



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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**COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES LIQUOR LICENCES BILL**

Ms PHILLIPS (Thuringowa—ALP) (11.04 p.m.): I rise to congratulate the minister and her department for the Community Services Legislation Amendment Bill and the Indigenous Communities Liquor Licences Bill. While this legislation had its genesis in the Cape York Justice Study presented to parliament last November, it has become this government's response to the interrelated problems of alcohol and violence in other Aboriginal communities as well, and it will hopefully have effects even beyond them. It is indisputable that alcohol has become the scourge of Aboriginal peoples. It sucks dry the family's income. It renders unemployable many breadwinners. It makes invalids out of healthy young adults. It introduces violence, abuse and even murder into their homes. Many Aboriginal people have taken to the demon drink to block out the reality of their lives—living in inadequate housing, shunned by white man's society, struggling to access schooling and unable to find jobs. No wonder many have sought solace in grog.

Over the years dependence on alcohol has become an epidemic and its addiction is rife. Well-meaning white people and desperate indigenous people have tried in vain to find answers to this insidious problem. Very few programs have been proved effective in combating this disease. That is why this government has bitten the bullet and introduced this groundbreaking legislation—legislation which provides for the transfer of liquor licences, the declaration of restricted areas and strict conditions for hotels and also strengthens the power of community justice groups, providing them with legislative power. Some critics have said that the bills are paternalistic, that they direct communities to impose restrictions, but I see them as giving support to communities as they struggle to come to terms with these issues.

The nearest indigenous community to my electorate of Thuringowa is Palm Island, which is just off the coast, but it might as well be a thousand kilometres away. I first visited Palm Island in 1976 when I worked for Townsville General Hospital and established a monthly visiting service there for parents of children hospitalised in the children's ward at TGH. Very sick children were transferred from Palm Island to hospital, but when they recovered the hospital was regularly unable to contact the parents back on the island. Many of these children were taken into care and institutionalised. When I visited Palm Island I discovered that there was one private telephone, and this was in the white administrator's office, and one public phone that was constantly out of order. No wonder the parents had lost contact with their children. Because of the very patriarchal culture at the time, they most often accepted the fate that when their children got sick and were taken to Townsville they would never see them again. This is not some fantastic tale of generations ago; this was happening less than 30 years ago.

In many respects, Palm Island has progressed in leaps and bounds from those days, but it is dogged by the plague of alcohol abuse and the violence that accompanies it. Recently, some women on Palm Island asked the council to ban the bringing in of wine and spirits and they have reported a significant decrease in crime and violence and an increase in food being bought from the store. This is the desired effect that this legislation is seeking. While it imposes restrictions on drinkers, its aim is as much to protect the innocent victims—the women who are constantly beaten and raped and the children who are abused, neglected and undernourished. I am proud that the government I am part of is prepared to stand up for these victims.

In reply to the critics, yes, everyone should have access to certain rights, but I do not believe there is any justification for someone to drink until they are nearly unconscious but still be able to abuse their family who try to care for them, nor do I believe that sly groggers have rights to steal, to hang around outside Centrelink or the bank waiting to grab the money from people who are dependent on them for their supply of alcohol. While, as I have said, I do not have an Aboriginal community within my electorate, I hope that the effects of this legislation will flow on to my community, because there are a very high number of indigenous people living within Thuringowa. One of my primary schools with over 200 indigenous students has one of the largest school populations in the state, but we do have many of the problems experienced in the communities—violence, particularly on women, drunkenness and homelessness and abuse of children, including a staggering rate of sexually transmitted diseases. We also have a frightening increase in substance abuse, with children as young as eight years stoned and staggering all over the main road with a Coke bottle full of paint still held against their tiny faces.

We need programs to combat these problems. Some years ago I worked with an incredible group of indigenous women on a program where they assisted young families who were struggling and needed family support. This one-on-one program was very successful in helping address many of the social issues that the families were suffering from. Unfortunately this program has been defunded, although the need still blatantly exists. We need the general community to support governments establishing the programs that will help with the healing. We must agree to put funds into these areas.

But it is not all doom and gloom. There are some remarkable indigenous women and men working in our community making changes, preserving culture, contributing to and building the capacity of our society. One such project in my electorate is the literacy program at Shalom College, an indigenous boarding and day school run under the auspice of the Uniting Church. It has about 500 students in primary and secondary classes. Most of the primary children are from the Thuringowa-Townsville community. The high school students come from communities throughout Cape York, many of whom speak several tribal languages other than English.

Less than two years ago Shalom College piloted a revolutionary literacy program developed by the Canberra University. In its first year of operation the program won a state award. Last month Shalom College was presented with a national award for the groundbreaking achievements it has made in this field.

It could be argued that education will be the key to liberating indigenous people from the shackles of the past, from alcohol abuse and from related atrocities. This education cannot be accessed without the ability to read and write. Literacy is critical and it seems to me that Shalom College has found a way to get through to indigenous children. I congratulate it on its commitment, hard work and perseverance in succeeding with this program. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved, and I am confident that this legislation, too, will achieve remarkable improvements—in this case to the quality of life of indigenous people.

I again congratulate the minister on her determination to present these bills, and I commend them to the House.