




Speech by

Hon. Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Thursday, 4 August 2011

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

 **Hon. CW PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (Minister for Disability Services, Mental Health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships) (8.07 pm): I rise this evening to respond to the Community Affairs Committee's report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and the Family Responsibilities Commission. I congratulate and thank the committee members including guests, particularly the chair, the member for Keppel, and the departmental, parliamentary and ministerial staff for the time they dedicated and the hard work they put into this important process.

As the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, I play a significant oversight role in the development and implementation of Indigenous policy and partnerships in Queensland to close the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders. This is supported by the activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services within the Department of Communities, which has a whole-of-government role in terms of policy leadership and coordination of government initiatives to close the gap. My department takes this role very seriously, as do I, and is undertaking extensive work across government on initiatives such as the Cape York Welfare Reform trial, the Remote Indigenous Land and Infrastructure Program Office, our Reconciliation Action Plan, the recently launched LEAP strategy and the ongoing development of a new Indigenous justice strategy.

Making a difference in the lives of Indigenous Queenslanders is not something that one minister or one portfolio can do on their own. That is why all Bligh government ministers take this issue seriously and are committed to developing and implementing key strategies to turn around Indigenous disadvantage. This is done in a coordinated manner across government to ensure we get the best outcomes for all Indigenous Queenslanders.

I reject entirely the suggestion levelled at me in the LNP's statement of reservation that I experienced difficulty in answering questions in areas such as housing and education because they did not fall within my portfolio. When the member for Moggill asked me a question regarding housing and employment in relation to his recent visit to Aurukun, I very clearly said that I was more than happy to respond even though these matters do not fall within the principal responsibilities of my portfolio. It was the suggestion of the chair that it may be better directed to another minister for response. I offered to answer the question because, as minister, I take a leadership role in Indigenous policy issues in this state. It is because I understand the intricacies of the often difficult issues faced by both myself and my colleagues in making a difference in this area and, most importantly, by Indigenous Queenslanders on the ground who want to work in partnership with the Bligh government to make a real and lasting difference in their lives.

Even with the changes to the standing orders this year, members of the opposition comprehensively failed to ask the sorts of questions that may actually help them better understand this area of policy, and their lack of understanding was reflected in their statement of reservation. I take this opportunity to remind them about how the government is making a difference in certain areas.

The Cape York welfare reform trial has been operating since 2008 and has seen innovative service and policy responses in the communities of Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge. The trial is

being seen by these communities as having a positive effect—more children going to school, people regularly paying rent and communities generally quieter than before the trial commenced. To date, improvements in school attendance and reductions in levels of violence in Aurukun, Coen and Hope Vale have all been seen. Local Indigenous authority is being restored through the work of the Family Responsibilities Commission and local commissioners and families are being rebuilt. While it took a little time, community members now understand that the FRC can assist them in addressing their problems. People now know where to access help. The trial has created new avenues including the FRC local offices, the local program offices and the village opportunity hubs for people to seek assistance.

At the estimates the member for Moggill spoke quite negatively about the costs of the trial and about Aurukun, and again here this evening. I do not think there is anything additional I can add on top of those comments provided by Noel Pearson in response to the member for Moggill. Aurukun is a community that has come a long way over the past four years. School attendance has improved and assault rates are down. Mayor Neville Pootchemunka has been absolutely proactive as a supporter of the trial and has said that the changes that the government wants to see are generational and has asked why the trial would stop before these changes are realised. Work is continuing to ensure that vulnerable members of the community are supported. The outcomes of the independent evaluation currently underway will inform the nature of the trial from 2012.

In closing, I want to remind honourable members that the Australian, state and territory governments are investing \$9.51 billion over 10 years to 2017-18 across eight Indigenous specific national partnership agreements in the areas of early childhood, remote service delivery, public internet access, economic participation, remote Indigenous housing, health, the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse and the Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement. The work that the Bligh government has done in the area of Indigenous policy in Queensland has been a long road and, as one community leader in Aurukun was quoted as saying, 'We are on the way, but we're not there yet.' The opposition provided bipartisan support for the FRC. I repeat: it provided bipartisan support for the FRC. While this was certainly welcomed, it must not lose sight of the fact that while these changes are working they will not work overnight. This comes with a price tag, but it is not about the money though. It is about the people. The outcomes we are seeing are proof positive that we are heading in the right direction.