

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE PETROL SNIFFING INQUIRY

I make a brief submission to the Petrol Sniffing Inquiry on my own behalf. How unfortunate it is that the people over the years whose life has been destroyed or tormented by petrol sniffing by themselves or through family and community members, may not be making direct submissions to this important Inquiry. I trust that Senate Members have found other ways to access these direct personal accounts.

Historical neglect of all Governments - State, Federal - of both political persuasions.

*In the mid 1980s while living near Port Adelaide in SA and mixing to some degree with various Aboriginal people, I was approached by a woman, herself from a remote SA Aboriginal people. A husband and wife - pensioners - had asked her to assist them to write to the Federal Government seeking support for their efforts. They were attempting to deal with the petrol sniffers of the (then) AP Lands by taking them out bush away from the settlements. Of course this was proving impossible though absolutely worthy project on their pension income. Tragically we received merely a form reply from the then local Minister. Of course the project could not survive and this opportunity completely lost to use the self determination of the appropriate people to tackle their own community problems with the funding required.

*At the same time two Anangu women from Pipalytjara in the far north west corner of SA - literally hundreds of kms. from Adelaide - would take it upon themselves to remove their 'young fella' relations to the city away from the petrol sniffing culture of the bush and presumably the boredom of having nothing to do. This was a very expensive personal solution for these two women and for anybody else they could recruit to help them. Again Governments seemed content to ignore the problem.

However, for some time (I think in the later '80s) there was a facility at the old Seaforth Home complex in Somerton Park in Adelaide where the young people from the bush could stay and where there was a youth worker programme get some help.

I know that I have thought in the last ten years when **there seems to be absolutely no current regular such institutional help afforded to either the petrol sniffers or their desperate families** that at least this small attempt was something.

*In the 1980s at Yalata on SA's Far West Coast, Mr and Mrs Bridely, a middle aged Anangu couple later working with a local sympathetic Health Worker, achieved with a basic bush programme the virtual elimination of petrol sniffing for a number of years. They had some support as I understand it from the local Health service. Not directly from any purposeful Government allocation.

* I lived in the town of Coober Pedy for seven years in the 1990s.

As I understand it, petrol sniffing was not prevalent except at times when young people would come back from the AP Lands having sniffed petrol there. Senior Anangu women and others who would know how important it was to nip a possible epidemic in the bud, would beg for the authorities' intervention. The standard answer in those days would be that it was not a criminal offence to sniff petrol so there was 'nothing they could do.'

Unfortunately all Governments, Federal and State of both parties continued to ignore the problem.

I write the above to emphasize what I presume is well known re the historical negligence of Government as I as a relative outsider know of this problem in our own State of South Australia .The tragic waste of the youth of our state. This was graphically also described by a least one Government official in recent years - the Coroner. It would be interesting if the Senate were to investigate how many of his recommendations from his 2002 Coronial Inquest were being implemented. These recommendations would no doubt be helpful across many remote areas.

I note from the terms of reference of the Inquiry that there is much emphasis on the supplying of OPAL to remote communities. While this may be fine as a negative and needed approach to the problem, it obviously fails completely **to identify and seek to redress the basic reasons FOR the petrol sniffing. Young people simply have to have their basic needs met.** It is currently extraordinarily expensive to live on the Lands. In Dec '05, for example petrol was \$1.70 a litre. Clothing is very expensive. Presumably this is widespread across the country unless the particular State Governments are realising it is essential to subsidise basic living costs for remote communities. Surely in the end this is a wiser and less expensive investment by both tiers of Government.

Three Christmases ago, the community of Yalata obtained funding for a two week camp. During that whole period not one young person in the forty or so on the camp made any attempt to sniff petrol, leading one of the Elders on the camp to acknowledge that kids don't sniff when they have decent food. One might add, also when there are interesting things to do. As it oft quoted - Young people have to have a reason for getting up in the morning.

Hopefully the Inquiry might look at **the presence or absence of Tafe in the remote communities.** Unless things have recently changed, Yalata has simply had no Tafe at all for many years. Driving skills notwithstanding, it can be a monumental task to even obtain a driver's licence. Lack of basic services such as this, apart from leading to situation of hopelessness, and drugs, alcohol or petrol sniffing to temporarily relieve the problem - also leads to young men in particular into unnecessary criminal offences - 'driving without a licence' -warrants issued- jail term. This very day I have spoken to a man in presumably in his late 30s. Living all his life on remote communities, his birth was not recorded, he can read only basic words and both these things continue to mitigate against his obtaining a licence and repeat offending.

It makes very sad even desperate reading to read how the former Liberal Government of SA systematically dismantled Tafe and other institutions in the AP (now APY) Lands.

Unfortunately, while acknowledging the very real difficulties the current Labour Government has had to make up for these 'years of neglect', it is also dispiriting to keep hearing that much of the funding available for workers, currently goes into the middle management level so that there is little left for workers at the community level. I'm

pleased to read in the SA Gov.s submission to the Inquiry a 2001 quote from Hon. Terry Roberts who is now himself Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation :*We must remove some of the barriers we have built into our bureaucracy... so we can get the services required to deliver the programs to those people who need them...and not be soaked up by salaries without any delivery at the bottom.*(my emphasis)

Unfortunately positions have been created in his own Government's time which do exactly that. I hope that Senators have an opportunity to check these statistics including the number of public service Aboriginal people at community level, notably in the APY Lands.

The SA Government has made a submission to the Inquiry which is pleasing but it seems long on generalities and very short on practical specifics. Will the Committee find that there any grass roots concrete strategies or achievements listed throughout the entire document?

Federal Gov responsibility. I recently read a early 70s newspaper report where the SA State Premier claimed that even though his government was spending 'twice as much on housing as any other state' they had no hope in making up the shortfall in Aboriginal housing without Commonwealth funding. The Commonwealth must surely accept sizeable responsibility for the epidemic facing young people in the remote areas of the country, including shockingly overcrowded and poor standard housing. And this not at the expense of losing inalienable free hold title - that is, self determination for the land. In a country the size of Australia we need to encourage - not discourage - and make it financially more possible for people to live in the bush, including the smaller settlements where the young people are more likely to be have opportunity to keep their cultural skills including hunting, alive.

Even the much vaunted Comm/State swimming pool projects I understand are flagging long behind schedule with only one in the APY Lands likely to be completed this year.

There is no doubt that both Federal and State resources are required. Moreover that the people of the remote areas themselves are listened to and their recommendations and initiatives are supported and acted upon.

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including the very obvious big picture - reasons why - up till very recent times.