

**Submission
No 53**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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My Background:

I am a retired teacher who was employed by the NSW Department of Education for thirty-five years in secondary schools. During this time, I developed an understanding of the behaviour of teenage students. For over half this period I worked in senior executive positions. From 1987-1991 I was Deputy Principal of Courallie High School in Moree, and from 1991-2006 I was Principal of Gunnedah High School., Both schools enrolled significant numbers of Aboriginal students. I acknowledge that I have been retired for eighteen years, but I believe that my past experiences place me in a good position to evaluate the issues in this inquiry, and to express my recommendations for a way forward.

Introduction:

I have lived in Gunnedah for 32 years. During this time, I have found it to be a very "them and us" community. These divisions are exhibited in several areas including religion (different Christian faiths versus non-secular), education (Private schools versus Government schools), employment (farming related versus mining) and environment (fossil fuels versus renewable projects). Most significantly in the context of this inquiry, I believe it is also a community that exhibits entrenched racial prejudice which is particularly prevalent amongst its older residents.

Aboriginal Issues:

The status of the traditional owners of our land is well documented. In the past 230+ years, white supremacy has effectively suppressed the opportunities for Aboriginal people and denigrated their image. As a result, Aboriginal people experience inferior lifestyle outcomes in many areas. These include education, social stigma, life expectancy, and incarceration levels (just to name a few).

On 14 October 2023 Australians were offered the opportunity to give Aboriginal people a voice in Parliament. I felt totally dismayed and sick in the stomach when I read that the Parkes electorate (which includes Gunnedah) recorded a "no" vote of nearly 80%. It was a spiteful response and reinforced my disgust at the racial prejudice which exists in this part of NSW. I can fully understand the anger that exists in the Parkes electorate. Instead of making a small gesture to reconcile the divide, the referendum results in Parkes (and other similar rural electorates that are experiencing increased levels of crime) has reignited the "them and us" divide.

There is a perception within the white community of Gunnedah (rightly or wrongly) that the current crime issues in the town are the sole responsibility of the Aboriginal community. I have been unable to establish whether this is true because it is difficult to obtain accurate information on the allegation, but once again it reflects the "them and us" mentality of the Gunnedah community. "They" will be the problem because it will certainly not be "us". The perception of many older members of the white community is that young offenders (whoever they are) should be locked up irrespective of their age. We know that incarceration of young people is likely to perpetuate and not solve their issues.

History has many examples of unrest that has occurred because citizens have been ignored. I will refer to the lack of franchise for women in the United Kingdom which resulted in the birth of the suffragette movement over 100 years ago. The frustration resulted in the tactic that when nobody is listening to you it is deeds and actions and not words that will achieve the outcome. I believe it is quite understandable that a community that is denied a voice will seek alternative measures to bring attention to their cause.

Recommendations:

1. Strategies to resolve the tensions between Aboriginal and white communities, and close the outcomes gap are urgently required. It requires strong leadership from all levels of government. At federal level the voice referendum failed to achieve this, so it is crucial that the matter is immediately addressed at state and local government level. First Nations communities must feel that they are being treated with respect. The referendum result gave

them a slap in the face, so it is up to each individual community to set up a process whereby Aboriginal people are given the opportunity to express their concerns and make recommendations on the future policies that affect them. Australians acknowledge Aboriginal people at formal occasions, celebrate their past at international events, but then choose not to listen or respect their culture and needs.

2. There is an urgent need for greater collaboration and information sharing between agencies responsible for the welfare of young people. There are several groups with the very best intentions who are involved with "at risk" young people. I am not convinced that their efforts are well coordinated. When police become involved, it is often too late. In many cases schools and a range of social services will be aware of issues that may be affecting the behaviour of a child. They will probably not be surprised to read that a young person who has been known to them in the past has been involved in subsequent criminal incidents. An individual and integrated plan of support from all agencies is vital at the first signs of erratic and disruptive child behaviour.

3. The current drug laws in Australia need review and reform. What happened to "The drug summit"? It is quite likely that a significant amount of youth crime in NSW is linked to substance abuse. For many decades our government has persisted in dealing with the problem in a punitive fashion. History tells us that prohibition often drives a problem underground and criminals can take advantage of the resulting conditions. Our drug laws are not working, and we cannot continue to pursue our failed approach. There must be better ways of dealing with the problem and we urgently need to explore alternative strategies.

4. An urgent review of the effect of social media on youth behaviour is needed. It is unacceptable that young people can use this medium to publicly boast about anti-social and criminal behaviour and encourage lawlessness in their peer group. Media outlets consistently reject any form of censorship and then continue to make a financial fortune hiding behind the freedom of speech banner. The industry needs to urgently explore processes that promote a culture of responsibility in all media outlets.

5. The Australian Constitution is a major inhibitor to progress. The 2023 referendum process showed this again (as many failed referendums have in the past). If disaffected groups feel their voice is not being heard it is inevitable that they will resort to other methods of drawing attention to their cause. Our constitution is over 120 years old and reflects social conditions and values from the 19th century when the common form of transport was horse and cart. Although this may appear to be a federal issue, there needs to be pressure from all state governments for reform. In my view a group of independent constitutional lawyers should evaluate the constitution and make recommendations for necessary changes to bring it in line with 21st century Australia. The NSW government should lead the way in advocating this reform.

Thank you for reading my submission and recommendations.

Brian Jeffrey M Ed (U Syd).