

## OOMBULGURRI COMMUNITY

### *Statement*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [4.57 pm]: Ever since the Parliament resumed about two weeks ago, we have waited for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs to come into this place to tell us the truth about the future of the Oombulgurri community. He has not done that. Apart from answering our questions about Oombulgurri, he has been silent, so I thought that tonight I have to rise to express our dismay at his silence, and to explain why I believe it is imperative that the minister goes to Oombulgurri and Wyndham as a matter of urgency and actually talks to the people for whom Oombulgurri has been home, who are no longer able to live in that community. I believe that the minister must go to Wyndham and Oombulgurri as a matter of urgency. The fact is, what he has been advised and the reality of the situation are very different. We have had a lot of talk in this place today about ministerial responsibility. There is no doubt that what happens in Oombulgurri is ultimately on the minister's head; that is how our system works. We on this side of the house will hold the minister responsible for what happens to the Oombulgurri community. Tonight I am taking a different tack because I am working on the assumption that the minister's failure to grasp the seriousness of what is happening to the community of Oombulgurri is because he has not been there, he has not listened to the stories on the ground and he is taking advice from people who are not conveying the reality of that situation on the ground. That is the basis on which I am working tonight.

I know that the minister has received advice and information from those affected by this tragedy because I know that, like me, he has received letters from Mr Patrick Birch. I will read members a brief quote from one of those letters to give a flavour of what he is trying to point out to the government. According to my notes, he stated —

Traditional owners who used to reside in the Oombulgurri community are now sleeping in scrubland around the town of Wyndham because they have been advised by the Department of Indigenous Affairs in Oombulgurri that they can no longer live in Oombulgurri.

I know that the minister has received that letter because I have been CC'ed in on it.

The minister has been open about the fact that, on receiving those letters, he asked his people on the ground for advice. Would I have done that? Is that an acceptable way to proceed when such serious allegations are brought to us? I leave that as an open question for tonight.

There is a question about who a range of ministers in the Barnett government listen to. I have made it clear in the past that I do not think they listen to the right people, but I will reserve judgement on that. I can tell honourable members that if the minister had gone to Oombulgurri or if he had even spoken to people other than his own bureaucrats, he would have heard a very different story. Yes, there is a lot of very common ground here. We all concede that it has been a troubled community. This was acknowledged by Labor and by the Liberals when they came to power in 2008. That was largely because a Liberal government made the response to the coroner's report. We know that the Liberal government did take it seriously because the Oombulgurri action plan took place under the Liberals. Oombulgurri was designated a priority community. The 2009–10 annual report of the Department of Indigenous Affairs states —

The AACC identified three priority communities of Oombulgurri, Roebourne and Armadale as models to introduce sustainable improvement. A Chief Operating Officer was appointed in July 2009 to provide on-the-ground decision making in these priority communities and support in other regional and remote communities ...

Did you hear, Mr President, any mention in that statement about closing the community down? No. So far we all seem to be working towards the same end and the same objectives; that is, to improve the viability of the community and to improve its capacity to manage itself. This is where things start to break down. This is the point at which the story being told by the minister and the DIA is very different from the one the minister would hear if he went to Wyndham and Oombulgurri and talked to the people whose home is Oombulgurri. The minister's story is that people decided to leave Oombulgurri of their own free will. The minister has never been able to explain why they left except to remind us that Oombulgurri has had a troubled history. In estimates committee hearings earlier this year it was even suggested that my questions about why these people left somehow implied that people did not have the right to leave. Of course, that is far from the case. At that estimates hearing at the start of this year I began to get a feeling that there was something seriously wrong with the government's handling of Oombulgurri. I asked questions at that estimates hearing about the women's refuge and the suicide programs. The responses I got indicated that we have an action plan but we have no action in Oombulgurri from this government.

Gradually over the ensuing months the language from the minister began to be couched in terms of a declining population and a consequential withdrawal of services. In fact, the last few public servants—the police and the

nurses—have now left. I fear that as far as the minister is concerned, the story has now come to an end. It seems that in the minister's mind the equation will be simple—no people, no services, end of community. But if the minister would go to Oombulgurri and Wyndham and listen to people whose home is Oombulgurri, he would hear a different story. That is what I am begging the minister to do. When I went and talked to the people at Oombulgurri and the people from Oombulgurri who are now in Wyndham, not one single person told me that they wanted to leave Oombulgurri. Every single person told me that they wanted to go home. This is not one or two people; this is dozens of families, old people and young people pleading with me to do something to make it possible for them to go home. The women talked to me about the fact that their husbands, fathers and sons are buried at Oombulgurri. They talked about having to leave Oombulgurri, home to many of them for their whole lives, because they could not live without the store, the clinic and the school. There is no food at Oombulgurri. It is a \$500 round trip to shop for food in Wyndham. This is not the first time we have brought this situation to the minister's attention. He should listen to what I am saying now in connection with the speech Hon Jon Ford gave yesterday. What we heard from these people was an acknowledgement that Oombulgurri has been through troubled times. We heard an acknowledgement that criminal activity had taken place in Oombulgurri and that liquor had been brought back into the community against the wishes of the old people.

**Hon Peter Collier:** Sexual abuse of children. Did you hear about that?

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** Yes, and sexual abuse of children. That is what I said. There is a concession from everyone that criminal activity has been taking place in that community. The liquor has been brought back into the community against the wishes of the old people. But they had no refuge. The store was failing and the alcohol-fuelled violence was unchecked. They had an action plan but they had no action. They had no help. They had no evidence of the government's words about enhancing the viability of the community and helping to fix the broken governance of the community. Those words had no practical substance.

The people of Oombulgurri left in tears. They were crying when we collected them in Kununurra, they cried when we reached Oombulgurri and they cried when we left. They want to go home; they want to go home without the alcohol. Oombulgurri is a dry community and its residents are determined to keep it that way. They want help from the government to go home. They have a state-of-the-art clinic—the minister knows this because he has seen the inventory of the community—a well-equipped school and a store that could be opened very quickly with the right manager. They have great houses. The minister and I would be very happy to live in the houses like the houses in Oombulgurri. Those houses do not have fuses because that is what the government officers have removed to cut the power. They have accommodation for their service deliverers. There are houses for teachers, nurses and police. They even have accommodation for visitors. It is a beautiful place. Anybody who walks down that avenue of boabs through the centre of the community would not be able to disagree with me that it is a beautiful place. It is a place of healing, as Hon Jon Ford said last night. If it was the minister's home, he would be distraught if he had to leave. These people are distraught. The minister can help them. The minister owes it to these people to give them that help. They do not want to move to Wyndham or any other community in the east Kimberley. They want to go back to Oombulgurri. Please help them.