

A letter addressed to:

- Senator Amanda Vanstone Federal Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, [minister@immi.gov.au](mailto:minister@immi.gov.au)
- Tanya Plibersek, Federal Member for Sydney, [Tanya.Plibersek.MP@aph.gov.au](mailto:Tanya.Plibersek.MP@aph.gov.au)
- Senator Aden Ridgeway, NSW, [senator.ridgeway@aph.gov.au](mailto:senator.ridgeway@aph.gov.au)
- Bob Carr, Premier of NSW, [bob.carr@www.nsw.gov.au](mailto:bob.carr@www.nsw.gov.au)
- Andrew Refshauge, NSW Minister for Education and Training, NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, [deputypremiers@mail.ccsu.nsw.gov.au](mailto:deputypremiers@mail.ccsu.nsw.gov.au)
- Carmel Tebbutt, NSW Minister for Community Services, [DOCS@tebbutt.minister.nsw.gov.au](mailto:DOCS@tebbutt.minister.nsw.gov.au)
- Diane Beamer, NSW Minister for Juvenile Justice, [MinWestSyd@beamer.minister.nsw.gov.au](mailto:MinWestSyd@beamer.minister.nsw.gov.au)
- Linda Burney, State Member for Canterbury, [linda.burney@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:linda.burney@parliament.nsw.gov.au)
- Meredith Burgmann, Preesident of the NSW Legislative Council [Meredith.Burgmann@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Meredith.Burgmann@parliament.nsw.gov.au)
- Social Issues NSW Legislative Council Committee, [socialissues@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:socialissues@parliament.nsw.gov.au)
- Clover Moore, State Member for Bligh and Lord Mayor of the City of Sydney [bligh@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:bligh@parliament.nsw.gov.au), [clover@clovermoore.com](mailto:clover@clovermoore.com)
- City of Sydney Safe City Strategy Project Co-ordinators, [lsaville@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:lsaville@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au), [mismatthew@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mismatthew@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Sirs and Mesdames,

I am a resident of ■ Street, Darlington, a small part of Chippendale which borders Redfern. I have lived here for ten years. I am also a school teacher and by law I am required to report children at risk.

I wish to draw your attention to groups of up to twenty, perhaps more, unsupervised children who, at present, are roaming the streets of our area, posing a threat to themselves and to others. These children range in age from toddlers to adolescents.

In recent days I have observed, or have been the victim of, the following behaviours.

- Adolescents and older children walk down the middle of Vine Street with very small children, including toddlers and preschoolers, following behind. The older children are not watching the very young ones. All are at risk of being hit by cars. (Cars routinely speed down Vine Street and, despite requests from residents, no traffic calming devices have been installed.)
- Adolescents and older children run across the four lanes of traffic on Cleveland Street where there are no lights or crossings, dodging the oncoming traffic. The small children follow behind. All these children are at grave risk of being killed.
- Groups of children huddle in the playground on the corner of Vine and Thomas Streets sniffing glue, or some equivalent substance. Very young children are with these groups.
- Children throw stones and bottles at residents, at passers-by, at houses and at cars.
- Children steal mail from mail-boxes, open it, remove cheques and other material they think are valuable and discard the contents and envelopes all over the street. Mail addressed to

residents from Buckland Street, Vine Street and Edward Street has been found scattered over our street in the last few days.

- Children, even the small ones, yell and scream at each other, at residents and at passers-by using language which is obscene and violent to the extreme. Clearly this language is being used in the presence of these children routinely. Any child who is spoken to in this way, and has learned to use such language, is the victim of abuse.
- Children routinely peer into the windows of cars and houses, checking for valuables. Car windows are routinely smashed. Children are heard boasting loudly of the people they have mugged, the bags they have snatched and the cars they have damaged.
- Older adolescents activate the pedestrian lights in Cleveland Street and steal from cars stopped at red lights.
- Children of all ages run through the streets late at night shouting and yelling.

I live close to the Settlement on the corner of Vine and Edward Streets, where, in recent times, drunkenness, violent language and behaviour, and what appears to be domestic violence, has become routine. The buildings have been allowed to run-down to a very poor standard. Small children live in the housing around the Settlement and they must be subject to the abusive environment and substandard conditions.

As well as the problem with unsupervised children, in recent times the parks in Vine Street between Thomas and Edward Streets have become shooting galleries at night. Every morning dirty mattresses, chairs and/or mattresses reappear in the park as fast as the crime prevention people remove them. A neighbour has had to go to the needle exchange to collect a special bin to collect the needles before he can walk his dogs in the morning. One of these parks is a children's playground.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that, over the last few months, Council clean-up services have been severely downgraded. The corner of Vine and Edward Streets, as well as Vine Lane, have become dumping grounds for rubbish. The Council no longer routinely cleans these places. The surface of Vine Lane has subsided so rubbish trucks no longer go down the lane to collect rubbish. The smell is foul. The result is that residents deal with Third World conditions as they leave their homes.

Although I have no personal experience of the following events or situations, they are commonly discussed by local residents.

- At least two people have been driven from their homes by the problems in our area. Both these people are Asian women, one of them a neighbour of a friend of mine. At least two elderly people are in fear of going outside their homes. Asian women and elderly women seem to be special targets of abuse, bag-snatching and rock-throwing in our area.
- A needle-exchange van is permanently parked beside a park where children play on the corner of Hugo and Caroline Streets. Children who play at this park and who use the new community centre in Hugo Street are forced to mix with drug users and dealers as they play and move about on the street. People abusing drugs and alcohol are routinely seen in the open areas of Everleigh Street, again accompanied by children of all ages. (No one in my street would ever go near the new community centre because of the drug-dealing on its doorstep.)
- Many of the children have no fixed address nor stable carers.
- Many of the children who roam the streets rarely, if ever, attend school. In my professional opinion, formal schooling has nothing to offer these children until they cease to be the

victims of such extreme neglect, and until they have learned to respect and care for themselves, to respect and care for others and to respect and care for their surroundings.

- Children set fire to cars as a form of entertainment.
- If children are reprimanded or reported by people who are victims of their anti-social behaviours, parents or carers of these children threaten the victims with serious assault.
- These children are sexually aware and active at very young ages, so young that the children are at great risk.
- A taxi driver who gives food to the children instead of the money they are often begging for has told me they wolf food down as if they are starving.

I can only assume the authorities are taking no action to protect these groups of unsupervised children from neglect, danger and violence because the children are Aboriginal. I find it hard to imagine that this situation would be allowed to continue if the children at risk were of European descent.

Similarly I can only assume that the authorities take so little action to curtail the activities of the drug dealers because they are operating within an Aboriginal community. Again this situation would not be tolerated in and around the homes of well-resourced people of European descent.

By the authorities I do not mean the local police. I have nothing but praise for the young constables who daily attend the crimes committed in our area. They work in appalling conditions and are clearly under-resourced. Despite this they are committed to providing diversionary activities for the children at risk. They obviously can do nothing about the revolving doors of social breakdown, inadequate juvenile justice and government indifference that tips these children out onto the street over and over again.

Residents in my street feel under siege. For the first time in the ten years I have lived here, I have begun to hear openly racist remarks about Aboriginal people. It makes you feel sick to the stomach, but there are many people who feel very frightened and some who feel forced to leave their homes because of what is happening.

This area has the potential to be a unique Sydney 'village', a place where the original owners of the land live alongside the older working-class residents, recent migrants, students and white collar workers in a vibrant and interactive community. Drugs and crime are destroying that potential, while developers lurk in the background, ready to prosper from complete social breakdown.

People in our area have been bombarded with glossy material about the Redfern-Waterloo Partnership. From a resident's perspective this initiative seems to be a criminal waste of money. Since its inception problems in this area have increased many times over.

Further, local people who have seen the plans for the redevelopment of the Block say the development will become just another drug dealer haven. It appears to us to be nothing more than a future slum replacing the present one.

Indifference, waste and blame-shifting at all levels of government are a significant part of the problem in our community. A myriad government-funded services fiddle at the edges of the problem. From a local point of view the Aboriginal Medical Service seems to be the most effective of these services and there are several under-resourced representatives of the mainstream churches who have worked for years to alleviate the immediate social distress on the Block. The gymnasium on the corner of Vine and Everleigh Streets has a good reputation but is apparently used by people from areas outside the Block, not the people in need who live in the neighbouring streets.

In contrast local residents feel that organised charities such as Barnardo's have little or no effect, or these children would not be roaming the streets. Furthermore extremist Christians from Hillsong

Church who have comparatively recently come onto the Block with their neo-missionary approach, may even be doing more harm than good.

Already at least one young person from this community has died in tragic circumstances. It is only a matter of time before more at-risk children suffer a similar fate.

I am writing to report this neglect in the hope some meaningful, comprehensive and co-ordinated action will be taken which addresses both the immediate crisis and the longterm well-being of these children, their families and the local community.

Yours sincerely,



Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2004