



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

Hansard 10 November 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Hon. J. C. SPENCE (Mount Gravatt— ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading) (10.07 a.m.), by leave: When the Beattie Labor Government came to office four months ago, we pledged to the people of Queensland to promote reconciliation, social justice and racial harmony in this State. We pledged to restore a whole-of-Government commitment to improving the social and economic well-being of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. We pledged to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included in relevant Government decision-making bodies and that indigenous self-determination is advanced.

Recently, a lot of media attention has been focused on the issue of violence in Queensland's indigenous communities, especially family violence—violence directed at women and children. I applaud the attention. It is high time the general community understood the issue and confronted it. The fact is: domestic or family violence is not a subject most of us like to hear about, let alone talk about. It is a bit like the disability issue 30 years ago, which was kept behind closed doors. The issue of violence against women and children must be dragged out into the stark sunlight so that everyone can see its hideous features, confront the perpetrators of this violence and try to extinguish it.

I note that various people have suggested that an inquiry should be conducted into this issue. However, this proposition is not supported by the Aboriginal community at large. Jacob George, the Chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council, the Queensland Government's peak indigenous advisory body, stated publicly at the Coming Together conference in Cairns last week—

"The fact is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what the issues and the problems are, and we are tired of being put under the microscope and investigated. It is time for the money to be spent on addressing the problems, not on another inquiry to identify things which have already been identified."

This view was supported unanimously by the participants at the Community Justice Initiatives Conference, which included over 200 delegates, many of whom were elders from remote indigenous communities.

The Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council has also publicly declared their unreserved support to fund action strategies, not another inquiry. To quote the chair, Wayne Connolly, in a letter to me last week—

"What is needed now is not passive action via a long cumbersome inquiry process, but rather positive active action that can provide direct assistance to Community Councils to deal with these problems."

Queensland's State representative of ATSIC's National Women's Advisory Committee, Jenny Pryor, has also publicly endorsed my approach on this issue and has stated that there is "a fair degree of scepticism amongst indigenous people about the value of yet another inquiry".

There have been numerous studies, investigations and inquiries into alcohol, violence and associated problems in remote Aboriginal communities. Many of these reports are still gathering dust on shelves in university libraries or in Government departments. I am not about to add a couple more million to the inquiry industry to reveal a problem which has already been extensively studied. My view is

that the last thing Aboriginal people need is another group of people sent by the Government to look over their fences. If we initiate yet another inquiry, we will be squandering resources in administrative and bureaucratic processes rather than putting the money directly into the communities—into action rather than talk.

One highly publicised and well-known inquiry into similar matters was the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody. This inquiry was valuable in that it exposed many of the issues surrounding Aboriginal deaths in custody, including the harmful effects of alcohol and other drugs in Aboriginal communities. It was initiated by the Commonwealth Government and ran over four years. It made 339 recommendations which Governments around Australia, including Queensland, are still implementing. Before one cent went to reducing Aboriginal deaths in custody, a total of \$31,626,000 was spent by Australian taxpayers on the inquiry.

The Beattie Labor Government does not need another inquiry that will duplicate earlier work and waste millions of Queensland taxpayers' dollars. What Aboriginal people want is Government support in terms of services, infrastructure and community development opportunities to address these problems. Unlike the Opposition, which has given up on Aboriginal issues and jettisoned the portfolio altogether, this Government is looking at solutions. I can assure the House that I have put in place a high-level senior officer coordination strategy and will keep the House informed as that implementation proceeds.

We do acknowledge the problem of alcohol-related violence in indigenous communities. We acknowledge that unemployment, isolation, poverty, the lingering effects of the removal of children, cultural disorientation, dispossession and the decline of traditional law are all part of the reason for the high levels of violence and alcohol abuse in these communities. We do not need to be psychiatrists to see that violence is often the last resort for people living with a sense of hopelessness and despair. This Government is determined to take action across-the-board—to address issues of jobs, health, housing, education, infrastructure, isolation, alcohol abuse, family violence and lack of opportunities—to take a whole-of-Government approach in order to achieve real outcomes.
