

Chapter 1

Introduction

Terms of reference

1.1 On 17 June 2008 the Senate referred matters relating to petrol sniffing and substance abuse in central Australia to the Community Affairs Committee for inquiry and report by 16 October 2008, as follows:

(1) The Senate:

(a) notes the report of the Community Affairs References Committee, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, dated June 2006, and the current expenditure on programs aimed at addressing petrol sniffing; and

(b) expresses concern at recent reports on the increase of petrol sniffing in central Australia.

(2) That the following matters be referred to the Community Affairs Committee for inquiry and report by 16 October 2008:

(a) the ongoing effectiveness of the eight-point plan in combating petrol sniffing in central Australia;

(b) the extent of the roll out of Opal fuel;

(c) the delivery of youth services in affected areas;

(d) the effectiveness and adequacy of resources provided to address petrol sniffing and substance abuse in central Australia; and

(e) what more needs to be done to effectively address petrol sniffing.¹

1.2 Due to the committee's heavy workload with other concurrent inquiries, the reporting date was extended to the last sitting day in March 2009.²

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The inquiry was advertised regularly in *The Australian* newspaper and on the committee's website. Interested parties were also contacted directly and invited to contribute to the inquiry. A list of those who made submissions is attached at Appendix 1. The committee visited the communities of Yuendumu, Papunya, Alpururulam (Lake Nash), Mutitjulu, Amata and Hoppy's Town Camp (Alice Springs) to meet with elders, community members and service providers to better inform itself about petrol sniffing and substance abuse.

1 *Journal of the Senate*, 17 June 2008, No. 15, p. 495.

2 *Journal of the Senate*, 18 September 2008, No. 32, p. 877.

1.4 Three public hearings were conducted. The first in Alice Springs on 29 October 2008, the second in Adelaide on 4 March 2009 with the final hearing in Canberra on 12 March 2009. A list of witnesses who appeared at the committee's hearings is at Appendix 2.

Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy Unit

1.5 The committee was initially frustrated by FaHCSIA's apparent lack of cooperation with making staff from the Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy Unit (CAPSSU) available to appear before the committee at its Alice Springs hearing. FaHCSIA advised the committee that as CAPSSU is an organisational unit within the department and that there were three other Commonwealth agencies involved in the petrol sniffing strategy the best way to provide a coordinated and comprehensive response to the committee's enquiries was to have all representatives appearing together at a Canberra hearing. The committee was pleased to be able to receive evidence from CAAPSU at its Canberra hearing.

Background

1.6 When the committee tabled its report *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities* in the Senate in June 2006, Senator Webber stated:

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.³

1.7 Although the committee has undertaken another inquiry into petrol sniffing in central Australia this does not necessarily indicate a failure to address the issue of petrol sniffing. Rather, in mid 2008 following reports of a growing number of incidents of petrol sniffing as well as the tragic death of a young Indigenous boy, members of the committee decided that there was a need to revisit the issue of petrol sniffing in order to ascertain how well current measures are addressing petrol sniffing and where there maybe gaps in the response. Subsequently, on the motion of Senator Siewert, the Senate referred the inquiry to the committee.

Beyond petrol sniffing report 2006

1.8 The committee does not intend to revisit issues addressed in its 2006 report however a brief outline of the report's findings and recommendations appears below to provide context.

1.9 In the 2006 report the committee gave an extensive overview of previous inquiries and reports on petrol sniffing dating back to the 1985 Senate Select

3 Senator Ruth Webber, *Senate Hansard*, 20 June 2006, p. 55.

Committee on Volatile Substance Fumes report. The committee expressed its dissatisfaction with the lack of action. Subsequently, the report called for immediate action:

The Committee does not want the recommendations in this report to be added to those which have already been made and discussed but not fully implemented. The Committee sees its recommendations as pointing a way ahead: a way to harness the commitment that exists in Indigenous communities and in government to address the problem of petrol sniffing and its underlying causes.

This must be the turning point. All Australians must be able to say they live with hope, dignity, purpose and opportunity.⁴

1.10 Importantly, the committee recognised that 'a whole-of-government approach matched with ongoing commitment and sustained funding of programs to engage Indigenous communities'⁵ was the only way forward. The recommendations within the report were unanimous and included:

- improving Indigenous health and population data collection;
- providing long-term funding and support for programs;
- increasing the police presence and empowering police to intervene and prevent petrol sniffing;
- providing community safe houses and rehabilitation facilities;
- providing sustainable funding for community-based diversionary and development programs; and
- increasing the supply and roll out of Opal fuel.

1.11 The recommendations emphasised the urgency of fully implementing the findings of earlier inquiries and establishing sound arrangements for measuring and monitoring the extent of petrol sniffing and supporting programs addressing petrol sniffing.

Eight Point Plan

1.12 At the time of the committee's earlier inquiry, the Eight Point Regional Strategy for Central Australia (the Eight Point Plan) was being developed by the South Australian, Western Australian, Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments to address petrol sniffing in a designated area of central Australia for a period of 10 years. Since that time, the plan has been partially implemented with some extensions and changes (discussed in Chapter 2).

4 Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, June 2006, foreword.

5 Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, June 2006, foreword.

1.13 At the Commonwealth level the Eight Point Plan is implemented by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA), the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD). The Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Unit (CAPSSU) is the multi agency unit responsible for the local implementation of the PSS based in Alice Springs. State offices of the Commonwealth departments also work with state and territory governments in implementing the strategy.⁶

1.14 The eight points in the plan are:

- consistent legislation;
- appropriate levels of policing;
- further rollout of Opal fuel;
- alternative activities for young people;
- treatment and respite facilities;
- communication and education strategies;
- strengthening and supporting communities; and
- evaluation.⁷

1.15 The overall goals of the strategy are:

- To reduce the incidence and impact of petrol sniffing in a defined area of central Australia by addressing the complex mix of interrelated causes and contextual factors contributing to this activity; and
- To evaluate the effectiveness of a regional and comprehensive response to petrol sniffing to determine whether and how it might usefully be expanded to other regions with similar issues.⁸

1.16 Originally, the PSS Eight Point Plan applied to a tri-state region in central Australia. In 2006 two new areas were declared as Petrol Sniffing Zones: the central Australia Expanded Zone in the Northern Territory and the East Kimberley in Western Australia. In December 2007 the Mornington/Doomadgee Zone in Queensland was agreed with the Queensland Government.

1.17 The Commonwealth government's submission noted that the criteria for choosing the additional zones were:

6 The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA), the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD), *Submission 14*, p. 15.

7 FaHCSIA, DoHA, DEEWR and AGD, *Submission 14*, p. 13.

8 FaHCSIA, DoHA, DEEWR and AGD, *Submission 14*, p. 14.

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- There was an identifiable petrol sniffing problem in a number of communities in the proposed region;
 - The communities agreed that there was a problem with petrol sniffing and were prepared to address the problem; and
 - The relevant State or Territory Government agreed that the proposed region had an identifiable problem and they are prepared to address this in partnership with the Australian Government.⁹

1.18 The central element of the Eight Point Plan was the implementation of a regional rollout of Opal fuel. Opal fuel is an unleaded fuel with very low levels of aromatic hydrocarbons, so it does not give the 'high' associated with sniffing regular unleaded petrol. The distribution of Opal fuel was seen as a key component of the solution to overcome the problems of petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities.

1.19 Committee members have followed with great interest the progress of the Eight Point Plan. As noted above, the committee considered that its first report must mark the 'turning point' for petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities. The committee has been adamant that its recommendations be implemented and it has attempted to maintain the sense of urgency for addressing the problems associated with petrol sniffing.

Acknowledgements

1.20 The committee would like to thank everyone who participated in the inquiry. It would especially like to thank the community elders, members and staff of agencies and organisations who spoke with us during the inquiry and who were generous with their time and information.

1.21 The committee is grateful for the assistance of the staff from Central Australian Youth Link Up Service, in particular Tristan Ray, Blair McFarland, Hannah May Caspar and Thomas Holyoake, who organised the committee's visit to Yuendumu, Papunya, Alpururulam (Lake Nash) and Hoppy's Town Camp. The committee thanks staff from the Mt Theo Program for allowing the committee to visit during a difficult period.

1.22 The committee would like to thank members of the Mutitjulu community and staff from Mission Australia for meeting them in Mutitjulu on a Sunday afternoon.

1.23 The committee's visit to Amata was greatly assisted by officers of the South Australian government. The committee thanks the South Australian government and FaHCSIA officers for attending this visit, and local staff and community members in Amata for allowing access to organisations and the community. The committee was grateful for the opportunity to visit the Amata Anangu School, and appreciated the tour given to them by staff and students.

9 FaHCSIA, DoHA, DEEWR and AGD, *Submission 14*, p. 14.

1.24 Due to rain, the committee was unable to undertake its planned visit to Umuwa and regrets that it was unable to meet with members of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Executive and staff from other organisations in Umuwa. The committee acknowledges the assistance of the APY Executive in arranging access to the APY Lands.