

**STATE CORONER'S REPORT ON SELF-HARM DEATHS IN THE KIMBERLEY —
GOVERNMENT ACTION**

Urgency Motion

The PRESIDENT: I received the following letter this morning —

Dear Mr President

I hereby give notice that at today's sitting I intend to move, pursuant to standing order 72;

That the house considers as a matter of urgency the serious lack of ministerial accountability exposed by Coroner Alastair Hope in the record of investigation into death by suicide of 22 people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

The member will require the support of four members in order to move the motion.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [3.39 pm]: I move the motion. Coroner Alastair Hope's report, released yesterday, is another damning indictment of the Carpenter government. How many disastrous reports do we have to have? How many have we already had? We have seen numerous reports and accounts of these problems, at both the state and national level. At the state level we have seen the Gordon inquiry and inquiries into children in care. At the national level we have had the report entitled "Little Children are Sacred". The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research tracked Aboriginal children over 20 years and produced an extraordinary account of the problems. Members know what the problems are, and the Carpenter government cannot duck and dive on this issue. We have heard of children suckling on dogs, and child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. I will use Kalumburu as an example. We have seen gonorrhoea in babies. I have stood in this place many times and reported on the abuse that is happening in Aboriginal communities. There were 22 deaths in a short time—all Aboriginals. Many hanged themselves. Twenty-one of those deaths were by self-harm. These suicides occurred in the Kimberley, and the number has increased by 100 per cent. From 2000 to 2006, 68 Aboriginal people committed suicide as opposed to 16 non-Aboriginal people. I say to all the families concerned that I understand their pain. The State Coroner said that all these deaths appeared to have been caused or contributed to by alcohol abuse or cannabis use. That is the reason for this report. No real leadership or coordination was to be found in the response to the disaster of Aboriginal living conditions in the Kimberley. There are child protection issues, education issues, health issues, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, employment issues and police issues. I could go on.

The Premier should be ashamed of himself. In 2002, the Gordon inquiry raised the same issues. Nothing is new in the coroner's report—nothing. There are 197 recommendations in the Gordon report. It is some six years later, and the same thing is happening over and over again. Little Susan Taylor, who, in despair, hanged herself on the fence of the Swan Valley Nyungah camp, was the catalyst for that Gordon report. She must be looking down from heaven with big tears rolling down her cheeks and thinking, "Here I am with 22 others like me. What's changed?" Absolutely nothing. This is a government that prides itself on saying how much it has helped Aboriginal people. We have a Premier who is always talking about the Gordon inquiry, yet the Auditor General, in his report in 2005, said that he could not work out which department had done what and that no-one seemed to be coordinating the recommendations, or words to that effect. I pulled out the Auditor General's report of 2005. The Auditor General stated —

An authoritative account of the progress of implementing initiatives and the Action Plan overall does not exist. As a result, the monitoring and oversight groups do not have available basic information such as:

- the number of initiatives and how many have been implemented
- how many are behind schedule
- expenditure against budget
- estimates on final expenditure and anticipated final completion

That was in November 2005. It is now 2008, and we have the same things over and over again. There is nothing new in Mr Hope's report.

What have the ministers responsible for action on the Gordon inquiry been doing, if Alastair Hope had to put forward 27 recommendations? Where is the accountability, Premier? Where is the accountability of the Premier and these ministers: the Minister for Child Protection, the Minister for Housing and Works, the Minister for

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Health and the Minister for Education and Training? Where has the Minister for Indigenous Affairs been? She has been sitting on her backside doing nothing. What has she been doing? Today, she came out with a fancy press release, welcoming the coroner's findings and talking about the Rudd government. Absolute rhetoric! The responsible minister was Sheila McHale for a while. I can understand what happened with Minister McHale. She oversaw the disastrous Department for Community Development, so I can understand that she did nothing. However, I actually thought that the next minister would do something, but, no, there is no accountability in this government.

In July 2007, the government put out its new, you-beaut newsletter of the social policy unit. It states —

This issue of the Social Agenda highlights some of the Gordon related actions and the medium to long term strategies that have followed from the Gordon “law and order/protection” first phase. The next phases include investment in education and training, enterprise, early childhood and infrastructure.

Future issues will highlight the multi-layered actions in place in Indigenous Affairs in WA that have in large part been driven by the whole-of government momentum created by the Gordon implementation structures.

I do not really know how that unit can sit there and go on with all that diatribe when we know that that is not true.

According to the Casey report that looked into indigenous affairs, there are 22 government agencies under 16 ministers that receive \$1.2 billion funding annually. It works out to be \$20 000 a head. According to the 2006 census, there were 58 711 Aboriginals. It states in the report that the state government alone is spending over \$20 000 a head each year on Indigenous people. That is not the commonwealth; that is just the state. In the context of the estimated expenditure on services for Indigenous people, the report noted that Lieutenant General John Sanderson stated to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, prior to a meeting held on 13 February 2007, that of the \$1.2 billion, \$450 million was spent on police courts and corrective services, and another \$350 million was spent on primary health-care services. Most of the funding, therefore, was applied to keeping the lid on social dysfunction, and \$7.7 million was spent on cross-government policy coordination. Only five per cent of the expenditure was spent on Aboriginal people on the ground. Who got most of the money and, as the coroner asked, where has the money gone? What can we see for \$1.2 billion? I cannot see anything. All I heard about were Aboriginal children sucking on dogs' teats because they were so hungry.

In his sixth recommendation, the coroner recommended —

. . . that the system put in place to address Aboriginal living conditions in the Kimberley should involve a system of accountability which would require relevant officials to accept responsibility for achieving targets considered attainable with resources provided and that there should be a system of accounting which would identify where the money has gone.

Like me, the coroner really could not see where the \$1.2 billion had gone. He continued —

This system should also identify what proportion of the money has been used in administrative costs as against provision of services by direct service providers.

I refer to child protection. What child protection? The coroner mentions the Ford review and states that the department is at present very much reactive rather than proactive in most areas of the Kimberley. Mr Hancock is a senior executive in the child protection department. The coroner said that there are not adequate staff to provide adequate child protection throughout the Kimberley region. He went on to mention the loss of accommodation for child protection workers; that the houses are allocated and then reallocated to other departments. That is something that I have not heard of before. The coroner states —

Mr Hancock stated that he was aware of Kimberley Aboriginal children as young as six months old having gonorrhoea as a result of sexual abuse, . . .

That is not new in this chamber. I have raised that issue many times. He said that at least one baby was being neglected to the point of death and that babies were feeding off mothers while the mothers were drunk and that the babies were otherwise in need of the provision of safer care; in other words, they were being neglected. He said that child protection officers would patrol around and see children who were not being cared for, but, otherwise, the department did not act in a proactive way in the Kimberley, but, rather, responded to complaints of neglect. I have the view that if a child was wandering around Dalkeith at nine o'clock at night, the parents would probably be locked up for neglecting their child. However, child protection workers can walk around the Kimberley and see babies being neglected, and they do not do anything about it. I know that they are between a rock and a hard place, but somewhere along the line we must look on these children as being Western Australian children, not Aboriginal children. That has been the problem all along. These children are looked at as though

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they are different because they are Aboriginals. They are no different at all to our kids. The report stated that there was an enormous turnover of fieldworkers. There was a recommendation that a leadership organisation in government be established to ensure that government agencies providing vital services in the Kimberley are not disadvantaged in attracting staff, compared with other government agencies, and that the terms of employment are appropriate for work in remote communities.

I believe very strongly in compulsory income management. I welcome that the Rudd government rolled out compulsory income management in three communities yesterday. I wonder why it is not being rolled out in Western Australia, although I believe it may be coming. Some years ago, Western Australia had the Welfare to School voluntary program, which the government made mandatory, and which resulted in an 85 per cent success rate in Halls Creek. That program was stopped because the WA government found some hitch with it. As early as the beginning of 2005, the government knew that program worked. The government knew that if there was a threat of welfare payments being withheld, children would go to school. It was a good initiative, but it was taken away. If compulsory income management is introduced in WA, I believe that many cases of child neglect would be halted. The minister can correct me, but under that scheme 50 per cent of welfare income is withheld, which is a good thing and very proactive. Why did it take Alastair Hope to say that in his report? That program should have been in place a long time ago.

Many years ago, Western Australia had the homemaker program. The former member Hon Muriel Patterson was a homemaker for the department. Homemakers are very good. They go into homes and teach mums practical ways of looking after their children and their houses. The reintroduction of that program has been in my policy for a long time and I have spoken about that in this place.

Something is being done about the issue of alcohol in Fitzroy Crossing by providing only low-strength alcohol. Initiatives are being implemented, but the lack of leadership is mentioned in this list of recommendations. If I hear the Premier stand up one more time and boast about the Gordon inquiry, I will actually be physically sick. While, on the one hand, the Premier says that, Steve Pennells, who won an award for his work, highlighted the plight of people in the Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Kimberley areas, most people in WA were absolutely horrified at what they saw in *The West Australian*.

It is time that Aboriginal people take responsibility. They are given houses, and it is not our fault that the walls are smashed down and the septic does not work. Why cannot Aboriginal people be taught maintenance?

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Minister for Child Protection) [3.54 pm]: On behalf of the government, the Premier and the Minister for Health have today welcomed the State Coroner's report and acknowledged that serious issues are contained therein.

I think the honourable member got her words tangled up at the beginning of her contribution. The coroner's report was inquiring into 22 deaths that occurred between 2000 and late December 2006, and one death in early 2007. The inquest was held to explore the reasons for the multiple deaths of Aboriginal people occurring in the Kimberley, in which drug and alcohol abuse was a factor, and then, if possible, to identify the reasons for the alarming increase in suicide rates in Aboriginal people in a specific period in 2006. That is the context of the coroner's report.

The recommendations of the coroner acknowledged that any solution to those problems is complex and multi-faceted and will require both immediate and longer-term strategic solutions. I will talk about some of the key issues.

In 2007, to provide leadership at the highest level, the Carpenter government created the Cabinet Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: It met once.

Hon SUE ELLERY: No, that is actually not correct. I sit on that cabinet standing committee, which is chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, and includes the Deputy Premier in his capacity as Treasurer and Minister for State Development. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services, the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, myself as Minister for Child Protection, and the Minister for Health are also represented at those meetings.

Hon Peter Collier: Is the Minister for Education and Training represented?

Hon SUE ELLERY: I do not think he is.

That cabinet standing committee reports directly back to cabinet. To ensure that the cabinet standing committee can properly coordinate the respective agencies underneath it, there is a director general's group on Indigenous affairs, and a subgroup that particularly concentrates on the operational response for the Kimberley. That group meets monthly. On the ground, there is the Kimberley Interagency Working Group, which meets in each of the

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major towns in the Kimberley. Its membership comprises the regional managers—and this is important—of all state and federal agencies and non-government schools in the region. In addition, within my portfolio, as a result of the Ford review, there is the Child Safety Directors' Group, which is chaired by Terry Murphy, the Director General of the Department for Child Protection. It reports to me. Membership includes the Departments of Health, Education and Training, Disability Services, WA Police, Corrective Services, Housing and Works, Local Government, Regional Development, Communities, and Indigenous Affairs. The Directors of Child Safety Group is responsible for coordinating across all of those relevant agencies and providing leadership in each of those relevant agencies. Members of that group must be of a high enough position that they report directly to their director general, to coordinate across-government activity.

As the honourable member said, in December 2006 the government received the Casey report into the operations of the Department of Indigenous Affairs. The government acknowledged the shortcomings identified by Dr Casey, and immediately commenced implementing the recommendations. Critical to the success of the current restructuring process for the Department of Indigenous Affairs is the authority and the mandate for Indigenous Affairs to audit and then report on the delivery of services across government to Indigenous communities. As I indicated, the government has established a Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs and the bodies that sit underneath that.

One of the key recommendations related to—and indeed was the reason for calling the inquest in the first place—inquiring into deaths associated with alcohol and drugs. The October to December interim report by the Drug and Alcohol Office indicated that the liquor restrictions in Fitzroy Crossing are working and having a dramatic effect across any range of measures. The report details a 43 per cent reduction in the number of reported incidents of alcohol-related domestic violence, and a 60 per cent decrease in the number of people presenting at the hospital's emergency department in October last year, compared with the same period in 2006. That is an extraordinary and glaringly obvious measurement that the government takes seriously, which is why I am pleased the Premier supports extending those alcohol bans to other communities.

In the area of child protection, the report also raised recruitment of staff as an issue. Damn straight it is! It is really, really difficult to get people to go and want to work in communities like Fitzroy. The government has implemented measures to make those positions more attractive, but it cannot kid itself that no matter what it attaches to the positions, it is a difficult environment in which to work in every measure possible. Nevertheless, we have allocated an additional \$300 million to child protection services, including funding for an additional 300 child protection workers. With regard to particular recruitment issues, the Department for Child Protection has successfully applied for and received an attraction and retention benefit for field workers—the people actually on the ground—and associated staff providing direct service delivery to clients. In addition, salary, housing and employment packages are in place for community child protection worker positions in a number of the Indigenous communities in the Kimberley. Until recently, child protection in the Kimberley region was managed as one big district with a manager based in Broome. It has now been split into two districts—east Kimberley and west Kimberley—each with a senior manager to provide specific support, supervision and leadership to the staff within each team, in order to develop stronger working relationships with local agencies. Members will be well aware that it is not possible to travel around the Kimberley quickly, and if senior leadership is based on the west coast at Broome, it is difficult to get to places in need of support in the east Kimberley. That was an important decision.

In addition to general staffing increases in child protection, there have been significant increases in funded and actual filled staff positions in the Kimberley. In June 2006, child protection staff positions in the field numbered 59.1 full-time equivalents. In January 2008, the number had increased to 70.4 FTE. It is difficult to recruit in the Kimberley, but we are getting better at it. We have put in a range of measures to address additional staff needs. Funding has been provided for 20 FTE at the Halls Creek hostel and nine FTE for parent support services in the Kimberley. In fact, the government has put in place a fly in, fly out rapid response child abuse team.

I quickly touch on income management because the honourable member has raised the issue. The government supports income management and the quarantining of welfare payments directly linked to issues of child protection. We supported this initiative under the previous federal government, and we support it under the present federal government. In fact, the honourable member and I have had conversations about identifying areas in which we might, in conjunction with the federal government, be able to roll this initiative out. It is important that it not be rolled out in isolation. That is not what is happening in the Northern Territory, although I do not know that I necessarily agreed with the way the previous government attached support services to it. The Queensland proposition, announced yesterday by the Rudd government, includes a package of arrangements to make sure that parents take responsibility for their children. The state government thinks that the best way to roll out quarantining is to attach it to parental responsibility orders, which were included in the Parental Support and Responsibility Bill. It is the state government's intention to roll out parental responsibility in the east Kimberley

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in May 2008. We may be in a position to actually create a real effect on the ground if the house reconsiders its position on the Parental Support and Responsibility Bill.

The point I make is that if the government does not mandate parental responsibility and engagement in these programs, taking money from Indigenous people and giving it to someone else will not address the real issue. The real question is: why are those people, as parents, not taking responsibility for their children? That is every parent's first level of responsibility. If we cannot engage those parents in programs because they will not participate, quarantining will shift the problem but will not fix the original proposition. That is a very real issue for the government. We need to put in place a full service program around quarantining, so that we have everything in place to ensure that we engage those people properly. This is a serious report from the coroner and the government takes it seriously. The directors general responsible will be meeting on Friday to implement the recommendations.

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan) [4.04 pm]: I support the motion moved by Hon Robyn McSweeney. Alastair Hope made a number of observations and recommendations with particular regard to education and, dare I say, the deficiencies in educational opportunities for Aboriginal children, particularly in the Kimberley region. He made some recommendations about strategies to overcome the appalling truancy levels and unacceptably low literacy and numeracy levels in the Kimberley. I appreciate that successive governments have been somewhat deficient in providing resources and educational opportunities to Aboriginal students, but quite frankly things have not improved during the term of this government. From what I have seen in the research I have conducted over the past few hours, things will not improve much as a result of what is on offer from the government.

I will provide the house with some statistics for the literacy and numeracy levels of Aboriginal students; it may give members an insight into the particular challenges we face. The most recent literacy and numeracy level statistics available are from 2007. Only 40.2 per cent of Aboriginal students reached the benchmark for reading, compared with 81 per cent for the collective Western Australian student population. Only 44.4 per cent of Aboriginal students reached the spelling benchmark, compared with 75.5 per cent overall. Only 42 per cent of Aboriginal students reached the benchmark for numeracy, as opposed to 80.9 per cent overall. The distinction between all students and Aboriginal students is quite vivid and disturbing. That void has been evident for generations and is not improving. The statistics for Fitzroy Crossing are even worse. Last year, only nine per cent of year 7 students at Fitzroy Crossing achieved the benchmark for numeracy; 10 per cent for reading; four per cent for spelling and 10 per cent for writing. These statistics are of great concern. If we are to improve literacy and numeracy levels, what will the government need to do about it?

Today I looked at the Department of Education and Training website for the Western Australian Aboriginal education and training participation and achievement standards directorate. Under the heading "Policies" it states —

A number of key national and state policies provide the framework for Aboriginal education and training in Western Australia. Accelerating progress in Aboriginal education and training is the key priority of the Minister and the Department of Education and Training.

That gets back to the issue of ministerial accountability, which is what we are debating today. The page discusses a number of the government's strategies. It refers to eight programs, five of which are commonwealth programs. One is listed under the heading "Aboriginal Educational and Training Operational Plan 2005-2008". I will refer to that in a moment. Further along on the same page, the document refers to what the government is doing with strategies to overcome the problem of low literacy and numeracy levels for Aboriginal children, under the heading "Plan for Government Schools 2004-2007". Obviously that is redundant, because it is now of course 2008. I had a look at the plan for government schools and, quite frankly, if this is a plan for improving literacy and numeracy levels in Aboriginal communities, we have a long way to go. It is full of generalisations and subjective statements. For example, under the heading "Outcomes", it states —

- The achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will be narrowed.

That is part of the government plan! That plan is redundant, even though it is still on the website. It has been superseded by the "Plan for Public Schools 2008-2011". One would like to think there might be something a little more expansive with specific programs. However, under "Outcomes", the document states —

- The achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will be narrowed.

Nothing has changed. There are no specific programs there. It is cause for concern that there does not appear to be anything specific about what strategies are in place to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of Aboriginal students in the Kimberley region, and to overcome the terrible truancy problems we have with Aboriginal students. Under the heading "Other Policies", the document states —

...

- Aboriginal School Based Traineeships Guide and Resource Manual
- Annual Report 2004-2005

I would say that is a little redundant now. It continues —

- Anti-Racism

This is not a program; it is just what the government is doing. It continues—

- Equal Employment Opportunity/Diversity
- Students at Educational Risk

There is nothing at all in anything I have read to the house to show that there is any forward thinking or specific planning to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of Aboriginal students. However, then I go back to the first program that I referred to in “Operational Plan 2005-2008 Our Vision: Working together empowers all to make a significant difference enabling Aboriginal students to realise their full potential”, which is, essentially, the beacon for Aboriginal education. I got this document directly off the Department of Education and Training website today. Again, this plan has generalised statements—there is nothing specific. For example, it says —

Roles and responsibilities

Schools have a fundamental role and responsibility to provide education to Aboriginal students.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: Wow!

Hon PETER COLLIER: Goodness! It continues —

Districts are responsible for sustainable change and improvement in education programs integrating successful Aboriginal education strategic initiatives into mainstream practice and operations . . .

TAFEWA colleges and other publicly funded registered training organisations have a major role in, and responsibility for, delivering VET and related services to Aboriginal students.

Yet again, we have a document that is full of generalisations. There is nothing specific in it that says we will overcome these appalling literacy and numeracy levels in the Kimberley. If this were done, it would enhance the opportunities for those students to provide more meaningful pathways in life.

What concerned me even more, I must say, was the list of education priorities for the government at the end of that document; in fact, members have to read this to believe it! It states —

PRIORITY 4

Quality teaching

The nurturing of a strong sense of identity as successful learners and as Aboriginal Australians is essential for improving outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Of course, it is —

...

- High quality teachers are attracted to and retained in schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolment.

This is a goal and priority. Following that is the important point that I want to isolate today —

Standards

The following proportions of Aboriginal students will achieve benchmark standards by 2008

The DET website states the benchmarks for Aboriginal students that the government will achieve this year—this year, Mr President! In 2008, 67 per cent of year 7 students will reach the benchmark for reading. Last year 40.2 per cent achieved that benchmark, so they will have an improvement of 37 per cent this year. In writing, 68 per cent of year 7 students will reach the benchmark, as opposed to the 50.7 per cent result last year, which represents an improvement of 18 per cent. In numeracy, 60 per cent will reach the benchmark this year, as opposed to the 42.1 per cent result last year, which represents an improvement of 22 per cent. Therefore, the government will make improvements in Aboriginal numeracy levels by 22 per cent, in writing by 18 per cent, and in reading by 37 per cent. I assure members that I will be watching! When the next Western Australian literacy and numeracy assessment—WALNA—results come out, I will see whether we have seen improvement of 37 per cent in reading, 18 per cent in writing and 22 per cent in numeracy, because, quite frankly, if the

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government is relying on the documents that I have referred to to achieve those outcomes, I think it is pie in the sky stuff. All these documents are full of generalisations. We need some significant, substantive, coherent policies to improve literacy and numeracy levels for Aboriginal students in our schools, particularly those in the Kimberley region. At the moment, truancy levels are unacceptably high, literacy and numeracy levels are unacceptably low, and, as the DET website itself states, responsibility rests at the feet of the Minister for Education and Training. Having said that, I fully support the motion moved by Hon Robyn McSweeney.

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural — Leader of the House) [4.14 pm]: I thank Hon Robyn McSweeney for raising this motion, and perhaps we ought to think about raising a substantive motion because I think this is a very serious issue.

I agreed with most of what Hon Robyn McSweeney said, except for her opening statement that it was a damning indictment on the Carpenter government. I do not think anything that she said after that—indeed, some of the things she said were quite complimentary—justified that statement. However, this is a serious issue.

Although Coroner Alastair Hope's findings might not have told us anything new, and I do not think anybody believes that is the case, he has highlighted the fact that this is a very, very serious issue that goes far beyond the Kimberley. Although the State Coroner's views were expressed about a particular set of circumstances, when I think of the number of young people in my own area who have committed suicide or who have died as a result of driving or drowning incidents while under the influence of abuse of alcohol, I am very much aware that what has been identified in Coroner Hope's findings exists right throughout Western Australia, particularly—I think this is something we need to be very carefully noting—in rural Western Australia. Our suicide rate in rural Western Australia is tragically high. I do not understand that. I do not know why. Perhaps the means of committing suicide are more available. However, there is something about our death rate as a result of the abuse of alcohol and other substances and also our outright suicide rate that we all need to be extremely concerned about.

I think the challenge that was made to us by Coroner Hope is to answer the fundamental question: why does a young person see suicide as a viable option? The instances that Coroner Hope looked at were not all textbook cases of poverty-abuse-cycle-type stuff. They were not all like that—some were, tragically, and we recognise that. However, there were instances that I have seen already in my fairly cursory examination of the findings of young people, some very young, who were happy and well adjusted, and their families were shocked that they made a decision to commit suicide. Unless we can get on top of that question of why young people see suicide as a viable option, no amount of intervention will ever prevent that suicide, short of finding out why that person thinks that suicide is an option, because if the victim's immediate family describes the person as happy and well adjusted and therefore not likely to suicide, how will a government agency ever know that? I am not saying for a moment that government agencies cannot improve things; indeed, I will go into that in a moment. However, many of the cases of suicide, in my own experience, have been like that. The family was shocked in many cases: "We did not think they were feeling that bad." They were not sick, or they did not know they were sick—they might have been, but that is another issue. Nevertheless, they were not openly sick and they did not seem to be depressed, but one day something triggered in their mind that made them believe that suicide was a viable option. We need to get on top of that. I think to an extent Coroner Hope has highlighted those couple of cases that were out of the ordinary, in my view. One involved an eight-year-old boy—an eight-year-old boy! I can recall going to a community on the Dampier Peninsula and saying to the community nurse, "This place is paradise". She said, "Well, so-and-so didn't think so yesterday." She did not name him—nor would I repeat the name—but he was a 14-year-old boy who had hanged himself the day before. He was a healthy, happy boy. He was a 14-year-old living in this paradise on the Dampier Peninsula, but for some reason he thought that suicide was an option. We have to try to understand that. I do not have the answers for it, and I do not know that anybody does, but I think we need to try to find out why that is the case.

I think it is very clear that we need to do more than we are. I think it is fair to ask—if the government spent \$1.2 billion, where has it gone? I will not make an issue of that; I think it is a question that needs to be answered. I will provide an answer by tabling a document that provides some examples of where that money has gone, but I will not read that document out. I think we need to understand that there are some things we cannot do—there are some things we can do. We can try to address poverty, but poverty itself is not the cause of these suicides. Poverty-stricken communities exist in which suicide is virtually unknown. I do not think there is even a word in any Aboriginal language for the act of suicide.

We can address, and we clearly are addressing—I thank Hon Robyn McSweeney for mentioning this—the issues surrounding alcohol abuse, at least at Fitzroy Crossing. What Hon Sue Ellery has said is clearly pointing towards a successful outcome in Fitzroy Crossing. The 60 per cent reduction in presentations of trauma at the hospital is a very good example of what can be achieved in this area. We can, and we are, improving housing, education, health care and human support. Yes, it is a challenge to get highly qualified people to work in those organisations; however, it is a challenge that we are prepared to try to meet.

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I now want to touch briefly on the issues raised by Hon Peter Collier concerning education. I have taken an interest in Aboriginal community education standards over the past four years while my daughter has been teaching in remote communities in Kalumburu and Bidadanga. In both those communities, particularly Bidadanga, which we know more about, we should be very careful that in analysing these critical issues and serious problems we do not lose sight of the good things that are taking place in Aboriginal communities, because many of these communities are doing some great things. I was interested in the benchmarks that Hon Peter Collier outlined. Yes, I agree that, on the face of it, the improvements that are proposed this year do seem a bit ambitious. However, we must always set our targets above our reach.

Hon Peter Collier: Perhaps I should have said “may” as opposed to “will”!

Hon KIM CHANCE: Yes! My daughter’s class achieved benchmarks that were 10 per cent above the level that was expected to be achieved next year. The benchmarks were in the low eighties. I believe that is fairly typical of what can be achieved in a community that supports its children and provides a happy environment. I think Bidadanga is in the main a very happy environment and one in which people can see a way forward. Perhaps I should not say this, because I do not actually know, but I have not heard of one suicide in that community, so I suspect that the suicide rate in that community is very low.

We are dealing with a serious problem. The community is looking to us as a Parliament, and as a government in particular, to provide solutions to that problem. The solutions exist, and I believe they can be achieved. However, we will not gain anything if we play politics on this issue, because in doing so we will only be hurting each other and will not be helping the people whom we are trying to help.

I have only 70 seconds left, but I would love to have the time to tell members about something that my department—the Department of Agriculture and Food—is doing. My department is going into communities that have cattle stations and is bringing those stations up to viability, principally via the provision of training in that key link area in which Aboriginal business communities have been identified as being so short in skills; that is, corporate governance.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: I hope they are not like the other Aboriginal corporations but are looking after the animals.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I can tell the member, as someone who is from the land and would understand, that five years ago, the Noonkanbah community was almost bankrupt. That community is now turning over and selling 1 200 head of cattle a year. They have reached, and they now exceed, the Kimberley pastoral benchmark on the standard of cattle and the price they achieve for those cattle. They know how to do it. That is one community. We are now rolling out that program over an area that is roughly the size of the state of Victoria, with 19 pastoral stations.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan) [4.23 pm]: I wonder how the Minister for Child Protection can say that the government has welcomed the coroner’s report. Some more appropriate words that come to my mind are shame, need for apology, or even stunned. How can the Minister for Indigenous Affairs say in her press release that this report is welcomed? That one word diminishes the entire press release put out by the minister and the government. It smacks again of the spin doctoring that this government engages in on important and serious issues. The Premier was Minister for Indigenous Affairs for two years—from 2001 to 2003. This is the leadership that the Hope report tells us is lacking. The most damning finding in the Hope report relates to this lack of leadership. What also comes to my mind is the Premier’s response to the federal government’s offer of assistance in the Kimberley. I cannot remember the exact words used by the Premier, but they were along the lines of, “We don’t need your help. We’re a shining light in this area of work in Australia. Perhaps we can supply some of our policies and our good work to you.” This report states that the government’s response is inadequate and seriously flawed. Apart from the problems that we have heard about, the 22 government agencies, the 16 ministers and the \$1.2 billion of expenditure, no-one is monitoring performance in this important area. No-one has been given the mandate, the power and the resources to make decisions and cut through the range of bureaucracy to ensure that things are done. In the meantime, the health, the suicide rate and the living conditions of the people in these communities have been going from bad to worse.

I became aware of the alarming suicide rate when I travelled through the Kimberley in 2006. It was discussed with me at every community that I visited. However, what stunned me was the way in which it was discussed. I found it shocking. However, to the people involved, it was as though they were discussing something that was just part and parcel of their daily lives and daily business. I also visited the goldfields and met with some people from Warburton. They talked about the number of suicides in the same way. That really surprised me. I also visited Warmun and met with a group of people who had just finished a five-day workshop. The women met separately from the men, and they then met as families. They were able to easily identify what they were looking for. They were looking for love, respect, and a sense of belonging and purpose. However, they did not feel that

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they were getting any of that. I wish the Leader of the House was here, because he asked what makes someone who is well adjusted contemplate suicide.

Hon Norman Moore: I wish all their ministers were here!

Hon HELEN MORTON: Yes. I ask the Leader of the House to look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs. That provides the most simple and basic understanding of what makes people feel okay about themselves or not okay about themselves. These people were able to identify the sorts of things that they believe would make a difference to their lives. They said that some of the things that they were doing in art, music and sport, and the importance of their family and their culture and traditions, were very helpful to them. However, they said that they do not feel that their lives have any purpose.

My daughter has just finished 10 months' work as the clinical nurse practitioner at an Aboriginal community at Ernabella in the north west of South Australia. She has told me a lot about the very damaged people whom she worked with in that community. She took off this week for Aurukun in Queensland, and she is already emailing me and sending me text messages about the living conditions and the poor health and education standards in that community. When I was at Halls Creek, I was stunned to hear that the education system had just two classes—a boys' class and a girls' class. The objective in the primary school was to enable the kids to write their names and gain some basic survival-type skills. The person who talked to me about that school said that she had gone through that school and her grandchildren now go to that school. She told me that she was able to go through that education system and straight through an education system in Perth without missing any years of education. However, in the space of two generations the education system had deteriorated so badly that her grandchildren would not be able to do anything close to that which she was able to do. One of my memories of Fitzroy Crossing is of an Aboriginal family discussing with me how a pregnant woman intended to take a chance and have her baby in Fitzroy Crossing, even though the hospital there does not have an obstetric service. She would rather take the risk of having her baby there than leave her other children in the community while she went to Derby to have the baby, because the accommodation in Derby was for the expectant mother only and not for other children. She was not prepared to leave the children in that community while she went to Derby to have the baby.

My overall impression when I left Fitzroy Crossing was that these people had a sense of hopelessness about the future; they felt helpless to do anything about it; and they were bored trying to overcome their lack of any real purpose. The alcohol, the ganja and the pornography are just a means of having something to do that is better than doing nothing. People in that situation are not sick; they are not termed "sick", and they do not necessarily have a mental illness. The sense of helplessness and hopelessness is just one of the ways that people eventually come to the conclusion that they are trying to escape from it. As perverse as it may seem, perhaps some people regard suicide as a real option of escape from that sense of helplessness and hopelessness when their grief, distress, pain and depression become too great. People need not be sick to feel like that. Do not confuse mentally ill people with people who commit suicide; the two do not often go hand in hand, and suicide is most often not associated with a mental illness.

The area that I am mostly concerned about is mental health. Some of the things stated in recommendation 24 on page 143 of the coroner's report are quite startling. One problem faced by people seeking to treat one young deceased person was the lack of a secure mental health facility in the Kimberley region. When she needed treatment in such a facility, it was necessary for her to be transferred to Perth. I have talked consistently about that problem for nearly two years.

The report goes on to say, sadly, that if there had been a secure mental health facility in the Kimberley, it is very likely that the deceased would have been detained at that facility and would not have hanged herself. The recommendation goes on to recommend that the government take immediate action to construct a secure mental health facility at Broome District Hospital. As I said when I stood in this house last Thursday, on one hand I am prepared to congratulate the Minister for Health for making that decision; on the other hand, it is unforgivable that the minister waited until he received the report, which has been welcomed by the government and the minister, before he was prepared to announce that funding would be made available for that secure facility. The business case for that facility has been on the cards for well over two years.

In reference to the Parental Support and Responsibility Bill, these parents feel helpless and hopeless. They already feel that they are inadequate as parents. The opposition has said to the minister many times over that if she removes the punitive aspects from the bill, she will have the opposition's support.

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [4.34 pm]: I rise to support the motion moved by Hon Robyn McSweeney. The key words of course are "accountability exposed by Coroner Alastair Hope". I have spoken in this house about this matter on other occasions. One of the interesting aspects of this matter is that the recommendations in the report, as Hon Kim Chance said, can apply right across the state. I must say that in the

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short time I have been a member for the Mining and Pastoral Region I have come across many issues throughout the regions to which this sort of accountability applies. I refer to the monitoring of and accountability on where the funds hit the deck. I was interested to see in the report the figure for state funding of \$1.2 billion; I would hate to say what the commonwealth funding would be on top of that.

Although I have very limited time to speak, I agree that members should support the motion and talk about this matter. We could go through each of the recommendations one by one, which I believe provide ideas for improvement. We do not need a royal commission. We do not need any more reports. We need some action. I will use a brief example that arose recently, which relates to another bill that will come into this house. I visited Punmu in Rudall River National Park. The community there was no different from any other community: there was rubbish everywhere, houses were wrecked, people were frustrated with trying to work there, and a community development employment program in place administered from South Hedland was not even functional. There was no-one there to say how the money could be used to hit the deck and help clean up the place. There was no-one there to say, "We've got the truck, we've got the equipment, why don't we get an extra so many dollars per hour to do that?" A workshop there was burnt out, so there was nothing there to start a program for fixing vehicles or something of that nature. I will speak more about that when we get to the bill I referred to.

Hon Kim Chance mentioned that consumption of alcohol in Fitzroy Crossing has been cut by 60 per cent. I had a meeting with a police sergeant in Broome. About 180 members of the Fitzroy Crossing population have moved to Broome and Derby. These people took their credit cards with them and left grandparents behind in Fitzroy Crossing to fend for and feed their children. The funds went with the people to Broome and to Derby. They had bought out Woolworths at Derby of green and red cans of beer when they moved from Fitzroy Crossing. There is no provision in legislation to prevent people from taking alcohol back into the town. All they need say is that it is for their own personal use, and there is no legislation for the police to act on it.

Before we put in place these measures recommended in the coroner's report there must be a whole-of-government approach. The ramifications of the report must be considered before the measurements are put in place, otherwise they will fail. The government can easily say that it cut alcohol consumption by 60 per cent because a large number of the population left; it could say that right across the Kimberley. The ramifications of that must also be looked at. Alcohol is a huge problem, but what about drugs? Drugs are a big problem in the Kimberley. It was a problem in Carnarvon well before I became a member of this place. Members of the Indigenous population there have talked about how they used to grow cannabis in a bath. They were not using the bath, so what better place was there to put the drugs and grow them? I think the coroner's report states that. An article by Lionel Quartermaine dated 17 July 2004 states —

Handing out cash payments to families who have a track record of failing to look after their children was like putting an alcoholic in charge of a brewery, according to the chairman of the almost defunct ATSIIC, Lionel Quartermaine.

He goes on to say other things that I will quote in another debate on another day. I commend Hon Robyn McSweeney for this motion.

Tabling of Papers

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural — Leader of the House) [4.38 pm]: I seek leave to table a document to which I referred in my speech.

Leave granted. [See paper 3698.]

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.