

## **INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

**Organisation:** The Nationals/Liberal Party

THE NATIONALS



Submission: Standing Committee on  
Social Issues

*Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage  
(Inquiry)*

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## Executive Summary

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition believes that not enough has been done to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

We contest that after 13 years the lemma Labor Government's efforts to improve the quality of life and welfare of Indigenous people in NSW have been lack lustre at best, and have yielded no real results. There was no clearer statement of its failure to prioritise the issue than its poor response to the *Breaking The Silence* Report (2006).

The Report was published in 2006, and while it encapsulated a number of noteworthy recommendations, two years later their application and success remains somewhat questionable.

The tiresome effort of the many people it took to produce a report of such magnitude has left many disheartened with the current situation of social disadvantage that continues in many of the lives of Aboriginal Australians.

As Marcia Ella-Duncan states in the report "The Taskforce acknowledges the people we met with deepest respect. They are our community champions who shared their stories with courage and dignity, sometimes at great risk to themselves and their families. These people spoke of the heartache of child sexual assault for victims and their families, and the devastating impact that it has on our communities. It is on the strength of their testimony that the Taskforce focuses particularly on improvements to the way we respond to child sexual assault in order to stop this devastation" (p2, *Breaking the Silence* Report, 2006).

Despite this, the lemma Government failed to allocate the necessary resources, estimated to be close to \$20 million, to properly implement the

recommendations. Yet during this time period the Government appeared to be able to secure similar amounts of funding for projects that appeared to have a more favourable political outcome, such as the compensation to contractors to delay the opening of the Lane Cove Tunnel.

In our submission, the Liberal/Nationals Coalition have not sought to make hard and fast policy based recommendations to the Committee, but rather highlighted particular areas and issues that we believe warrant close examination, with view to the Committee putting forward constructive, costed, policy based recommendations.

Our submission is based largely on the grass roots input our Local Members have received from Indigenous communities and other stakeholders. For example as recently as August 2007, Members of the NSW Coalition, lead by the Leader of the Nationals and Shadow Minister for Education, visited Indigenous communities in Western NSW to listen and learn about the challenge of engaging Indigenous students in our State's education system. Anecdotes and conversations from these visits have been provided as the contextual basis of our submission.

We sincerely hope the Committee takes the opportunity to also visit Indigenous communities and listen to the nature of the issues first hand. We believe that the most successful policies are those that are conceived at a local level and achieve grassroots support.

## **Areas for Examination**

The Liberal/Nationals Coalition recommend that the Committee closely examine the following issues and areas with a view to putting forward constructive, costed policy based recommendations:

- Avenues to improve the Department of Health's current record system of youths who have contracted STD's;
- The need for additional Safe Houses in the more remote Aboriginal communities;
- The need for a system that would ensure that school children who finish Year 6, but do not go onto Year 7, are traced and recorded, and support is provided to ensure that they continue their schooling;
- The need for a costing of the professional development of Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA's) as a solution to encouraging local Indigenous people to take up the teacher training and teaching positions.
- The need for a costing of a full audit of Aboriginal housing in NSW, in order to ascertain how many homes are available and how many are liveable or require maintenance;
- Avenues to improve the current relationship between the Department of Housing (DOH) and Aboriginal Housing to improve outcomes;
- Opportunities for funding for additional female Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLO's);
- The need for a Joint Investigative Response Team (JIRT) made up of workers from DoCS, Police and the Health Departments that could stay in the communities as opposed to 'flying squads';
- The effects liquor trading hours have on Indigenous communities in an effort to curb early starts to binge drinking;
- The need for stronger liquor accords to address sale of packaged alcohol and hours of trading;
- The role that education of youths could play in preventing sexual abuse;
- The need for specialist sex crimes and drug squad Police resources to be funnelled into the more disadvantaged, remote communities and

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- Examination of how most effectively to co-ordinate a whole of Government approach largely between NSW Police, DoCS, NSW Health, Department of Education and Training and Department of Housing in order to ensure interagency co-operation.





uncommon. This is of course linked to the incidence of children contracting STD's, which has been reported as being prevalent in some of the smaller communities such as Brewarrina, where a women's health worker reported that a number of young children had contracted some form of venereal disease.

- **DoCS staff are understaffed, under resourced and under-trained:** There are examples of this state-wide, such as in Brewarrina where there is reportedly only one DoCS worker who is based largely in Walgett. The DoCS building know as the 'Brewarrina Village' has been closed for seven years, as the Department could not recruit the staff resources to run it. Furthermore in 2007 in Bourke there was no safe house for children, resulting in one situation where the Police had to hold children aged between five and seven years in gaol from Friday to Tuesday over a long weekend.

The outcomes of these issues are reflected in key statistical indicators that track Indigenous peoples health and well-being. The *Indigenous Issues in NSW Research Paper 2004* said that in 2001 life expectancy for a non-Indigenous male was 76 years, where as for Indigenous males it was only 57 years. The Paper went on further to quote Rosemary Neil who stated that "Australia has the dubious distinction of being the only first-world country with a dispossessed Indigenous minority whose men, on average, will not live long enough to claim a retirement pension" (*Indigenous Issues in NSW Research Paper, 2004*).

To provide a context to these facts and figures, it is useful to consider an actual case study of the **Dareton/Wentworth Aboriginal Medical Service**. In August 2007 there was only one GP for the next 200km from Dareton and there was only 0.6 of a ASIC doctor, as they only worked 3 days/week. In this remote community there is a severe shortage of locums, and in order to attract them, the AMS offered \$1000/session, which equates to \$2000/day, yet they were still unable to attract anyone to the position. Furthermore there is no drug and alcohol health worker in the entire Dareton/Wentworth area. For years many patients had to be flown to Broome and Brisbane (and other distant cities), and after an operation was performed, the patient had to find their own way home, at their own cost.

Additionally seven years ago the Government purchased a dental chair and dental equipment for the Wentworth Hospital, however, it still remains in storage, as they have been unable to attract or retain any dental staff. The AMS has four nursing staff who need to be trained, however Dubbo is the closest place, which means that three days a week the nurses have to leave work and travel 800km to Dubbo for the training.

**Based on this we recommend that Committee closely examine the following issues and areas with view to putting forward constructive, costed policy based recommendations:**

- Avenues to improve the Department of Health's current record system of youths who have contracted STD's;
- The need for additional Safe Houses in the more remote Aboriginal communities;



### **Evidence that Aboriginal student retention rates have not improved:**

- NSW has the lowest retention rate for Aboriginal students in Government schools (**Years 7/8 -12**) at 28.7%. The state with the second lowest retention rate is SA with 34.3%.
- The full-time apparent retention rate of Aboriginal students in **Years 7-10** was 80.0% in 2006, down from 81.6% in 2002.
- The full-time apparent retention rate of Aboriginal students in **Years 10-12** was 35.9% in 2006, down from 36.8% in 2002.

The educational performance of Aboriginal children falls well below the NSW averages. The performance of Aboriginal children in the early basic skills test is well below the state average with results worsening as the children progress through school.

Aboriginal student education outcomes in NSW have not significantly improved during the past decade, with Aboriginal numeracy and literacy skills, school retention and completion rates still far below the national average. This situation can be attributed to myriad reasons, one of which being the failure to systematically and comprehensively implement appropriate education policies.

A raft of NSW Government reviews and initiatives have not delivered improved outcomes. These include the **Aboriginal Education Policy (1996)**, the **Review of Aboriginal Education Policy (2002-2003)** and the **Aboriginal Education Review (2004)**.

The Inquiry, headed by Professor Tony Vinson (and endorsed by the NSW Government), found that despite the **Aboriginal Education Policy** being in existence for seven years it had “yet to be implemented in more than a tokenistic way in many schools” (p 20, Vinson, 2002).

**Based on this we recommend that Committee closely examine the following issues and areas with view to putting forward constructive, costed policy based recommendations:**

- The need for a system that would ensure that school children who finish Year 6, but do not go onto Year 7, are traced and recorded, and support is provided to ensure that they continue their schooling;
- The need for a costing of the professional development of AEA's as a solution to encouraging local Indigenous people to take up the teacher training and teaching positions.

## Housing

As the *Breaking the Silence* Report stated: “Many Aboriginal communities experienced chronic overcrowding in their houses and this increased the vulnerability of children” (p 258, 2006).

Additionally the Report, in reference to the issue of overcrowding, stated that the “DOH does not currently have a strategy to address it. However they reported that they would be conducting research into the issue of Indigenous overcrowding within the next years, as a basis for developing a strategy to address it” (p 264, 2006).

Furthermore, The *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005: Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* paper reported that overcrowding contributed to poor health, family violence and poor educational outcomes. Such outcomes were strikingly obvious in all of the communities that The Nationals visited.

**Based on this we recommend that Committee closely examine the following issues and areas with view to putting forward constructive, costed policy based recommendations:**

- The need for a full audit of Aboriginal housing in NSW in order to ascertain how many homes are available and how many are liveable or require maintenance;
- Avenues to improve the current relationship between the DOH and Aboriginal Housing to improve outcomes;

## **Incarceration and the criminal justice system**

While Aboriginals account for only 2% of the population of NSW, they are markedly over-represented in the justice system; accounting for 11% of court appearances, 10% of convictions, 19% of the prison population and 17% of the prison population serving sentences greater than six months (as figures published in 1999 suggest).

Between 1997 and 2001, 29% of the State's Indigenous population was charged with a criminal offence and appeared before a court, more than four times the rate of the non-Indigenous population. Studies have credited a large proportion of these offences as alcohol related.

Anecdotal evidence from the Indigenous communities suggests a close nexus between the abuse of alcohol and criminal violence. Indigenous communities want to work cooperatively with licensed trading venues in order to stamp out the incidence of alcohol fuelled crime.

There also exists a difficulty in trying to empower the communities because currently the communities are not safe when the police report is filed, while the investigation is underway and once charges have been laid. Locals have reported that threats are often made, not only to the child who was assaulted, but also to the whole community. Adding to the complex situation it is reported that cousins and aunties etc. are often threatened whilst the investigation is underway.

Furthermore, the intergenerational aspect of this ongoing problem was mentioned repeatedly throughout the communities. This viscous cycle is characterised by the following systemic problems. The children are abused in communities with poor mental health facilities that have a lack of diagnostic services. They therefore experience ongoing grief and trauma and often turn to drugs and alcohol at a very young age. By their mid 20s, they are often young parents and have a well developed alcohol and/or drug abuse problem. By their late 20s, they are perpetrators themselves.

**Based on this we recommend that Committee closely examine the following issues and areas with view to putting forward constructive, costed policy based recommendations:**

- Opportunities for funding for additional female ACLO's;
- The need for a JIRT made up of workers from DoCS, Police and the Health Departments that could stay in the communities as opposed to 'flying squads';
- The effects liquor trading hours have on Indigenous communities in an effort to curb early starts to binge drinking;
- The role that education of youths could play in preventing sexual abuse;
- The need for stronger liquor accords to address sale of packaged alcohol and hours of trading;
- The need for specialist sex crimes and drug squad Police resources to be funnelled into the more disadvantaged, remote communities and
- Examination of how most effectively to co-ordinate a whole of Government approach largely between NSW Police, DoCS, NSW Health, Department of Education and Training and Department of Housing in order to ensure interagency co-operation.



## **Conclusion**

The overwhelming existence of both statistical information and anecdotal evidence that reflects the growing disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians provides momentum for our drive to bring about positive change in NSW Indigenous communities.

The Liberal/Nationals Coalition therefore hopes to bring some of the most prevalent issues to the forefront of the Inquiry's discussion in an attempt to produce common sense, policy based solutions.

We look forward to the Inquiry's final report.

## References

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