

GRIEVANCE DEBATE (Indigenous Communities: Education) – 16th June 2008

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (9:07 PM) —In this grievance debate, I want to raise the issue of Indigenous education and the impact of pornography in remote and mainstream Australian communities, which allows some of the most vulnerable members of society to be so easily exploited. On previous occasions in this House I have raised the point that a real opportunity exists for a better deal in the education of Indigenous children in remote communities. It could be provided by boarding schools located in regional towns closer to their home communities. I am pleased to note that prominent Indigenous leaders like Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine continue to enthusiastically press the issue and actively encourage the government to take a role of creative leadership in providing educational opportunities for Indigenous children.

I add my voice to their call and point out that quality boarding schools have existed in Australia from the earliest days of formal education in colonial times. Two of my aunts attended Mount St Mary's at Katoomba as boarders in the years around the First World War, when my grandmother lived at Blakehurst, then a tiny farming hamlet south of Sydney on the Georges River. At the same time, her two eldest sons were boarders at St Joseph's at Hunters Hill. Many of the most prominent men and women of Australian society, whether they made their mark in private enterprise or on the land or in public office, received an excellent beginning in their life's journey from their education in many of the nation's finest boarding schools. Such establishments are an ideal way of providing the same opportunities for Indigenous young Australians in remote and regional Australia. While I have raised this subject in earlier speeches, it is appropriate to raise the issue once again and give support and encouragement to the innovative leadership of Noel Pearson.

We are all well aware of the reality of life for children in remote communities. There are many communities which do not have a primary school and there are many other obstacles that Indigenous children have to overcome to obtain even the most basic schooling. Most particularly their disadvantage is intergenerational. There is little literacy within their families and their communities, and the lack of English only compounds a complex situation for them. Even when they are able to attend some primary schooling, poor health, poor nutrition, irregular meals, highly irregular sleep patterns and the intermittent violence of drunken behaviour from some adults in their communities all combine to make it difficult, if not impossible, for Indigenous children to learn and remember what formal lessons they may receive. It is imperative that all governments listen to the voice of those leaders within the Indigenous communities who have a real understanding of the severe disadvantage faced by Indigenous children and who are passionate about addressing such disadvantage.

However, I do note that there are suggestions that the children should be accommodated in boarding schools in southern capitals. I also note that some commentators have pointed out—including the Fred Hollows Foundation—that the very idea of boarding Indigenous children in southern boarding schools is destined to fail from the start. It is considered that young Indigenous people would miss out on understanding their roles and cultural responsibilities within their communities. On their return from boarding school, feeling detached from their own traditional society and not having sufficient sense of place in mainstream Australian society or fully understanding its laws and expectations, they could well find themselves caught between two worlds and have no sense of belonging in either. These concerns are very real and are a part of the dilemma for governments—national as well as state. It seems clear to me that massive funding is required at a national level to establish top quality boarding schools with the best teachers that money can attract that can become centres of excellence in Indigenous education, but with the very important requirement that such centres of learning be established in regional towns located as close as possible to the local communities they are intended to serve.

For example, a regional boarding school could be established at Katherine in the Northern Territory, or at Kalgoorlie or Geraldton or Broome in Western Australia, or at Bourke in New South Wales—just to name a few—to provide the appropriate education for children in their surrounding communities. The children could attend school from Sunday evening to Friday evening and be flown or bussed into or out of their home communities on a fortnightly or monthly basis—that is, they would attend home at regular intervals. It is clear that young Indigenous children should not be moved so far away from their communities that they cannot return home on a regular basis. They must be able to maintain their social and cultural contacts with their families and communities. Yes, of course it will be expensive, but we as a nation cannot afford not to address

this issue any longer, otherwise we will lose another generation of bright, young Indigenous Australians to hopelessness and even substance abuse.

This is not to say that young Indigenous students should be prevented from applying to the many prestigious boarding schools in the southern capitals. The excellent initiative funded by the Macquarie Bank and the Cape York Institute's Higher Expectations Program enables Indigenous students from remote Queensland communities to attend boarding schools in Brisbane, Townsville, Rockhampton and Cairns. The Cape York Institute was devised by Noel Pearson and is aimed at providing the top 10 per cent of students in Cape York with an education that would open their lives to the excitement, opportunities and employment possibilities that we all know a good education offers. Such excellent initiatives should continue and provide a model for similar corporate sponsorship across Australia so that young Australians in remote areas can have a choice and share in the great Australian dream for the future.

This initiative alone will not address the issue across the nation. Such a national issue requires a national initiative to be taken by the federal government. It is clearly the role of the federal government to establish boarding schools in appropriate areas that can provide a protected learning environment for Indigenous young people in key areas relatively close to their home communities. I am speaking about a strong leadership role for the federal government to fund and build quality boarding schools in the regional centres of remote Australia for the benefit of Indigenous children living in those areas. It is only through such learning centres that we can provide a protected learning environment to break the cycle of poverty, cross the barriers of language, overcome poor health and poor nutrition, escape violent and abusive behaviour, and ultimately overcome the disinterest in learning that is endemic in those remote communities.

Quality, well-funded boarding schools would provide the opportunity to encourage improved health through good hygiene and appropriate sleep patterns. They would provide the opportunity to supervise diet and provide better nutrition and regular meals, especially breakfast. And of course they would ultimately engender an active interest in learning through improved study and homework patterns. We owe these young Australians nothing less than the opportunity to get the very best education that we can provide for them. I take this opportunity to remind the Prime Minister and his government about the Prime Minister's comments in his address on the apology to Australia's Indigenous people in February this year when he said in the parliament:

... old approaches are not working. We need a new beginning ... a new beginning that draws intelligently on the experiences of new policy settings across the nation.

Here is a new policy, and it comes from the Indigenous community itself. Here we have a new policy for the education of the current generation of young Indigenous Australians. It will require massive funding because it is a massive undertaking. But the government has a huge war chest—left to it by the previous government—that equips it for a noble purpose such as this.

On another issue of concern, in the short time I have available I wish to raise the issue of pornographic material that continues to be received in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. While I understand and applaud the fact that the government has continued the ban of pornographic videos that was put in place by the previous government under the Northern Territory emergency response program regarding violence towards women and children in remote Indigenous communities, it has left these same remote Northern Territory communities vulnerable to the scourge of pornography by refusing to ban pornographic material being received by satellite pay TV. It is my understanding that the government says it is open to the elders of the communities to ask for the transmission of the offending material to be prevented from being received within these communities. Yet it is the women and the children who are the victims of pornographic material—as identified in the many reports on this subject—and they are not in a position to ask for its removal.

These women and children are disempowered in these communities. It is the powerless women and children who are the hapless victims of pornography, and they are hardly in a position to have such material stopped from being received into their homes by pay TV. This is a serious dereliction of duty of care by this government towards these women and children, and I ask the government to ban pornography received by pay TV in these remote communities. It is well documented that pornography is corrosive in human relationships. It objectifies women and creates a lack of respect in the viewer.

In conclusion, we can clearly see that the impact of pornography in communities in remote Australia is the utter breakdown of the society of our Indigenous Australians. (*Time expired*)