendations, which I think is important in dealing with this very important issue. As Senator Moore said, this is following up on our previous very important inquiry, where we also had a unanimous report. Both inquiries were originally referred by the Greens and we are very pleased with the outcome of both reports. We believe this report makes strong and sensible recommendations. This is one of the Senate's success stories where, working together, we are seeing real outcomes on the ground.

The rollout of Opal fuel, together with youth diversionary programs and support, has had a major impact on petrol sniffing in Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. We are very proud to have taken part in that process. This committee inquiry shows that we need to remain vigilant and that we still have a significant way to go. The inquiry found very strong success with the rollout of Opal but also found a number of problems with the rollout of the eight-point plan and a number of issues in places that have fallen between the cracks. In most places, we have, at best, rolled out only three or four points of the eight-point plan and in fact in some places only one—that is, the rollout of Opal. The original report said very clearly that Opal alone will not do the job; it needs to be part of a more comprehensive approach. That is why the eight-point plan was developed in the first place. It is very important that the whole package continues to be delivered and not just part of it. We need to be providing support services and initiatives which tackle the underlying causes of petrol sniffing—boredom, hopelessness and despair. If we do not do this, the problem will only shift to other substance abuse. We had some evidence of that happening with drugs like ganja and alcohol, and people troublemaking again, which also leads to other issues.

Years down the track we still do not have consistent legislation—as in the eight-point plan—across the Northern Territory, South Australia and my home state of Western Australia. Appropriately, with policing we have some but still not at an adequate level, particularly in the APY Lands. There is further rollout of Opal fuel but, as Senator Moore said, there are a number of stations in the Northern Territory which still refuse to stock Opal. That is proving a problem for communities. Also, it enables sniffable fuel to be run out of those particular service stations into other towns, which is happening in Balgo. The particular stations where communities have a lot of concern include Rabbit Flat, Tilmouth Well, Ti Tree and Laverton in Western Australia. While we now have the rollout of Opal to a large number of communities, there are still communities not receiving it. We make recommendations around that problem.

We have some alternative activities for young people and youth workers in some towns but not in others. Where there are both male and female workers, it is operating very well. There were significant problems getting the process underway. There are some treatment and respite facilities in place but not enough. We visited the fantastic new substance abuse centre at Amata. If we could have more of those in communities that would be fantastic. When I asked whether there were any more of these facilities in the APY Lands, the person I was talking to burst out laughing. It is really sad that we do not have enough of those facilities. We had some communications and education strategies. Again there

were difficulties getting them going. Although it is about communication and education, there was not enough communication with the local communities about how to do that. It is very important, when rolling out Opal, that the communications strategy is in place.

With regard to strengthening and supporting communities, some communities have a lot of support; others have not. In our recommendations we strongly recommend an independent evaluation of the Central Australian petrol sniffing unit because we think there are some concerns with the rollout of the eight-point plan. So in the committee report we have recommended that that issue be looked at by government. I would like to see that done as a matter of priority because I think that there are some significant issues that we need to deal with in the delivery of services through this program to Central Australia.

One recommendation in the report says, as Senator Moore highlighted, that we need potentially to be looking at legislation to mandate the supply of Opal through petrol stations and roadhouses. We have recommended that this be looked into to see whether it is a possibility. It is a last resort mechanism—if service stations or roadhouses cannot be persuaded to sell Opal as a matter of priority and urgency, we believe there needs to be a process requiring them to do so. It is so important to communities that we believe governments, state, federal and territory, need to be looking at that as a last resort. We have set a time limit —if governments have not implemented it within six months, they need to then look at legislation.

There need to be many more resources for youth services. We need to ensure that there is a male and a female youth support officer in communities, with both of them delivering services. We need to make sure we have functioning infrastructure such as housing, cars and activity sheds. In Mutitjulu we saw an excellent program where young people are making handicrafts, using batik to make baskets, headbands and bags which they are selling at a local market. They were in a tiny little shed which was not air-conditioned. You can imagine what it was like on a 46-degree day. The young people were trying to make these things in very difficult circumstances.

We need more training for community workers, more rehabilitation services and more adult education and support for ex-sniffers. There is a problem around ganja coming into some of these communities and we need to be ahead of the game there. It was also pointed out that mainstream drug and alcohol campaigns often miss Aboriginal audiences, so we need to make sure we focus those better, and of course the whole underlying issues around schooling need to be dealt with. We need coordination between government departments. Although that is much better than it was, there still seem to be some problems there. There have been problems with the tendering processes, we believe, and this goes back to the issues around the Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy Unit—the CAPSSU, as it is called. We believe those problems need to be investigated as part of the independent audit and evaluation of the unit. Those need to be looked at.

We also strongly support the recommendation that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner be resourced to monitor and report on progress around petrol sniffing. This is such a vital issue. We have made such progress. We cannot stop. We absolutely have to continue it. It has the full support of the committee. It is such a pleasure to go to communities and see what progress has truly been made and, as I said, we cannot stop. We have to remain vigilant and we have to go beyond the eight-point

plan, but we need to ensure we are implementing that as the starting point and we need to ensure that the resources for the rollout of Opal are maintained. I beg the government to please maintain those resources and enhance them where necessary.

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.



Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (11.06 am)—It was a privilege to be involved in this inquiry of the Standing Committee on Community Affairs into petrol sniffing and a privilege to visit parts of Australia that not many Australians get to visit—and it is great to see people from Central Australia here today to listen to our report. Within that context that it is a part of Australia that very few Australians get to visit, the communities there can suffer very much from ‘out of sight, out of mind’ problems. As people have pointed out, we have made 18 recommendations. From my perspective, recommendations 12 through to 16 are the most important. These are the ones that deal with developing, monitoring and ensuring that there are activities and programs that are happening in communities which are within the petrol-sniffing zone.

In my view, it is far more important that we develop sustainable activities and programs than to worry quite so much about mandating Opal fuel. I would hope that the availability of non-sniffable petrol ceases to become an issue as we further and properly develop alternative activities. I think we need to keep in mind that petrol sniffing is a symptom. It is great that we have dealt as successfully as we have with that symptom, but it is not a symptom that needs to be our complete focus. I think it is very obvious from the report itself that our focus needs to be on developing the sorts of activities that children, teenagers, throughout Australia should reasonably expect to be available within their communities.

One other point, which is included in our first recommendation, is that it was a surprise to some members of the inquiry—certainly to me—that Opal fuel was available in any community that requested it. This was not, we thought, a well-known fact within the communities, and it certainly was not by the inquiry. We are recommending that CAPSSU and others put some effort into developing this. The other part to this issue is that what happens in those communities—just as the request to have Opal fuel—must be driven by the communities. During our visit to Lake Nash we were shown a steel skateboard ramp that had apparently been funded by FaHCSIA. It was not shaded. It was made of steel. The temperature on the day we were in Lake Nash was 42 degrees, which was pretty average. You could only use this skateboard ramp after dark, but there were no lights at the ramp area. I think it is a small indication of the sorts of problems that develop when you do not ask communities what they would like and what they want.

I share Senator Humphries’s concerns about mandating the supply of Opal petrol. I would hope that public pressure and negotiation by the federal government and by state and territory governments can convince the roadhouses involved in these areas to voluntarily undertake the supply of Opal. We never did get a satisfactory answer as to why they were not—particularly suppliers such as the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, Tea Tree Roadhouse, Tilmouth Well Roadhouse, the Laverton Roadhouse and other stores: Laramba store, Maryvale Station, Canley Park, Jervois Roadhouse, Ross River Resort and the Urandangi community store in my home state of Queensland. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.