

Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

Senator ADAMS (Western Australia) (4.26 p.m.)—I, too, am very proud to have been part of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. We have worked very well, travelled to some fantastic places, seen the communities and talked to the people first-hand. It has made such a difference to be able to go and sit down and have some time to really talk about the issues that matter.

My fellow committee members have commented on a number of issues. I will talk about some of the basic things that I think can make a difference. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge our friends in the gallery who have travelled from Yuendumu and Papunya to be with us here today and see the report presented. I think that is really good.

I also congratulate our Senate Community Affairs secretariat, led by Mr Elton Humphery. They have had to follow us around, and sometimes the suggestions we have given them of where we wanted to go have quite horrified them. They had the challenge of trying to get charter aircraft and work out which was the best way to attack places like Balgo and Halls Creek while we were up in Darwin and how to go from Alice Springs to Yuendumu and out to Mount Theo. It was a great experience and I think it is so important that we had the opportunity. On the trip to Mount Theo we had a number of the media present, and that was great because at least it gave them an opportunity to see what it was all about. They were the practical issues. We also had people from the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin travel to Balgo and Halls Creek. These people would never have been able to get there by themselves. Their research is that much richer for the opportunity that the committee gave them. We and the communities will certainly benefit from that research later on.

Finding the solution was one of our goals as we travelled around remote areas of Australia. The communities that we visited have obviously had enough of inquiries, meetings, workshops, seminars, reports and committee meetings on sniffing. I feel that real action is necessary now, and Senator Siewert has certainly made a very strong point on that, as I do—it is just so important. We have done enough; there is enough research there. Now we must get on with it. I think Minister Brough is keen to follow up on our recommendations and enhance where we have been and what we have done. We really can take a step forward for the people sitting in the gallery.

In South Australia, we met Mrs Mona Tur, who has been an interpreter for the past 30 years. She gave us a lot of insight into the communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands. I spoke about a program last evening that had run out of funding. It was such a great program, but where does it go? Mrs Tur said:

I saw program after program start and then abruptly stop because there was no more funding left, there were no more staff and the community eventually lost interest in trying to keep programs going. They were getting stressed and sick themselves. No-one was there to help.

This is the fundamental thing: we must have that support behind these programs.

When I look at our friends from CAYLUS up there, they are the key to Yuendumu being able to reduce their petrol sniffing. It is so important that you have those people to support the people who live in the communities. Without them, there is no way that the programs will work. We have to keep people in the communities longer. A three-year program is of no use whatsoever. If a program is successful, somehow we must get that program extended and keep the professionals who are there. As a professional person, if you know a program is going to end in three years, after 18 months you are going to be looking for other work because you are not sure as to where you are going to go next. This is the trouble and it has happened time and time again, not just in Aboriginal communities but in all the other areas in which we have great programs.

This is something that I would be working very hard on to see if there is any possible way to continue good programs. Programs must be evaluated to ensure that dollars are being spent the way they should be. If it is evaluated and it is successful, for goodness sake let us not reinvent the wheel. As has been said, there is no short-term fix to petrol sniffing. From my observation, communities need as much outside support as possible to help them find a solution.