

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES — ROLE MODELS — SUPPORT PRIORITIES

Statement

HON COLIN TINCKNELL (South West) [6.31 pm]: I would like to raise an issue that affects close to a million people in Australia. I am talking about something that I have raised in this chamber before and I believe we are losing the battle. Over the past decade or more, our various state governments have consistently been losing the battle that Aboriginal people face. Incarceration rates are higher than they have ever been and Aboriginal prisoners have been the subject of ex gratia payments due to terrible situations that have arisen from a lack of understanding of Aboriginal life and culture. For instance, Aboriginal people are picked up for minor traffic offences, they go to jail, and die in jail. Then ex gratia payments are made. Aboriginal kids are often not interested in gaining high school diplomas. Their educational requirements are often quite different and by being painted with the same brush as everyone else, they lose interest and do not continue with their education. We need to find and promote Aboriginal role models in more areas than just footy. Aboriginal people excel in so many other areas, including arts and drama, politics, business and academia. I think the media needs to buy into this and promote it because they certainly do it on the football field. People need to be held up as role models for the wider Aboriginal people, while understanding that many differences exist within Aboriginal communities.

Our policies often reflect that we treat Aboriginal people as one group. We are 100 per cent wrong when we do that; we have talked about this in the past. It certainly affects any opportunity for us to improve their plight. We need to engage in further discussions with all the separate communities to find out what they need and attempt to provide for them. It is really not a case of providing for their needs; it is more about listening to them and allowing these people to provide for themselves. We need to make that possible for them. We need to listen to each problem and address each situation individually, and not just attempt to throw money at the problems or create bureaucratic organisations that get paid to simply tick a box.

In some areas, the rate of sexually transmitted diseases is very high, especially for juveniles. In other areas, drug and alcohol abuse is rampant and the youth suicide rate is a great concern. Health in Aboriginal areas is a major problem in this country and it has not improved for many years—only in certain areas. The lack of basic services in micro and ultra-remote communities carries on this problem. The priorities of the state and federal governments have been found lacking in Aboriginal affairs. Western Australia has many of the same issues as our northern friends do in the Northern Territory, yet the money we get is not great. Broome Regional Prison is an example. The conditions are inhumane and deplorable. It was recommended that both a new prison and a courthouse are required immediately. A significant number of people brought before the Broome courthouse and held in the Broome prison are Aboriginal, yet these facilities have been neglected time and again. They are the oldest prison facilities in the state. I want to repeat that: they are the oldest in the state. I repeat that the government needs to prioritise these kinds of projects.

Without any chance of rehabilitation, the state is condemning these prisoners to a life of reoffending and returning to prison, thus compounding the problem. The funding from the federal government to the Northern Territory to deal with Aboriginal affairs is substantially more than it is in Western Australia, but the problems there are almost identical. We have the same drug and alcohol abuse problems, crime and incarceration rates, sexual abuse and sexual education problems, domestic and nondomestic violence, and suicide and suicide prevention needs, yet if members look at the funding coming, it is quite a bit different. These problems do not stem from Aboriginal people being bad people. They stem from Aboriginal people not being involved in a lifestyle that offers them alternative opportunities. Young Aboriginal kids need to be inspired to want to achieve in the areas they are interested in, not in areas that we tell them they should be interested in.

In my 20-odd years of working in Aboriginal affairs and in Aboriginal communities, I have found that face-to-face community engagement by trusted individuals is most effective. The government does not have to do all the work; that is the beautiful thing. Many initiatives by certain previous governments and the private sector have been successful. They can be emulated and built on. A bipartisan approach by all parties is needed, not just the two sides of government. We need the crossbench—the Nationals, the Greens and everyone involved—otherwise this problem will not go away.