

REPORT OF A PUBLIC FORUM BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

**INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING
INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**At the Bidwill Uniting Church Community Centre
On Thursday 14 February 2008**

The Public Forum commenced at 5.42 p.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. I. W. West (Chair)

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly

The Hon. M. A. Ficarra

Dr J. Kaye

The Hon. T. J. Khan

The Hon. M. S. Veitch

CHAIR: I welcome everyone to this public meeting of the Standing Committee on Social Issues. On behalf of the Committee I thank the Mount Druitt Uniting Church for allowing us to use this venue earlier this afternoon and this evening. The Committee is very pleased to be here and we are looking forward to hearing your opinions on how indigenous disadvantage in New South Wales can be addressed.

The New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has asked the Committee to inquire into policies and programs aimed at addressing the lifetime expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and identifying opportunities for strengthening cultural resilience within indigenous communities. The Committee needs to hear your views on which factors most affect the life expectancy of the Aboriginal people in respect of health, education, adequate housing, employment and/or the criminal justice system.

Before we commence this evening I would like to make some comments about aspects of the forum. Firstly, there is the issue of privacy. I understand that some of the issues that may be raised this evening may be highly personal for many speakers, so I ask that speakers respect the privacy of others and avoid naming third parties, which might result in a matter becoming more complicated than it should in a general forum. The Committee secretariat will be assisting us this evening. Those are the people that you should be getting in touch with if you want to put your name down, and they are the people who keep us all in order and make sure that we are operating in some sort of civilised way.

I ask anyone who has not put down his or her name to do so now. I thought that possibly five minutes each speaker would be appropriate and I have the job of giving people a nudge and to tell them that their time is up. So far as the order is concerned, when it is someone's turn to speak I will read out the name from the list and ask him or her to come and talk to us. If any speaker does not wish the media to be present, if they are present, that speaker should say so and we will ask them to leave. The first person that has her name on the list is Avis Egan.

Ms EGAN: I am a registered nurse. I have just completed 12 years of nursing—three years with Aboriginal health. The current life expectancy for Kooris is very much lower than mainstream. There is one public hospital in Melbourne. Some of the Koori patients that are coming in are dying before they reach 50. I think the main reasons are excessive smoking, alcohol consumption, too much sugar and fatty food. There is not enough education on the dangers of these things. There is not enough education on cardiac arrest, strokes and the prevention of liver disease. More education is urgently needed in this area.

In New South Wales the State Department of Health should be legally responsible for Aboriginal health, not the Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people staff the Centre for Aboriginal Health in the State health department and some of them are not qualified. I think it should be staffed by mainstream. For these problems to be solved the Government needs to take control. The standard of education of Aboriginal people is not high enough to deal with these issues; we need the Government to take the lead. The Centre for Aboriginal Health in the State health department is not currently controlled by mainstream.

There are some urgent health problems in New South Wales. If we can get something from this forum I would like to put forward an urgent recommendation that the Centre for Aboriginal Health be urgently controlled by mainstream. A suggestion is two permanent registered nurses and a health manager. I think the reason there are so many health problems is that Aboriginal people are controlling a lot of the organisations. We have not got qualified people. I worked in the health department in Melbourne around 34 years ago and they had a section for Aboriginal health within the State health department and they controlled all the health problems and it was really good.

My concern is that Aboriginal people control the Centre for Aboriginal health in the State health department and some of them have not got any formal qualifications. We need qualified people there. Some Aboriginal people are dying at the age of 48 or 50 from heart attacks, stroke, diabetes and liver disease, and we need the help of mainstream. We need to get something from this forum that they will take over the Centre for Aboriginal Health urgently because Aboriginal people's lives are in danger, and the Government is legally responsible. I do not know what is going on there.

CHAIR: Thank you very much Avis. You raised a very important aspect. I should clarify that this Committee is a Legislative Council standing committee. It is an upper House standing committee in the New South Wales Parliament, not the Federal Parliament. This is the New South Wales Parliament and the Committee is inquiring into an issue that has been referred to it by the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The last thing we want to see is any of the recommendations that we make gathering dust on a shelf. We want to be in a position to be making recommendations that will stick; recommendations that we can make to the Government that it will take up and that will mean something. So your contributions tonight are extremely important in assisting us in that regard. I ask David Nicholls to come up and make a contribution.

Mr NICHOLLS: Good afternoon. All I want to say is that I was with the police department for 16 years as a liaison officer. When I left there to have a heart operation, I have been dealing without the Housing Commission ever since and I have never seen so many pigs in all my life. When I could not get a place I ran around for about nine weeks. I went and saw Diane Beamer and she clicked her fingers and jumped up and down and two days later I had a place. That is one lady to whom I owe a lot. I think the Housing Commission has to have liaison officers there for two days a week to deal with Aboriginal problems. Luke is the officer in that area. That is the way we did it in the police department. If an Aboriginal was picked up or they were arrested I had to be present. I was lucky that I had good bosses because they did that. That is all I want to say. I hope you people here today take that into account. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you very much David. You raised an important aspect. The next person on the list is Rita Tobin.

Ms TOBIN: I am a parishioner at Holy Family Centre, Emerton. For 10 or 11 years I have been involved with the Chifley Committee of Australians for Reconciliation. I have become aware of a lot of the problems of Aboriginal people in health, housing and juvenile justice. There are a lot of areas that could be improved. With housing, as the gentleman said, it is very difficult for Aboriginal people to get a home. I was speaking to a lady yesterday and she had a young woman whose partner had been sent to prison. She has nowhere to go and she has three small children. They were trying to get her some accommodation.

They rang an estate agent to see whether they could get somewhere for her to live and they were told that she had to come to a real estate agent in St Marys for an interview. When they got there they realised that she was part Aborigine. They said that they were sorry but there was no vacancy. That is the sort of thing that some people have to face. Very often people who sit in big offices make decisions for the disadvantaged. Here I am speaking about Aboriginal people, but it applies also to other disadvantaged people. It is very good to sit in an office in the city and make decisions for people, but they do not understand the humanness of the person in need.

These people are human beings and they are in desperate need of help in all these areas—health, education and housing. It is just not good enough for a country like ours that has the wealth that it does for people to be homeless or to be lacking in educational facilities. I am not talking about people who opt out of education, but they opt out for different reasons because they cannot cope with the learning situation and because it is different to their understanding of life. Their lives are so full of hardship, disadvantage and disappointment. Very often they cannot cope with ordinary situations that some people can cope with.

For all these reasons I feel that a forum like this that looks at these questions is very important. But even more important than looking at the things that are happening we have to do something about it. Anybody can talk about things. You can talk and talk until you are blue in the face but unless you do something to correct the situation nothing will happen; it will just get worse. It will go from bad to worse. As Avis said, the health situation for Aboriginal people is in a terrible state. In education none of these problems can be solved overnight.

I heard someone say once that it takes three generations to change a situation. Hopefully, we will not have to wait three generations to change these situations. If this forum can make a difference and help the politicians and the Government to understand the depth of the situation so that it can be changed, that would be a good thing.

CHAIR: The issues that are being raised reinforce what we have been hearing over the past three days—from the first day when we heard from government departments about all the wonderful things that are in place and the good things that are happening through to yesterday and today when we started to hear more realistic stories about the failures and shortfalls and the desperate needs that we must address.

Aunty GLORIA: I would like us now to think about our kindergarten building—Murrawinda—at Mount Druitt. It has been vacant for nearly four years. We have got tonnes of Koori kids running around who are not going to kindy. We do not know what is happening with this building. We do not know why it folded. We have a few children coming to this building every Monday morning. That is the only thing we have. I would like you to think about Murrawinda. It was going for 28 years before it closed. No-one seems to want to do anything about it.

What is up my nose is the fact that we are all wondering whether we here in New South Wales are going to end up like those in the Northern Territory. I have seen a documentary about those in the Northern Territory, where they have the voucher. They went into a shop that was sold out, but they could not go to any other shop with the voucher. So they had to go without. If they had their dole or pension they could have gone to any shop to buy the food. With vouchers they have only one shop to go to. I do not think that should happen here. There are many families on the grog and many who gamble, but there are twice as many families who do not. I cannot see why those who look after their children should be treated the same as the ones who neglect their children. I really worry about that kind of thing. I have 37 grandchildren and they are all well fed and well dressed and they go to school. If that kind of thing happened, it would be a different kettle of fish altogether.

Over the past few days people have been talking about half-cast children. There are many half-cast children now. In the first place, it was said they went away because they were neglected. I lived out west for almost 60 years at Brewarrina and Burke. It was not because they were neglected, but because they were a big embarrassment to the squatters, farmers and managers on the missions, and the managers' male children. That is the reason they were taken away. I want you to remember that. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that important contribution.

Fr MULLINS: I am the assistant priest at Holy Family Parish at Mount Druitt. I am concerned to speak on one particular issue that may already have been mentioned here this afternoon. I mention it in the context of the work of the men's health unit at the Men's Shed at Mount Druitt. I think there might have been a speaker from there already. I am sure he said great things. A thing that has been bothering people a great deal about the Men's Shed is the lack of support services for people released from prison. There have been a lot of calls for a halfway house or some other accommodation. That is extremely important. I suggest that it is particularly critical for young people released from prison so that they have a better chance of avoiding the revolving door syndrome. They should be given appropriate support as they attempt to settle back into the community.

I have been told by the superintendent of the Mount Druitt Police that two people are released from prison every day into the Mount Druitt policing area. This is not a minor issue; it is an ongoing concern and challenge. I am not exactly speaking on behalf of the Men's Shed—although I am on the management committee—but I am aware that it is particularly concerned about the lack of support services, particularly for young people released from prison.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. That important issue has been raised with us over the past couple of days. There appear to be many gaps that we must consider carefully.

Mr RICK MANTON: I am involved in the local indigenous church and I have been at Mount Druitt for 10 years. I will speak about a program that we want to implement in our church. It is a church-based mentoring program. I know that over the past few days, weeks, months and years the church has received bad press. That comes when white people have come into Aboriginal communities and worked there with all kinds of different attitudes that are totally outside the realms of what the *Bible* teaches. We are coming at this from an indigenous point of view and we want to reach indigenous people. The challenge for us is to look at it differently. Our approach is radical because we know from personal experience about some of the issues. We have been affected by them. We tend to think and talk about solutions and to work through them from a grassroots level.

I am not aware of any other mentoring program being implemented anywhere else in New South Wales or Australia. It probably has happened, but I am not aware of it. It is a grassroots program focusing mainly on youth and kids. We have a lot of kids and youths coming to our church. You can look at them and almost predict their future, and it is not very bright. We as a church want to do something about that. We believe strongly that our mentoring program will make a huge difference in the kids' lives, in family life and in the community's life. It is a holistic program focusing on cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical issues.

We have been asking the question in our group: What does it mean to be an indigenous man today? That is an interesting question, and a lot of the guys in our group could not answer it. The mentoring initiative is a preventative program looking at alcohol and drugs and trying to steer kids away from that into a positive lifestyle for positive outcomes and a positive future. We focus on the family because we believe that is the key to our survival and to our community's survival. Over the years the family structure has been broken down. We are a family-oriented people and we need to get back to focusing on the family.

We are looking to teach through our mentoring program from a women's point of view—not me personally. Women in the group are teaching other women what it means to be a woman today and about their role in the home—how do they look after the kids and all that kind of thing. The same happens with the men. In our community I see a lot of kids having kids. The males, in particular, do not have a clue about their responsibilities and they go off to breed with someone else. It goes in a vicious cycle. Those kids grow up with no guidance or direction. It goes around and around. We firmly believe in this program and we know it will work. We have that self-belief in regard to that program.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. You have obviously hit on some core issues of family ownership and responsibility. Those issues have been recurring throughout the three days of our hearings.

Mr BRETT MANTON: To tell the truth, I do not know where to start. The problems we are confronting are massive in size, scope and number. I will address one part of the story and I will catch up later with some other stories. I was administrator of three Aboriginal schools in Western Australia for five years. I trained on and off the job for the first two years and took the administrator's role for the next three years.

The school was in Western Australia but the main school campus was in Coolgardie, which is not far from Kalgoorlie. It was a boarding school for secondary students. We have the capacity to have around 40 boys and 40 girls in our hostel. Those kids came from remote parts of the Western Australia and the Northern Territory and some from Queensland. We accepted some from other States when the need arose. At any given time we had between seven and 10 different language groups in our school.

Then we got the education part of our operation right. Prior to my going there—the school was called the Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School [CAPS], set up and run by Wonguthas in the goldfields who had come off Mount Margaret Mission, which is a tick for the missions—we were not interpreting anything different than what government schools were interpreting where those kids were coming from, but we had a solution to it. We had problems that we sorted out. Once we sorted that out and got the ball rolling, some amazing things happened.

I will tell you about Richard, for example, from Oombulgurri. When he came down with his report, his teacher said—Richard was 14 at the time—he was at a year 8 stage. When we tested him, he was a splinter off being illiterate. People have got this idea that Aborigines are dumb so they lower the bar, see? Aborigines do not like being treated like that, so we raised the bar. Not to our surprise, all the kids came up to it. We took kids like Richard—and our hostel was full of them—from where they were to where they should be, sometimes within three months but no longer than five months. No other school in Australia was achieving what we were doing there.

Do you know what the Government did to us? They squeezed our funds. The cheques came a term later when our lips were barely above the water. You would think that they would jump on board. The experience of my dealing with the departments, both State and Federal, was incredible when we were achieving such amazing results, right? Because we got it right in the classroom! Those kids came from really warm areas. If you have ever lived in the goldfields you will know that when the time comes, the temperature drops from hot to freezing cold in a split second. We thought those kids would be homesick, and we were sort of scratching our heads when it was getting close to winter. In mid-term, they all came back.

They all came back because we got it right in the classroom and they felt like decent human beings. The Government squeezed things harder. Our biggest problem always was government. I know where that comes from and I do not want to go into it just yet. We need new thinking for a new day. I think that is what Rudd is on about, okay? We have to be willing to try something completely different—not just a little bit different, but something completely different—like find out what happened at the Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School and copy it. It is a good model to copy.

I will give you an example of how the funding is wrongly directed. At the time I was working there, there was heaps and heaps and heaps of money for Aboriginal languages to be learned in the classroom. It was an amazing experience to be in a board

meeting with all Wongutha people. We were in desperate need of funding, believe me. If we could have tapped into that resource! The question was, "Well, which language do you teach?" We had at least half a dozen language groups in this school, they are in Wongutha country, and the question is, "What do we teach?"

The Aboriginal board decided that it was not our job, the job of the school, to teach Aboriginal languages. Our job was to make sure that they were proficient in English because when they go back home and buy a car, it breaks down and they open up the manual, it is written in English. There is a serious obesity problem in this country. When you go and buy food and read the label, it is all written in English. I thought the board was really wise in its decision to focus on that, and that is what we did. Funding needs to be redirected. It is a new day. We need to try new things.

Another matter I would like to raise about education is that from my experience I believe if you do not turn Aboriginal kids on to education in the preschool and early years, you have Buckley's chance of turning them around. I have worked in preschools, white preschools, where Aboriginal kids attended. The money is absolutely lousy. It was the best job I ever had, but I had to leave it because the money was so poor. I believe that needs seriously addressing because we need to attract top-shelf Aboriginal operators into preschools. They will not go there because of the money. They have got families to feed, they have bills to pay, they have things to do, and they cannot do them on preschool wages. Yet we need to attract the best Koorie operators and the best Aboriginal operators into the preschools to turn the kids on to education.

CHAIR: Thank you, Brett. That was a great contribution that hit the mark.

Ms KAYLEEN MANTON: Good evening, everyone. My name is Kayleen Manton. I am Rick's wife. I have been at the Mount Druitt Indigenous Church for 11 years. We moved from Victoria before we came here. I am a Queenslander. I would just like to share a little bit about myself. I went to Canberra yesterday. When the Opposition said our women were drinking and let their children, I can say that that would have been me because that was my upbringing, and I do not drink today. So sometimes an alcoholic woman will not always have an alcoholic child. I can say, for me and my sister, that we are not alcoholics. We have seen it all, and sometimes that does not happen to all of us.

I would just like to say that Rick and I, we have done Scripture at one of the public schools over the last nine years. We start off with the kids when they are in year 1 and then as the years go on, we see them in year 6. In year 3, we see a change that comes over them. When they are in year 6, you can say in your mind, "That kid there is going to end up in a juvenile centre." You can see it in primary school. You can see those who are going to be struggling with things. In year 6, we have seen kids who cannot read properly—in year 6!

In Scripture, we would do numeracy and everything with them as well, you know. They have to count things and write things. One young girl, she is in year 6 and she will be in high school next year, but she cannot even read properly. She is asking me what the letter A looks like. That should not be happening in year 6. So you know what is going to happen to this girl; you can tell the future. She is going to end up on the dole and probably pregnant at a young age. She is not going to be going to high school because she will not be able to cope.

I think that our schools need personnel at the primary school for kids, when they come to school each day, to unload. A lot of Aboriginal kids come to school with issues. I am talking from experience. You come into school having seen things in your house and in your neighbourhood that night as a kid and you cannot tell anybody. You do not know who to tell. It is good to have somebody at school, a person, that they feel that they can just go and unload a bit to and talk to about, you know, the night or what happened. We have had small children tell us about the kids who harass neighbours at night and that, and these kids have been in our class. These are kindergarten kids.

What I would like to see is personnel in the primary schools around Mount Druitt so they will have someone for them to talk to and just unload so that they are not carrying the burden in their little hearts each day and night and are trying to cope with it. It is sort of like what comes first, the chicken or the egg, with all these problems. You know, what should you deal with first? My concern with Mount Druitt too is that, in the 11 years I have lived here, I have seen only one Aboriginal person work at the Mount Druitt shopping centre. If you go out there today, you will not find one Aboriginal girl behind the checkout, you will not find one Aboriginal boy who is a security person or pushing the trolley, nor are there any girls in the retail shops. If you have seen them, I would like to see them. I have never seen any.

I think we can try and encourage that throughout year 10 kids at the school and year 12 and have more work experience for them. You know, if our business people in Mount Druitt who love Aboriginal people can see the year 10 kids or the year 12 kids and say, "I've got a job for you. Would you just like to come and try it out?"—they might not like it—at least that would give them a chance to say, "No, I don't like that."

Just give them that opportunity to try it out. I worked at a juvenile centre for a year as a chaplain. I would like to see the juvenile centre have seminars for the girls there. They have got too much free time. I think they are doing arts and crafts. All that is good, but they are only bandaid solutions. You know, we have to deal with what is going on inside. You can have all this outward stuff, but they are still bottling up in a lot of things inside.

I used to try to talk to a few of them about those things, but time does not allow you to do that. I would like to see that as part of their program. And we should make them go to school when they are in jail. You know, they are in prison. They should be made to sit down and get a bit of education or sit down and do a course or a TAFE course, but they have a choice of not to do it. But I think that they should do that and have seminars on their own feelings and why they do the things that they do.

As regards health and wellbeing, I know a lot of people do not support giving finances to churches, but you know what, we are a people who do not drink alcohol. You know what? White churches drink alcohol, and Aboriginal churches do not, so we are all about wellbeing as well. We do not smoke. Most of us do not smoke and do not drink, and that is health and wellbeing, yet when I have had to try to get funding for a woman's conference—that is, about 80 Aboriginal women who do not drink and do not smoke and are community leaders—you know, we get knocked back because we do not fit the criteria. Yet these women are leaders in their community.

I like that saying, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world". It is the women. I am not being silly about the men, but, you know, we are the ones who look after the babies and the kids. That is all I wanted to say.

CHAIR: Thank you for that, Kaleen. People have contributed very powerful words this evening—Avis, David, Rita, Gloria, Pat, Rick, Brett and Kayleen. Thank you very much.

Ms MATTHEWS: I was up here earlier this afternoon answering questions in relation to Learning Ground. After being here tonight and hearing what members of my community are saying I would like to give a bit of a commentary. Everything that you are talking about is possible. There are frameworks within the New South Wales Government already that should be enabling this, but I do not understand why they are not working. We have our community justice groups, our circle sentencing and our local authorities that are not engaging effectively enough.

Whilst we are here talking about a lot of the rigors of our black-white engagement and trying to get social cohesion, peace and justice there is still work to be done. It is about us now. It is at about our solidarity and our connectedness. But that does not let the Government or non-Aboriginal people off the hook in any measure; it is about how we need a concurrent activity going on. Yesterday was a powerful event. As I said earlier in evidence, I feel a shift, but I also feel a power and I feel a courage to now start to talk to people about things that have often been too much of a challenge for people to say, or too much of a challenge for people to hear. But when do we wake up? When do we step up? When do we really get honest about our interconnectedness as an Aboriginal community to create a framework of movement that goes all in the one direction?

I am not here to shame anybody; I am here shaking like a leaf but I feel that this needs to be said. There cannot be an expectation that governments step up and try to change things because the truth is that they do not know what to do. Even to be talking about social inclusion is a fallacy because all their policies for the past 60 years have been framed to be socially exclusive. So you are talking about trying to change the direction of the Murray River. The mother in front of me knows that that is a very hard task. We stood together at the junction of the Darling and the Murray and we saw the water going in different directions and at different levels. The truth is that the true spirit of that current flows the one way, but we are moving only in that one way.

So I am saying that even after the spirit of the blessing that we all received yesterday, to be honest about it, it is forgiveness that we need to be talking about. But I also say to all my contemporaries, peers, seniors and elders in front of me that it is also about us stepping up and getting back to the true spirit of our aboriginality. As I said, the Government cannot be let off the hook. You now have to stand up and accept that you are dealing with the world's oldest culture and religion; that our culture and spirituality have the answers to your complexities in providing us with a socially just existence. Do not make my heritage your history and do not put me in a position where I bargain away my self-determination. There is nothing scary about us. In fact, if you get it right for us, everybody else will know that Aussie fair go. Bless you as Australian citizens and thank you.

CHAIR: I wish I could have said that. The next speaker is Judy Parry.

Ms PARRY: I am from the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry [ACM]. We are mainly a group of volunteers who get together and yarn about what is needed. We try to be a bit diverse in how we apply service groups or different things we work with. We have team members on circle sentencing. We talk to schools about reconciliation and central justice and we try to educate schools such as Riverview and different leaders that are coming through. We also work with domestic violence groups and we avail ourselves of the expertise of our team leaders and a community development worker in domestic violence, for example, in places like Murrandine.

We have run different groups for people in need of the services just for getting together, understanding each other and understanding that women in those positions are not alone. We have a service for Bolwarra. Those of you who know Bolwarra will be aware that we have transitional centres. The ladies from Bolwarra come to groups and ladies like Aunty Janice work with the girls. Aunty Janice Kennedy, Jenny and Daisy help with their transition. They might see a counsellor, have a yarn, have a need to be with their people, and know that they are coming out but that they have some connections. We help them into our community.

While I am talking about domestic violence the young lady said earlier that young people are coming from, say, spending six, eight, or nine months in a refuge with mum, and they are only nine years old. They have not had recent schooling and they have been under stress for some time. There are programs for high school kids but if we do not support eight-year-old and nine-year-old children and help them along, 13-year-old and 14-year-old children will not stay in school; they will be pregnant or in trouble.

While we are talking about youths in trouble, we have a program for which we got support last year from another church organisation that gives out funding to run drug and alcohol groups for What's Your Deal. We get mental health in to talk about all the different things that get them into trouble—drugs, alcohol, or cannabis. We try to do it very differently. We get in our elders, in particular our male elders, for the young ones. Aunty Janice Brown is teaching the kids and helping the kids through. Uncle Wes and Greg also come over. But money is needed for these programs. Just recently we got some money and we took the kids away on a youth camp. They were absolutely amazing.

We had volunteers from the ACM cooking and cleaning. The council in Penrith gave us some extra money for transport, but you cannot do everything on a shoestring. I did not think to bring them along because this was a last minute thing. I got a flyer and raced here today just to let you know what is needed. When you are talking about mentoring and young men coming from prison, we have a male counsellor for crime prevention. We tried to put in a submission and we all thought it was a great submission. We worked on skilling up some Aboriginal boys, along with a male counsellor in the groups, but we were told that our elders that we put forward as cultural educators for the kids did not have a degree, so we did not really fit the criteria.

We told them about What's Your Deal and that young girls worked on beading whilst the young boys worked on the didgeridoo. We got the Parramatta boys to come along. We got the worker from Penrith to come in and talk to the kids about high-risk offender policies so that the kids would not keep on getting hurt. Young 12-year-old children are being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon because they do not know the criteria for young risk offenders. We were told that we were marginalising women,

that we were doing the wrong thing, and that the women should be allowed to play the didgeridoo. We did not fit the criteria. We will have to look at funding and at our Aboriginal culture. If we are to run groups we need to be able to put in our culture and we need to be able to do it in our way. It needs to be understood that our cultural leaders have a life experience in culture and they do not need a degree. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Judy. I take this opportunity to thank everyone for being here this evening. As Chair of the Standing Committee on Social Issues I give you this commitment: We will be going around the State taking contributions and getting information from people. We will be going to Dubbo, Kempsey and other areas around the State and we will be doing an interim report by the end of June and a final report by the end of the year. We want to ensure that the contributions that have been made here today are incorporated.

I am sure I am not verballing any member of the Committee when I say that we are all unanimous in this view. We want the indigenous community to have ownership of the recommendations that we put to the Government. In trying to achieve that we want to ensure that the secretariat that supports the Committee has an opportunity to speak to you further to enable you to elaborate on your contributions, which will be put down in greater detail as possible recommendations for us to consider. So we appreciate you coming tonight. It is extremely important. This forum has shown us, as a Committee, that this is the sort of thing we need to do in other places. Thank you very much.

The forum concluded at 6.42 p.m.
