

Extract from the Senate Hansard: 20 June 2006

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee Report

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (4.21 p.m.)—I am extremely pleased to be able to speak on this unanimous report, *Beyond petrol sniffing: renewing hope for Indigenous communities*, by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. First off, I would like to say that the representatives of Yuendumu and Mount Theo who are listening to this have come a long way to hear this report being presented. I acknowledge the work and the effort that they have put into encouraging us in this report. Five minutes is a very short time for me to speak on the report and go through the extensive detail that we heard during the hearings in this inquiry, but I would like to touch on a few important issues.

There has been a long list of reports looking at petrol sniffing, substance abuse and the impacts of disadvantage and despair. The message has been very clear: we do not want just another report that sits on the shelf, we do not want a badly thought out, knee-jerk reaction that makes things worse and we do not want another short-term or pilot program that only addresses the symptoms and runs out of funding before it starts to have an impact. What we want is for this to be the very last report on petrol sniffing.

There is nothing particularly special about petrol sniffing. It is a cheap and nasty drug that is easy to get hold of and it is the last resort of the most desperate and disadvantaged. It is the last place to go to escape, when any escape is better, no matter what the cost to your health, your family or your life. That is why rolling out un-sniffable Opal fuel is absolutely necessary but it is not sufficient.

The report recommends the further roll-out of Opal fuel, and I very strongly support that. I also strongly support the call by CAYLUS—the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service—for its roll-out into what they call the northern central region, for those remaining Central Australian communities that are affected by petrol sniffing and want government support. This will become one of the two new focus regions for the delivery of Opal fuel and sustained youth services.

Rolling out Opal fuel is necessary to give the communities the breathing space to be able to turn around sniffers' lives. We need to get the kids off petrol and give communities a break from the trouble and grief that eventuates from it, so we can tackle the underlying causes. We also need to give kids something to do, some source of hope, so they can turn their lives around.

Make no mistake. If we do not treat the underlying causes, we will not break the cycle of abuse and this will not be the last report. This is what the NT coroner meant when he said that youth services should be considered essential services in remote communities. Just yesterday I heard the example of Papunya, where they have been rolling out Opal and have stopped petrol sniffing. Now they are saying: 'We need a youth worker. We need to give our kids something to do—and something to do beyond football. Football and other sports are great, but we need more than that. We need truly extensive services and things for kids to do—the same as in any other community.'

We need to put time, resources and effort into giving these kids meaningful and worthwhile lives. We need to deal with the underlying causes and deliver services and support. We must provide to Aboriginal communities the basic services the rest of us take for granted. Government agencies have always had this responsibility. We need to encourage them to make sure they are fulfilled. We need to look at and learn from those programs that have been successful. They all combine community engagement, strong agency support, skilled on-the-ground staff and well thought out intervention, and they work with the strengths and limitations of the community and its culture.

Many top-down programs have failed where they have been unable to communicate and engage effectively with local communities. Many bottom-up programs have failed where there have been poorly trained and poorly resourced community members who have been placed in extremely difficult situations and given positions of responsibility where the level of demand is overwhelming and they feel unable to intervene effectively. However, communities in crisis need even stronger support from us than they have been provided with in the past. We really need to make sure that we are supporting these communities. We need sensible, balanced, long-term partnerships.

In conclusion, I would like to say how pleased and proud I have been to work with this committee in developing our unanimous report. It is now up to government—federal, state and territory—to do the real work to implement these recommendations so that this is truly the last report dealing with petrol sniffing. The Greens are committed to implementing these recommendations and supporting all positive moves that are taken to end petrol sniffing and end Indigenous disadvantage in this country.