



Speech by

**Hon. JUDY SPENCE**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT**

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Hansard 4 December 2001

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

**Cape York Justice Study**

**Hon. J. C. SPENCE** (Mount Gravatt—ALP) (Minister for Families and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Disability Services) (10.00 a.m.), by leave: Last week I toured communities on the west coast and northern tip of Cape York Peninsula to discuss recommendations of the Cape York Justice Study by former Justice Tony Fitzgerald. As I informed the House last week, I visited Kowanyama, Napranum, Mapoon and Bamaga, where I met representatives of councils and the community. By the end of the three-day tour, I had also held discussions with council and community representatives from Injinoo, Umagico, Seisia and New Mapoon.

During the three days I received many firm messages from the community. One of these was that not all communities on Cape York are alike. While many are afflicted by unacceptable levels of alcoholism, violence and societal breakdown, others are relatively cohesive and orderly, and their children are healthy and happy. It is not surprising that the most functional communities generally do not have licensed premises and that many of their leaders have no desire for them to ever host a wet canteen. Make no mistake: the leaders of Cape York, be they elected leaders or elders steeped in tradition, understand that alcohol is the flame that ignites the powder keg of violence on the cape. Long before Justice Fitzgerald, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence and authorities like Noel Pearson were saying this. The quandary they face is how to break the circuit.

Local people understand this complexity. They know better than anyone in this place that when you close the door of a canteen you open the door to sly grog. For instance, the leadership in the northern peninsula area communities articulated a problem in their own locality. The five communities are within a very short distance from one another. Two of them, Bamaga and Umagico, have licensed canteens. The others do not, although the locally owned Pajinka Wilderness Lodge at the very tip of the cape also sells alcohol. There would be no point closing Bamaga Hotel on pension and pay day if Umagico remained open and vice versa. Then again, if both establishments were to be closed simultaneously, diehard drinkers—not to mention sly groggers—would take their dinghies to Thursday Island and stock up at the local hotel.

Clearly, measures to control alcohol demand coordination and cooperation among local communities. Indeed, we will also need to enlist the support of licensees in neighbouring towns such as Weipa, Thursday Island and Cooktown. But logistical challenges like this can and will be met. The Premier has made it clear that the government will not compromise in the fight against alcoholism and violence.

I also delivered a plain and tough message to communities last week. I told them they should begin by accepting that their canteen licences will be removed from council control and that the government will work with them to achieve real improvements in alcoholism and related problems. If gains are not evident within three years then, as Justice Fitzgerald recommends, we will consider an alcohol ban. Many people, especially in communities with council-run canteens, did not like this message, but they have undertaken to spend the next three months considering these issues. I think they realise their children cannot wait for their communities to change their mind about grog.

I want to thank all the people I met for giving up their time to consider these difficult issues. Some people had downloaded copies of the Cape York Justice Study from the web and read and analysed it. Their comments and questions were insightful. Other people who have no access to the

Internet wanted to read the report and eagerly took away copies from their meetings. I look forward to hearing and reading their comments.

The people of Cape York might not be in full agreement with Justice Fitzgerald's recommendations, but many of them see this consultation process as an opportunity to have a say in the future of their communities. These are the people the government wants to engage with as we work towards building a better future for the children and young people of these Queensland communities.

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