



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Indigenous Communities
SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 February 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker Hayes, Chris, MP	Question No.

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (4.23 pm)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, let me also congratulate you on your elevation to that noble role. I would like to share some of the sentiments that the member for Cowper has just put forward. We will stay committed to this intervention, to deliver the very necessary results that are required on the ground in remote communities.

I think Shadow Minister Abbott indicated how much we owe to Nanette Rogers, the Crown Prosecutor, for bringing these matters very publicly to our attention. But could I say—and all credit to Ms Rogers—that she was prosecuting briefs that were prepared on information that was relayed by the Northern Territory Police; therefore, I think it is incumbent upon us to look at what the Northern Territory Police have had to say about the scope of this intervention and how it should proceed, and what they have said specifically about the permit system. To date, the Leader of the Opposition has essentially argued that we need to wind back the permit system. He makes out that it is, effectively, a barrier to remote communities' participation in economic benefits. This intervention is not about the participation of a community in economic development. That is something we specifically have to do. The Minister for Health and Ageing just indicated what we need to do and are continuing to do in relation to health, as we will also do in relation to education and training to ensure that the Aboriginal youth of these communities have access to all the necessary skills and abilities to allow them to fully participate in the economic benefits of our communities.

This is specifically about being able to access the remote communities of the Northern Territory. I did pay due deference to the views of Nanette Rogers, but perhaps I could indicate what the Police Federation of Australia said in their submission of 9 August to the Senate inquiry. They question the connection between the permit system and child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities and, therefore, they claim, changes to the permit system would be unwarranted. They go on to say:

Operational police on the ground in the Northern Territory believe that the permit system is a useful tool in policing the communities, particularly in policing alcohol and drug-related crime. It would be most unfortunate if by opening up the permit system in the larger public townships and the connecting road corridors as the government intends, law enforcement efforts to address the 'rivers of grog', the distribution of pornography, and the drug running and petrol sniffing were made more difficult.

They are not my words; they are the words of the Police Federation of Australia representing the specific interests of the police officers of the Northern Territory. They have indicated very clearly, from a law enforcement perspective, that it would be a retrograde position to do what the former government intended to do and that is to abolish the permit system.

In looking at what the Leader of the Opposition said about being able to open up these communities to the rest of the country at large, this exercise is not about opening up the communities but about addressing specific issues, specific problems, in these communities currently. If the police are coming out and making substantive submissions like that to the then government—which, incidentally, were ignored—it is incumbent upon us on forming this new government to at least listen to those people who operate on the ground, who have responsibility for law enforcement, who care about what occurs in these communities, who care just as much as the Crown Prosecutor who prosecuted all of those matters. These people were the very ones who laid the initial information, who laid the charges and made the arrests. We have decided here simply to take one version, and we are certainly committed to proceeding with the intervention, but in looking at what is a good tool in law enforcement we cannot take our eye off what has occurred and what is the practical experience of police. (*Time expired*)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—The discussion is concluded.