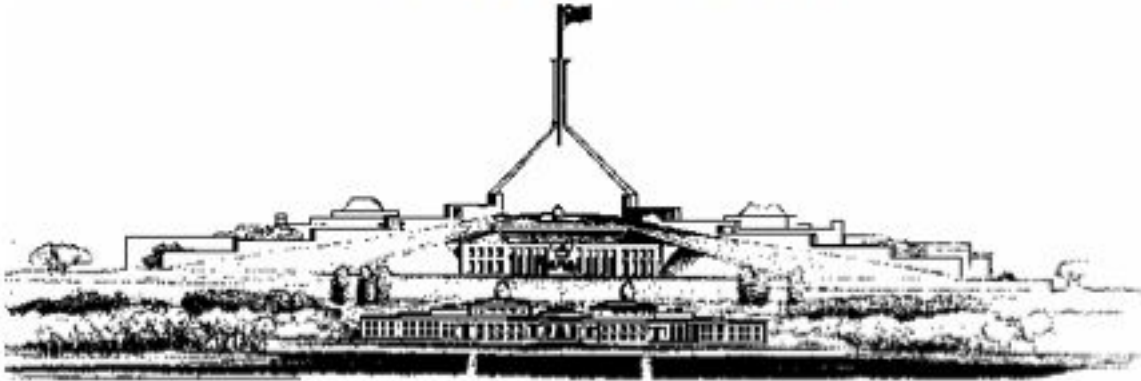




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**ADJOURNMENT**

**Indigenous issues**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 20 June 2007**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Senator BOYCE** (Queensland) (7.02 pm)—As Senator Bartlett points out: there is an extraordinary amount of rich detail in a number of reports published in the past week or so relating to Indigenous issues. I want to quickly have a look at two of these reports. The first was released by the Northern Territory government called *The protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse*, written by Rex Wild QC and Pat Anderson. The second report—which could not be more different from the first—is the Cape York Institute’s welfare reform report, *From hand out to hand up*, formally presented to the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Minister Mal Brough at a press conference yesterday, by Noel Pearson from the Cape York Institute and representatives of the Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge communities.

For me, these two reports, their recommendations and their respective government responses are in contrast. Both reports deal with the breakdown of the basic requirements for a functional community of any kind. They talk about alcohol and substance abuse, violence against people and property, sexual and physical abuse, lack of meaningful occupation and hopelessness. The Cape York report notes that: the infant mortality rate amongst Indigenous Australians is two to three times higher than that of the broader community; the per capita alcohol consumption in the Cape York communities is four times that the national average; life expectancy for Indigenous men and women is 17 years less than that for non-Indigenous men and women; and, most ominously in terms of a potentially better future, the Indigenous children of Queensland are nearly five times more likely to be the subject of a protective order than other children.

As everyone present would know, none of this is new, unfortunately. In fact, there has been a long-standing tradition of state government reports—very good reports, such as the Boni Robertson report from Queensland in 1999 and the Sue Gordon inquiry in Western Australia in 2001-02. As governments, we talk wisely about them, and then nothing; nothing really changes. At the launch of the ‘hand up’ report yesterday, the Mayor of Hope Vale, Greg McLean, described opponents to change and reform in his community as wolli-wolli people. He told us that wolli-wolli people were people who lacked focus and they lacked enthusiasm for action. I think we can

class Clare Martin and the Northern Territory government as wolli-wollis. They were reluctantly dragged into accepting that there were any problems in the government’s management of Indigenous issues in the Northern Territory and they were reluctantly embarrassed into setting up the Wild-Anderson inquiry. Now that they have had the report for almost two months, they are going to leap into action in August.

The most significant aspect of the Northern Territory abuse inquiry is that it succeeded in attracting so many witnesses and submissions. It held 226 meetings with individuals, agencies and organisations. It visited 45 communities and received 65 submissions. That, to me, was one of the most heartening aspects of the report, because in the context of abuse, dysfunction, violence and a general loss of identity it is very difficult to comprehend how hard it must have been for people to come and speak to that inquiry, to talk about the worst possible sorts of dysfunction within their own family and their own community. These were very brave people and they were very desperate for change. Doubly so, given the sort of cynicism and exhaustion with imposed solutions that some of them talked about. One man from Gunbalunya said, ‘We have a 20-year history of six-month programs.’ An elder said, ‘We have been piloting pilots for long enough.’ For the sake of these people, this inquiry must achieve more than filling some more library shelves with worthy but neglected recommendations.

The NT Inquiry makes 97 recommendations, but the two core recommendations are on education and reduced alcohol consumption. It notes quite correctly that one of the major pluses of education is that children are safe from sexual abuse when they are at school. For me, this seems very worthy but long term and wolli-wolli. To suggest that one of the major reasons for sending children to school is that they are safe from sexual abuse is incomprehensible in the 21st century. What about the rest of the time, especially at nights, when the adult alcohol consumption spikes? What about those children who are too young for school—the three-year-olds who are mentioned in this report as victims of sexual abuse and also witnesses of abuse and violence? It is a very sad reason for advocating education, that children are safe from abuse between 8.30 am and 3.30 pm.

By contrast, the Cape York report goes straight to the nub of the problem. It says that we do not value what we do not earn. It accepts that the problems in the four communities of Hope Vale, Aurukun, Coen and Mossman Gorge stem from dispossession and racism over many years but primarily blames a deterioration of social norms. As Mr Pearson pointed out yesterday, there are many examples of countries where people live in extreme poverty and overcrowding, but cultural norms persist. In those communities it is not okay to be chronically drunk and violent, it is not okay to abuse young teenagers and children, and it is not okay to expose children to pornography and violence. The difference, according to the Cape York report, is passive welfare. It has turned cause and effect on its head. It says that dysfunction and poverty are themselves the issues to be fixed.

The report calls for radical welfare reform. It says that all welfare payments should be conditional. In other words, if you do not meet certain obligations, you do not get your welfare payment. It says that each adult who receives a welfare payment for a child should be required to ensure that the child maintains a 100 per cent school attendance record. It says that all adults must not cause or allow children to be neglected or abused. It says that all adults must not commit drug, alcohol, gambling or family violence offences. It obliges adults to abide by conditions related to their tenancy in public housing.

Just to confirm that these were not imposed conditions in any way, I will read the next paragraph of the report. It says:

These payment obligations were selected on the basis of three factors. They were consistent with the values expressed by community members. They relate to behaviour which, if allowed to continue, would have a negative impact on child wellbeing. The existing legislative and service delivery mechanisms aimed at addressing these dysfunctional behaviours in Cape York are unable to realise the desired outcome.

This report also calls for the establishment of a new statutory authority, a family responsibilities commission, to determine whether individuals have breached these obligations and to decide on an appropriate sanction if they have. The sorts of sanctions they are suggesting in this 400-page very detailed and very well set out report go from a warning through to paying the welfare payments that might have gone to that parent to another responsible adult so that the funds go to the child.

Some of the other aims in this report include addressing what is termed the 'welfare pedestal', whereby young school leavers can start off on \$14 an hour and find that very attractive and more rewarding than a traineeship without thinking that in five or 10 years they are going to be better off not on welfare but in a real job. One of the other aims is to support individual engagement in the economy by converting

Community Development Employment Projects into real positions, asking if those are real jobs that people should be doing, making communities business friendly and moving from welfare housing to home ownership.

Like Senator Bartlett, I have just recently visited the Yarrabah community near Cairns, and I was shown around by the Mayor, Vince Mundraby, and the CEO, Leon Yeatman. Leon is probably an unusual commodity in Indigenous communities. He is a Yarrabah local. He has gone home with an MBA—*(Time expired)*