



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence

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) (10.06 a.m.), by leave: Today I table an historic report that has the potential to galvanise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into taking action against violence in their own communities. The report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence was written for indigenous people by a group of women who felt that the time for passivity about violence in their communities has long passed. For the first time in Queensland, a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have produced a report to Government that turns the microscope on their own families and communities. Their document amplifies the voices of their communities, analyses the issues and makes recommendations to Government. It numbers more than 300 pages and has 123 recommendations.

The report belongs to the women of the task force, and I acknowledge their presence in the gallery today. But it does not belong only to them. They dedicate it to the hundreds of people who bared their souls and shared their pain with the task force. Many of them began by saying, "I have never told anybody this before". The report is also for indigenous families caught in the cycle of violence. Especially, it is for the children who, as the report tells, are often moulded by violence. They are forced to cope in ways that, too often, make them part of the cycle.

Importantly, it is a document for all of us— for non-indigenous people who want to better understand why violence plagues so many communities and how it shapes too many lives and for we in Government, who are able to give assistance to communities that are saying "Enough" and who are stepping forward with their own solutions.

I will not even attempt to sum up, because I could not do justice to the work of these women. Suffice to say that non-indigenous Queenslanders who find time to read even less than 40 pages in a single section called Forms of Violence will find their hearts aching. That section is told largely through the voices of community members who give raw accounts of the experiences of themselves and their loved ones. They tell of terror and despair that is inescapable, because they are part and parcel of their families. If such accounts are painful to read, how agonising it must be to live these lives.

The report covers violence in all its forms: physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and self-inflicted. It says that the very public implosion of indigenous communities can no longer be hidden or excused as being "the Aboriginal way". Such thinking is a serious indictment that must be challenged and rejected. It puts it into context, using a broad brush to paint in the backdrop to a detailed analysis.

Of course, many communities are violent—non-indigenous communities included. But the violence portrayed in this text has a life of its own. It was nourished by a brutal colonial history and by the violent oppression of Governments and other institutions. Now the violence is feeding on itself. Some women, who are often victimised by male partners, parents or uncles, are falling into despair and alcoholism. Elders, whose authority can bring some order to the more functional communities, are at risk of abuse. And, most tragically, some children are acting out violence in shocking ways.

The task force members heard of this sad reality from people all over Queensland. They listened to and took written submissions from discrete indigenous communities, rural and regional towns, the suburbs of Brisbane and the inside of prisons. They heard from men and men's groups as well as from women. The authors want to look to the future, to building secure and optimistic lives for

their children. They found that all of the indigenous people who addressed them cited alcohol and other drugs as intrinsic to violence.

Many of today's children have been immersed since birth in alcoholism and violence. When they become old enough to offend against the law and against others, they are doing no more than mirroring the behaviour they have witnessed. For the women behind this report, the time for being labelled "victims" has passed. As the task force chair, Ms Boni Robertson, writes in her foreword—

"Through our collective efforts, we can break the cycle of violence and work towards a future that allows our children to be proud of their cultural identity and to live a life free of ongoing violence and abuse."

The Queensland Government wants to help these communities and the individuals within them to take control of their own destinies. The report provides Government with guidance from the people themselves. It has suggestions for many departments, demanding a concerted cross-Government response. We will spend some months considering the report and design a strategic response by early 2000. It would be unfair to ignore the work already done by Government agencies and the fact that some issues highlighted by the task force are already receiving Government attention.

For instance, my colleague the Minister for Police has begun piloting the transfer of community police to the Queensland Police Service. The Departments of Housing and Families are resourcing women's shelters or planning new shelters in remote communities, including Doomadgee, Palm Island and Lockhart River. My own Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development is funding the Aboriginal Coordinating Council to review community governance, funding grassroots organisations to combat violence and implementing an economic development strategy.

Some of the task force's recommendations fall within the Federal Government's reach. I note that the Federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator John Herron, has been promoting his commitment to family violence prevention and has promised \$6m in national funding over four years. I have sent Senator Herron a copy of the report and have sought an assurance that Queensland will receive its due share of Federal money. But the annual allocation from this fund will be only \$1.5m to be spread amongst all States and Territories. \$1.5m would barely build two shelters on Cape York alone. Senator Herron is a Queenslander, and I have no doubt that he will be deeply affected by the words of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this State. I would urge him to seek further funding for the urgent issues of family violence.

Finally, I salute the women who have put so much effort and emotion into this document. I understand that many of them were enduring violence even as they were working on the report. To the chair, Boni Robertson, and her co-workers, I say: thankyou. They volunteered for an enormous task and have made an historic contribution to one of the most important challenges faced by our nation.
