



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (2.41 pm): Recently there has been a lot of discussion about the continuing plight of Indigenous communities and the intervention by the federal government into remote Northern Territory communities. Often I wish there was more emphasis on the positive things that happen in remote communities, although it is true that drastic action is needed to give people in remote northern Australia safety, opportunity and prosperity. The Queensland government is doing its fair share to address those issues, especially in my electorate in Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait. I will quickly highlight a couple of more recent initiatives.

The new Indigenous Partnership Agreement establishes a new framework for dealing with those communities, not just in my electorate but right across Queensland. The agreement acknowledges that more needs to be done to close the significant gap between the quality of life and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders and the wider community. Immediate priorities are to deal with land tenure and access, housing, alcohol and other substance abuse associated behaviours such as violence, child safety and family wellbeing, chronic disease, education and training, employment, policing and community governance. The agreement is for three years from 2007 to 2010 and each community will negotiate its individual local partnership agreement. Local Indigenous partnership agreements will be reviewed every six months and progress towards each goal will be recorded. Specific goals will be established in each community. I have spoken to a number of community leaders and they are pleased that there is agreement on the principles of the way forward. They are looking forward to getting down to brass tacks and finalising their individual community plan.

The Department of Child Safety is doing its fair share. It is increasing its presence on the ground in remote communities. The department is building residential safe houses in Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama, Aurukun and Weipa in my electorate. Housing and office accommodation will also be established for Child Safety officers on Cape York so that they are closer to the communities that they look after, rather than being based in Cairns and flying in.

Child Safety officers will deliver services from branch offices located in Weipa to look after Aurukun and Napranum, Cooktown covering Hope Vale and Wujal Wujal, and Thursday Island for the Northern Peninsula Area. This year's budget also contains money for additional police in remote Queensland communities. To its credit, the Commonwealth will provide some funding for housing to support those additional officers.

I get around Indigenous communities a fair bit. Regularly I speak to the people and their local leadership. If one issue is raised constantly it is housing. A lack of appropriate housing is the cornerstone of the difficulties that the communities face, both here in Queensland and in the Northern Territory. I do not want to stand here today and put the boot into the Commonwealth for its performance in providing public housing over the past 10 years. The Minister for Housing has done a good job in reminding people that the Commonwealth ripped \$400 million out of public housing when it came into office.

The Commonwealth has put its funding into rent assistance to assist people who need to gain housing in the private market. By and large this works well in cities and provincial centres, and has added

to the investment in housing in those places although, clearly, in most places demand is outstripping supply. Unfortunately, however, the policy does not provide for housing in Indigenous communities where there is virtually no private investment.

Clearly, two changes need to be made to assist in addressing this fundamental issue. Firstly, the Commonwealth and the states need to look at land tenure arrangements. As I have said in this House on many occasions, this is the fundamental issue that is affecting economic progress in those communities. I do not want to interfere with people's traditional rights, but the crux of the matter is that Aboriginal people are land rich and cash poor. I do not want to be in a position to take their traditional rights away from them. I want to see government sit down and agree with them on a way forward so that they can use that land for housing subdivisions and to create an economic future for themselves.

Clearly, the Commonwealth has to come to the table with more money for housing. There are plenty of other practical things that we can do such as assisting with the road network, and I will continue to pursue that matter rigorously.