

**HALLS CREEK COMMUNITY**

*Urgency Motion*

**THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths):** I received the following letter this morning -

Dear Mr President

At today's sitting it is my intention to move, pursuant to Standing Order 72, that the House consider as a matter of urgency the Labor Government's failing of the Halls Creek community.

Yours sincerely

Hon Robyn McSweeney MLC

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)** [3.35 pm]: I move the motion. The Aboriginal community in Halls Creek is rotting away as a result of alcohol and sexual abuse. Children as young as two suffer from sexually transmitted diseases. From 1 July 2004 to this month, 105 Western Australian children aged 14 and under have been diagnosed with sexually transmitted infections. Thirty-seven of these children were from the Kimberley region, 26 from the metropolitan area and 22 from the Pilbara. It is a very confronting statement. Are we as members to sit here and accept that this is happening? Do we think that because it is out of sight it is out of mind, and is therefore no cause for concern? Do we somehow accept that this is just an Aboriginal problem that has been around for years and is endemic in all Aboriginal communities, and must somehow therefore be normal? We cannot afford to do that. If we do that, another generation will be lost to alcohol abuse, violence and poverty while sexual molestation of little children and rape goes unchecked. Words are very cheap, but we now have to take action, as the abuse has reached crisis point. The Department for Community Development must be aware that the children of Halls Creek are being abused, yet they remain in the same, sad family situation.

Magistrate Sue Gordon, who presided over the excellent Gordon inquiry, acknowledged what has been known for many years: that agencies were reluctant to intervene in Aboriginal families because they thought things could be sorted out. They still have that view; they still think things can be sorted out. This is neglect and it can no longer be allowed to continue. Once people realise that child sexual abuse is a criminal offence - as is child abuse - it should not matter to which race the child belongs. The issue of race should not enter into due process. The issue of the stolen generation should not enter into this argument either. If children are being abused, due process should be pursued.

Why has the government not put in place the recommendations of the Gordon inquiry? Halls Creek was a known priority. What support did the government provide for Halls Creek? This is a question that needs to be answered. Whatever it was, if anything, it has not worked. In fact, some say that Halls Creek has become worse since 2002. Hon Ken Baston and Hon Norman Moore will know that because it is in their area. Members are all aware of the problems, and solutions ought to be discussed. I do not wish to be negative and to criticise.

According to press reports, the town's indigenous leaders, school principals, parenting bodies and medical service are banding together to ask for solutions. They have offered some of their own, including the introduction of curfews, the payment of food vouchers instead of money and allowing parents to smack their children, although I think Aboriginal children are probably abused enough without that. Another suggestion is to issue court orders that will allow children to be taken from parents and placed in a boarding school out of town. That is their solution, not mine. Parents who had their children taken from them would be required to attend rehabilitation as part of the court order. This would be a good move, because the children would be in a safe place. They have also demanded the introduction of mandatory reporting. Aboriginal people must have a say in whatever plan is undertaken, and the safety of those children must underpin that plan.

I have heard Dennis Eggington say that if children are to be taken, they need to be put with extended families. I can understand that, but what if figures from the Department for Community Development show that Aboriginal children are more at risk of being abused in relative care? Two reports have been released. One was the Cant report, called "Protecting Children in Care: A Way Forward", and the other more recent one was the Gwenn Murray report. The Gwenn Murray report showed that of the 59 children who were abused and whom Gwenn Murray's inquiry looked at, some 42 per cent were in relative care at the time. Both the government and the opposition must think very carefully about what is happening. I am brave enough to say that. Dennis Eggington was reported in *The West Australian* as saying-

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“They will be managed and looked after by those children’s extended families, which really is a part of Aboriginal culture anyway.

“As long as their relatives and their family are managing those boarding schools . . . and the children are still able to maintain their cultural identity and links, I think there’s nothing wrong with it.

I do not either, but those children who are put in relative care must be safe. I believe 673 children are in relative care at present. That means that the abuse is not stopping. Those children are being taken from their own homes and put in relative care, but the abuse is not stopping. The Department for Community Development needs to look into that, because the cycle is continuing. Why do people think that if a child is taken out of his or her nuclear family, there will be no abuse in the extended family? They all come from the one nuclear family.

I actually believe in - I have been reported in the press as saying this - having hostels attached to schools within those communities. The children should not be taken out of the communities, because that is unfair. The hostels need to be where the parents can see that the children are being looked after, and they can see for themselves that they are safe. We are talking about human beings. If we tried to put ourselves in the shoes of those Aboriginal people, we would not even come close to doing so. I do not want to sound patronising. I am just saying that I could never come close to knowing what it would be like. The mistakes of the past do not need to be revisited. I believe we can do it better this time. The hostels should be on site, and not out of town. The parents should be made to follow the court order, with rehabilitation. I do not believe in fairyland, so I do not believe that the alcohol abuse will ever stop completely. It just will not happen. However, measures such as the provision of food vouchers, with some cash component, may stem the tide enough to be able to achieve some real progress in those communities. My view is that when parents give up their responsibility for their children, the state has a responsibility to step in. We cannot just leave the situation as it is. By all accounts and from what we are seeing, the time has come for the state to take responsibility.

The Gordon inquiry, which I have mentioned, told this government what was wrong. It was very comprehensive in what it said about little girls being raped in Aboriginal communities and the dreadful abuse that was taking place. Nothing has really changed. The Premier made this issue a very high priority, but the action plan that should have been implemented in 2003 is running nearly two years late and, as I said, the violence is continuing. The government took this portfolio area from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and put it into the Department of Indigenous Affairs in 2005, knowing that the action plan had not been implemented. Nobody is monitoring the implementation of that action plan. The Auditor General has warned that important information that would protect children has been lost during the delays. Only one new DCD initiative has been listed in the past 12 months, and barely half of the department’s total initiatives have been acted upon. Less than a quarter of the money allocated for 2003-04 and 2004-05 for the Safe Places Safe People initiative for vulnerable Aboriginal people has been used. That really needs to be looked at. Now the Aboriginal people are calling out for help, and we must take action. The no school, no welfare policy that was scrapped had an 80 per cent success rate. It was very successful, and should have been continued. As Hon Ljiljana Ravlich knows, education is the key to success, but the program was stopped. It was trialled in Halls Creek, and stopped in November, because it contravened the federal Social Security Act. That is a federal issue, and that act is now being changed so that a system can be put in place. Under the old scheme, parents in Halls Creek had Centrelink payments withheld if they failed to attend a meeting to discuss their child’s truancy. Noel Pearson has put forward a raft of proposals that are now being considered, and good on him for doing that. Hopefully, by the end of the year, they will be in place. An 80 per cent success rate is good. Hon Tom Stephens has suggested that we go back to the old homemaker scheme that the Department for Community Development had in the 1970s and 1980s. I thought it was a bit earlier than that. Hon Muriel Patterson, whose seat I took in this house, was a homemaker for the Department for Community Development. That scheme worked really well, and I have no problem with it being reintroduced. In fact, I often wonder why these very good programs were cut in the first place. I presume it was because people felt it was patronising or, as Hon Tom Stephens has said, it was not in the interests of self-determination. However, we have seen that self-determination is not working in Halls Creek. Perhaps this is one part of the solution. It is farcical to think that teaching people how to cook and budget and giving them parenting skills could somehow not be beneficial.

A letter to the editor of *The West Australian* was published on 15 March, with the name and address withheld, because the writer thought he or she would lose his or her job if the name was supplied. The letter states -

Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McHale is committed to doing “whatever it takes” to improve the situation. That sort of promise generally means more money in the way of welfare payments and more “work for the dole” type schemes - more child welfare payments for “carers” to spend at the pub while the kids starve and more money for gambling at card games, more violence, more assaults, more distress and grief. And so it goes on.

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That same minister, Hon Sheila McHale, presided over the Department for Community Development, which has been in crisis for some time now. She is now Minister for Indigenous Affairs. I hope, for the sake of those kids, that she does a better job there than she did as Minister for Community Development. The abuse in these communities was rife for the whole five years that Minister McHale was in charge of the Department for Community Development. I sincerely hope that the leaders of the community of Halls Creek have success with their hostel plan. I support it, but it must be run properly, and this goes back to the relative carers. It must have Aboriginal planning, input and ongoing involvement.

I have spoken in this place before about the appalling conditions in Kununurra, and the way that the government ignored what the then shire president, Barbara Johnson, was telling it. Halls Creek is no orphan when it comes to abuse in communities. I go back to the report of the Gordon inquiry. Perhaps the Premier, Alan Carpenter, should reacquaint himself with the recommendations of that report, given that Halls Creek was one of the high priority areas, and a lot of information was obtained from Aboriginal communities throughout that region. We have a duty of care for those children. Just because we cannot see them does not mean that we cannot do something now. The mechanism is in place.

An article from *The Weekend Australian* of 18 March states -

Some call it culture. Most call it rape. According to the account of a 14-year-old Aboriginal girl made public in Katherine in the Northern Territory several weeks ago, her father died and her mother moved in with a new man. He assumed certain so-called tribal rights over his stepdaughter and promised her in marriage to an old man.

“That old man thought I was playing up and he started jealousying me all the time,” the girl said. “One night, when he and his mates got drunk, they held me down and raped me. The old man put a fire stick up inside me and burned me bad.

I had to go to hospital. That’s when I found out I was having a baby.”

After the attack, the girl stayed in Katherine and became one of the town’s many drunks. She has not been sighted for some time. She is one of three fire-stick victims who have turned up in town in the past three years. Two of those women are dead, having reportedly met violent ends.

The next part of the article relates to Western Australia -

“There’s this big lie, this farce that covers the whole of Aboriginal Australia,” says Marie Allen, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission regional councillor from Katherine. “The lie is that none of this abuse and incest is happening. Our [male] leaders are always saying: ‘You’re not supposed to talk about this stuff.’ They don’t want people to know, they want people to think they’re cultural. But I’m just fed up with the way Aboriginal women are treated . . .

Allen recently pulled an elderly woman off Katherine’s streets and returned her to the bush because she was being repeatedly raped or hassled by groups of young men. In January, a seven-year-old girl from across the border in Western Australia was raped by - police believe - a gang of juveniles in a playground, in the middle of the day. The girl’s parents were drunk, attending funeral “sorry business”. The girl now wears a colostomy bag.

I do not want any kids doing that and I do not think the government does either. I think every member in this chamber is appalled and it is time for some action on the government’s part.

**HON BARBARA SCOTT (South Metropolitan)** [3.51 pm]: I speak in favour of this motion. I hope this is a matter of serious concern to every member in this chamber. When I read the press reports covering that specific situation in Halls Creek some two weeks ago, there was a feeling of *deja vu* - we have heard all this before. It is now time for action. None of us in this house has any excuse or reason for not taking action to protect the children of Western Australia, whether they are black or white or whether they live in Halls Creek or the back of Bencubbin or Mukinbudin. It does not matter where they live. Measures that need to be taken have been put at the feet of this government, and it has just ignored them. Hon Robyn McSweeney alluded to the 2002 Gordon inquiry when the then Premier, Dr Gallop, said he would draw a line in the sand. The Gordon inquiry report is a remarkable document; it is a very thick document. I hope most members have at least had time to scan it. I do not have it with me in the chamber today, but Dr Gallop said that he would draw a line in the sand and make a difference for the children of Western Australia. However, we are still waiting for some of the major recommendations from the Gordon inquiry to be implemented. What else do we have to wait for? Do we need to wait for more disturbing stories similar to those that came out of Halls Creek about the abuse of Aboriginal children some two weeks ago? The Minister for Education and Training nods as if to say that it is not a concern of hers. Education is one of the main components for confronting this issue. It is about time Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich took her portfolio seriously and looked at the intervention programs and strategies that her department

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has tried to set up. Look at the Roots of Empathy programs and at other programs that have been funded as pilot programs, such as the Early Years strategy. This government has put a stop to that. Those programs have not been funded sufficiently. People say to me on a daily basis that I have to say something in the Parliament about early intervention.

Early intervention applies as much to children in Halls Creek as it does to others. What I am saying today is that this government has failed the children of Western Australia when it should have seen the warning signs and when these messages had been sent to it. Where is the children's commissioner that was recommended by the Gordon inquiry? In fact, the Gordon inquiry recommended that there be not only a children's commissioner for Western Australia as soon as possible, but also a deputy children's commissioner for Aboriginal children. I do not particularly adhere to that line, but the then Premier said that he would draw a line in the sand, that he would make a difference and that he would implement the recommendations of the Gordon inquiry. This is such a serious matter. Indeed, he used the words, "This is a national disgrace." This is a national disgrace. People in this chamber talk about the bottom line and how wonderful the government is to have all this surplus money; yet children in this state are suffering while simple programs that can and do work are not being funded. For instance, the mothers and infants program in Kalgoorlie has been trialled through the Department of Health, and every year it has had to fight for extra funding. Under the program, Aboriginal mothers are trained as community health workers. They do not need degrees, but they need to have an empathy with their people. They go into the communities, work with teenage girls and give them information to help them avoid early pregnancies. If they have babies, they are helped with breastfeeding, nutrition and organising their finances. These are the sorts of messages that have been coming through to us from the community year after year. The Gordon inquiry put that message before the Parliament clearer than anything else we have seen. Yet on 11 March 2006, *The West Australian* ran a distressing and alarming story about Halls Creek. This story could be told about a number of communities. Indeed, two years ago when I travelled there with Hon Norman Moore, I was staggered at the number of community leaders who said to us, "We want our young children taken from us. Can you find somewhere to put them? Can you create hostels?"

Hon Robyn McSweeney has suggested a solution. There are solutions. Programs need to be funded, but people must fight every step of the way to get government funding and backing. These programs have been raised with me day after day. Members need only visit the Parkerville Children's Home, where children at high risk are placed. Can we not look at models in our community that work for children at risk? Can we not create some sort of home like that, whereby children are not taken from their parents and placed in boarding schools? It did not do me any harm to be a boarding school graduate, but I do not believe that taking little children from their parents and homes is the best option. Why do we not support them? We do not support them because it costs money. Why do we not introduce mandatory reporting of child abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and violence? We do not because it costs too much money. This government is in charge of Treasury and it has all the evidence in front of it, but what does it do? It does nothing. Government members smile or smirk when the opposition raises these issues and asks when the department will do something about the issue. It is time that a bomb was put under several departments, and children's lives and futures were taken care of.

We could set up a home like the Parkerville Children's Home, which has house parents, who are supported by professionals, and a school. The truancy rate of children in Halls Creek is appalling. As a teacher of old, I can relate to teachers who find it very distressing to endeavour to put in place programs and teach the very basics of numeracy and literacy to children only to find that on many occasions they do not attend school. The level of educational achievement by Aboriginal children is appalling. The national literacy levels that were reported last week indicate that the standards for year 3 children in Western Australia are below the national benchmark. The minister should ask why that is. If we do not employ strategies in the early years of schooling, our children will fail. If they cannot read by grades 3, 4 or 5, they are not likely to be able to learn to read in years 8 or 9.

Yesterday I had lunch with a very dear friend of mine who is a retired principal of a college in Western Australia. He is now working at a school in Fremantle and teaching difficult, at-risk boys in years 8 and 9 who cannot read. He said it is very difficult to get these boys to learn to read at that level, because they have experienced only a succession of failures. That is the problem we are facing in the Aboriginal community. We must help these children to succeed in the early years. I urge the Minister for Education and Training, with every sense of sincerity that I can muster, to look at the Early Years programs that have been put in place and at what the teachers have tried to do in those early years to get the parents onto the school site with their children even before they start school. I urge the minister to look at whether these programs are being funded to the appropriate level. I urge the minister also to look at whether we can help the parents in remote communities to learn to read and write so that they can, in turn, help their children. What is happening in these remote communities is a disgrace. There are, of course, a number of mitigating factors. In many cases these parents have received no parenting themselves. However, if we do not achieve early goals in education, and if we do not give children the priority that they need in their health care in the early years with models like the one that has

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been adopted in Kalgoorlie, we will have no option but to resort to welfare models. The model that Hon Robyn McSweeney talked about - namely, the no school, no parenting payment - is very good, because we need to take a carrot-and-stick approach to this issue.

**HON MURRAY CRIDDLE (Agricultural)** [4.01 pm]: This issue has also been brought to the attention of the National Party. Our leader, Brendon Grylls, was in Halls Creek three weeks ago, and he is there again today to look at this very issue. At some stage we need to identify the people who are responsible for these problems. It is not good enough for people to keep passing the buck. This has been going on for some time. One of my children has been teaching in the north for the past 10 years, so I know a bit about what is going on. We need to have some deadlines and some guidelines, and stick to them, and make sure we get some progress. The problems are not happening just in Halls Creek. It is said that 50 children are at risk in Halls Creek. Judith Butters, who works at the Aboriginal medical service in Halls Creek, has made that very clear, and Dennis Eggington has supported her. It is clearly an issue from the point of view of the Aboriginal community in the area. It is also an issue in Geraldton and Mullewa - our area, Leader of the House - and in other areas. I have gone into the police station in Geraldton. The staff at the Department for Community Development get to work at nine o'clock in the morning and go home at five o'clock at night. From my point of view, that is a waste of time. I know what happens in the north. The kids need to be hauled out of bed and put on the school bus and fed before they can even start to be educated. By the time these kids are 13 or 14 they are lost so far as the community is concerned. That is the real situation. I want someone to accept responsibility and take action. We have heard about kids being abused. Someone needs to accept responsibility for that in the community. It is no good just saying we will fix it. It has been going on now for too long, and it is getting worse. Some of the diseases that are going around these days are terminal; they cannot be fixed. We need to get a move on and do something about it. People need to take responsibility 24 hours a day.

I have been talking about food vouchers for years. I first put that idea forward about five or six years ago in Geraldton. I thought I would get blown off the face of the earth and people would say that we cannot do that in this day and age. However, I never heard a whimper. If that is not the solution, give us a solution that will be of assistance. If these people cannot use the money that they get wisely, they should be taught how to handle the money.

**Hon Barbara Scott:** We have the solutions. We just need the money.

**Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE:** I am not sure that we need extra money. We need the money to be spent in the right areas. We cannot keep throwing money at the issue. We need some practical solutions so that the issue can be dealt with in a meaningful way. I will be very interested to see what our leader, Brendon Grylls, brings back from the north. I am sure it will be the same old story. We must do something. I suggest to members that we do something about it by appointing suitable people who will be accountable for fixing the problem. If they cannot do the job, let us get someone who can. The problem must be properly managed, and that is what this house is asking the government to do. We must start now by appointing suitable people who are responsible for their actions. If reasonable solutions are put forward, the communities will come on board and assist. I want to see that sort of system put in place.

**HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral)** [4.05 pm]: I support the comments by Hon Robyn McSweeney and Hon Barbara Scott and agree with their suggestions to rectify the situation. Last year on a visit to Halls Creek I was privileged to attend a public meeting that dealt with the issues confronting that town. That meeting was attended by many of the elders, schoolteachers, police, shire representatives and members of the public. I am very impressed with the way in which Halls Creek is tackling its issues. Halls Creek has been mentioned in the press because it is the town that is leading the way by trying to do something for the indigenous people of that area. I assure members that there are many other towns in this state with far worse issues, and that is even more disturbing. The meeting I attended addressed issues such as the abuse of alcohol, abuse of children and children being too tired to be educated at school because they had been roaming all night. They roam because they are frightened to return to a situation in their home where they will be belted, abused etc. That is the real issue. The teachers to whom I spoke told me that when the children came to school they were given breakfast and they went to sleep for the rest of the day. The hardest thing for the teachers to do is to toss the children out of the classroom at the end of the day. The children are too frightened to go home. I found these facts disturbing. However, I was heartened that the elders at that meeting stated what they believed were the problems. It now appears that there is a proposal to establish hostels within the town, manned with support from the Aboriginal people. I honestly believe that is one way to go, because education is important.

I spoke in this place last Thursday about an Aboriginal community just out of Karratha. Unfortunately, I did not realise until the next day that the Minister for Education and Training was in Karratha. Had I known, I would have taken her with me on the lovely journey of 110 kilometres. It took me two hours to reach my destination. I am sure the minister would have enjoyed it.

Several members interjected.

**Hon KEN BASTON:** As I said, I did not know the minister was in town. The school to which I alluded on Thursday is attended by 23 students. It is a magnificent school, but it disturbed me that the principal's accommodation is not good enough to keep that principal at the school. I have learnt today that it may be the reason for that principal's decision to leave the area. These are some of the issues that have been raised.

Last year I was at Tom Price, and I was pleased to see a program that is in operation there. The kids come to school in the morning, do their hair etc and are given their breakfast. An incentive program, which I have not seen operating elsewhere, is in place and it is working. The incentives are in the form of various prizes hanging from the ceiling, for which the children need to collect 100 points. Under this 100-point program, once a child reaches 100 points he can decide whether to choose a prize to that value, or collect another 100 points for a bigger prize. However, I was disturbed to learn that the program was not funded from the education budget. The funding came from the mining industry, the result of the principal's leadership. I would like this sort of program to become part of the education process, with funding made available to schools. It is an excellent program.

A similar program is operating at the East Carnarvon Primary School, but it does not involve the incentives hanging from the ceiling. I commend those teachers for taking the lead by implementing that program. The problems of Halls Creek touch on what is happening in that region. I also visited Balgo last year, where everyone told me that things were going fairly well. A couple of policemen were in town. I inquired if everything was okay and they said yes, apart from an incident the night before in which a mother and daughter had a row and burnt their house down and the daughter had tried to hang herself. On another occasion, the fellows building houses were attacked by 10 dogs, and one of the fellows had his leg torn apart. Had the police not been there, the fellow would have been killed. The whole community seemed to me to be in chaos. I wondered where we would start. Halls Creek is the start. I certainly believe that the community has got to the point at which it wants to trial some programs. We should give the Halls Creek community every bit of financial support necessary to make that happen, and then enlarge on it even further.

**HON ADELE FARINA (South West - Parliamentary Secretary)** [4.11 pm]: The government has been addressing the many issues facing the community in Halls Creek. It is important that we acknowledge, when implementing any measures to address these problems, that it is absolutely critical that Aboriginal people are afforded the opportunity to contribute their ideas and to develop their own solutions. They need to have ownership of the measures that we put in place, otherwise, as experience has shown, the measures simply will not work. Judith Butters' views are a welcome contribution to the debate, but we need to ensure that they have community support if they are to work. At a meeting with the Department of Indigenous Affairs' acting regional manager for the east Kimberley on Wednesday, 15 March, Ms Butters advised that the community would not support a blanket removal of children, as this would create another stolen generation. Key critical issues here have not been explored and canvassed in recent media reports. Her proposals for a long-term family rehabilitation program and hostel on site are options and issues that have some merit. However, they need to be explored and we need to ensure that they have full community support and ownership, otherwise they simply will not work. In some media articles Hon Robyn McSweeney has been quoted as strongly supporting the idea, but without local community support these measures will not work. Experience has shown us that doing things to or for Aboriginal people has not worked and is not a way to continue. The issue we have is that there has not been one community view on the best way to address the issue, and community ownership is fairly critical. A number of measures have been put in place to ensure that community dialogue is undertaken and that we are able to work together to put together a program to address these issues.

The isolation of the Halls Creek community, the over-reliance of the Aboriginal population on welfare payments to sustain families, the lack of long-term employment opportunities and the lack of appropriate housing have all contributed to the situation that exists in Halls Creek today. Long-term alcohol and drug abuse are also issues that have been impacting on the fibre of that community. The Department for Community Development has made a concerted effort to address these issues. It has employed local Aboriginal staff in an effort to link more closely with the community. Its Halls Creek office has three officers and its Balgo Hills office has two officers who work together as a team to provide services and to address the issues in those communities. Those officers include a child protection worker and a youth and family engagement officer. There is a perception that child abuse is rife in Halls Creek. However, the number of referrals to the department does not reflect this. In the past 12 months the department has received 21 referrals of alleged child abuse, of which 10 referrals have been for alleged sexual abuse.

**Hon Robyn McSweeney:** More cases are happening; you must admit that.

**Hon ADELE FARINA:** I do not think that is the case. A lot of work has been done to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of children are paramount. When dealing with the referrals that it receives, the department

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ensures that children are placed in safe environments; that is, with family or extended family. Currently, only six children are in the care of the CEO at Halls Creek.

The department is also implementing three major developmental strategies in Halls Creek to deal with the issue of child safety. One is HYPE - Helping Young People Engage - which is a program aimed at reducing antisocial behaviour in young people and children. The government has committed just under \$58 000 for the implementation of this program in Halls Creek alone. The program is also being implemented in a number of other communities in the Kimberley region. The selection and training of local indigenous HYPE workers is proceeding. The program is due to start operation in April. A second strategy is the Safe Places, Safe People program, one of the government's responses to the Gordon inquiry. This initiative builds on existing ways of supporting Aboriginal families who are already providing safe places for children to stay.

**Hon Robyn McSweeney:** Are you spending the money though?

**Hon ADELE FARINA:** Yes, we are. The program provides an opportunity for us to track the children when they are placed and to ensure that their safety is paramount at those permanent placements. The other strategy being implemented by the government is the Early Years strategy. Halls Creek is an Early Years site. It has received four grants totalling approximately \$48 000. Many successful outcomes have been achieved with local families and young children through this initiative. These include the establishment of playgroups run by local women who have received the training and support required to do the job well. Not only has the program been developed in conjunction with Aboriginal people, but also it provides opportunities for employment for local Aboriginal people, and unemployment is one of the key problems that has been identified. A lot of benefits have resulted from that program.

In addition, last month the Department of Indigenous Affairs appointed a place manager to assist the Halls Creek community to address any identified lack of government service delivery, to broker arrangements across government and local communities to help responsive services and to work with the community to identify and develop a range of practical solutions to the problems that may arise. The department also appointed a staff officer to the Shire of Halls Creek to work on improving the governance of community groups situated at Halls Creek.

In the 2005-06 budget the Department of Housing and Works allocated funding for six new houses to be built in four of the communities in Halls Creek, averaging about \$300 000 each. It has also established a Halls Creek camps mobile maintenance team to deal with house repairs, maintenance issues and some upgrading works. The Department of Health has initiated a number of programs, including the Kimberley drug service team and the Halls Creek sobering-up centre, which provides safe, supervised overnight care to adults who are found intoxicated in public. It received over \$300 000 in funding in 2005-06 and has provided 1 217 occasions of service to intoxicated clients, 99 per cent of whom were Aboriginal. Counselling and non-residential rehabilitation are also available for Aboriginal people in Halls Creek.

Also, the Department of Education and Training is considering a range of strategies to encourage Aboriginal children to increase school attendance. There is a range of other issues, some of which have already been mentioned by members opposite in their statements. Police are monitoring and policing the liquor licensing restrictions in Halls Creek. They are also implementing a no-tolerance policy of street drinking and other minor antisocial behaviours. That has resulted in the crime rate decreasing. Domestic violence has been targeted by police, and they are taking a no-tolerance approach to that also. That has resulted in an increased number of reported assaults. The crime rates in Halls Creek are an indication that the government's measures are having an effect. The rates of a number of offences have decreased recently. Burglary in particular has decreased by more than 50 per cent and sexual assaults have decreased from 21 to eight offences in the past year. However, drug offences have doubled over that period. We clearly must change our focus to address that problem.

In addition to the programs that have been implemented, the agencies met last Tuesday to address the issues identified in the recent media reports.

**Hon Barbara Scott:** Because of the articles in *The West Australian*?

**Hon ADELE FARINA:** No. Programs have been ongoing, but the recent attention of the media highlighted issues. Occasionally the media focuses on the problems. Government departments have had an opportunity to meet and reassess what they have been doing and to prioritise all the issues. A meeting was also held today.

**HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [4.21 pm]:** I will speak very briefly on this motion. Hon Adele Farina has drawn from an extensive list, but I can see from her pile of notes that she has much more information. One of the things that came from her comments was a sense of a combined government response. It is not simply a matter of one agency's response. I appreciate that this urgency motion has been moved, because it is an issue of critical importance. I appreciate also the way in which Hon Robyn McSweeney has approached the issue because it is a problem for all of us. Nobody would ever dispute that there is much

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more to be done. However, I hope the current engagement and the way in which the opposition is prodding us to lift our game in that area will contribute to a better outcome.

I would not like the general public to be left with the impression that Aboriginal people who live in communities in the north or in the agricultural region are in a state of irreparable despair. That is just not true. Yes, there are serious problems. I can speak from only limited experience, but my daughter lives and works as a teacher in those remote Aboriginal communities, so I get a daily feel for what is happening in two of the bigger communities in the Kimberley. It is not all bad news. Although educational outcomes are extremely challenging, I see people there who are very committed to their task. That includes not only Department of Education and Training staff, but also people within the communities. My daughter has worked in both a "wet" community and a "dry" community. One area has adequate policing and, during her time there, the other community was not policed at all, although it was a very remote community - communities do not get much more remote than that. I hasten to add that it is now policed.

Something not included in Hon Adele Farina's briefing that she could not possibly have related to the house is the effect on Aboriginal communities of economic development. I acknowledge the area has a problem with drugs and alcohol and that they contribute to its social upheaval. However, it seems to me that the principal problem challenging people who live in these communities - often non-Aboriginal people as well as Aboriginal people - is lack of hope. Lack of hope comes from lack of economic opportunity. In that regard, and in our own small way, the Department of Agriculture, in cohort with the federal government through the Indigenous Land Corporation, has started a successful and tremendous program that began at Noonkanbah and is often referred to as the Noonkanbah scheme. The Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Service now covers an area of the Kimberley that is the size of Victoria. Nineteen pastoral stations are covered by it. The scheme is applied to pastoral stations only and trains people in corporate governance. It is turning around the economic situations of the stations and is providing people with a sense of hope. That scheme is being extended to the Pilbara and, hopefully, it will be extended to the southern rangelands. In addition, last year the government funded the New Opportunities for Tropical and Pastoral Agriculture initiative. Although it is not entirely an Aboriginal-focused program, it certainly will play a key role in reintroducing Aboriginal communities to the process of agriculture through a market gardening and horticultural-type process, which has obvious health benefits. I mention those projects because I know that Hon Adele Farina did not. The Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Project has been recognised by the United Nations as the best scheme of its type in the world. It also won a silver award for the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management and was the joint winner of the 2004 Premier's Award for Excellence in Public Sector Management.

Things are happening. As much as I encourage the opposition in the views it has put to us - it has an important role in keeping the government honest in that regard, which I appreciate - I do not think we should be overcome by despair, because there are signs of achievement.

**HON NORMAN MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the Opposition)** [4.26 pm]: I thank Hon Robyn McSweeney for bringing this matter to the attention of the house today. If there is an example of the house requiring more than one hour to debate an urgent motion, this is it. I suspect that each member has a story to tell about this matter. I have been taking an interest in this issue since I was a teacher in the north eastern goldfields and the Pilbara. One of the most serious problems this country faces regarding Aboriginal health and welfare is the ideological bent that various governments and government agencies have adopted for a very long time. To a large extent, that ideological bent has ignored the reality of life in Aboriginal communities. Decisions are being made by bureaucrats in Canberra who view Aborigines as noble savages. The bureaucrats believe that the programs they implement are in the best interests of the Aboriginal people who are living in the remote communities that are spread throughout the state.

Hon Kim Chance has hit the nail on the head. If an Aboriginal community is created some 500 kilometres north east of Laverton for a group of people who have been told to live there and do something useful and meaningful with their lives, one can bet one's bottom dollar that it will not happen. The Aboriginal community has progressed - if I can use that term; it is probably the wrong one - from the traditional hunter-gatherer society to something that is quite different. They are caught between two economic systems. They do not know which way to go. The bureaucrats in Canberra and other places have said that Aborigines should revert to being noble savages because the bureaucrats think that that would be nice. However, we are finding that it does not work.

The alternative is something that nobody has yet been prepared to grapple with. In part, the alternative involves saving Aboriginal children from the circumstances in which they find themselves. Nothing fills me with more despair than to go to Kununurra, with its beautiful lawns and lovely trees in the centre of town, and to see people there drinking themselves stupid all night and to see children hanging around trying to find something to do. The children are then expected to go to school the next morning. It does not work. Those children should be

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taken from their parents and be put in a safe house for the night. They should be given a chance to sleep and to be properly fed, clothed, washed and cleaned. That would give them a chance at school. To say that it is not acceptable to do that anymore because of the stolen generation hype simply denies those children the opportunities that should be afforded to them.

The stolen generation report has set back the cause of Aboriginal people a long, long way. In some people's minds that is a silly thing to say. The report claims that all the things that were done in the past were wrong, abysmal and unacceptable, and that anybody who even thinks about doing anything like that in the future is completely wrong. People have not been prepared to talk about children being taken from their parents, albeit for a period, to ensure that they are in a safe environment. As grown adults, we must now recognise that there is a problem that has been created by misguided policies of the past, and listen to people like Noel Pearson and the new president of the Labor Party, who are saying, "Let's forget the ideology of the past and look at the practicalities of the future. Let us work out what we're going to do about these poor children who are in terrible circumstances, and these poor adults who fundamentally have no hope and are alcoholics or drug addicts, or sniff petrol or do whatever they do to fill in the day."

It is a serious issue. I acknowledge that there are some good communities, and some are getting better and better as time goes by. However, there are some dreadful communities and some dreadful towns. In my view, in a sense Halls Creek is a good town. I like Halls Creek; it is a good place to go. However, it has some problems that have been highlighted, I guess ironically, because of a program that was put in place in a sensible way by the school principal and the commonwealth government to do something about truancy. That was highlighted in the media as a project which worked but which some federal bureaucrat told his minister was illegal, improper or unconstitutional - whatever the reason was. It is the same old story. My advice to the federal minister is to change the rules and change the law. If this is a program that works and if kids go to school, it is worth continuing, and it puts some responsibility back onto the parents to make sure that the kids go to school.

We need to rethink all this. If it were ever possible in this place, I would appreciate there being some time for us to have a serious debate on this matter over a period, so that we could talk about the subject from the beginning to the end, rather than have just a simple one-hour debate in which we all try to get a few points of view across in a short time. However, I believe it has been an excellent debate, and one that demonstrates the way in which this house can, in a mature way, deal with problems that are sometimes considered to be too political to be discussed in polite political circles such as this place. I hope we will get a chance to debate this issue at some time down the track.

In conclusion, I say that far too many Aboriginal children are at risk throughout Western Australia, and something must be done about that. I also add that many non-Aboriginal children are at risk, and of course we accept that something must be done about that too. However, let us get on with the job and do something about it.

**HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West)** [4.32 pm]: I thank all my colleagues in this house for the way in which they have contributed to this debate. Hon Barbara Scott, with her early childhood education background, contributed very well. Early intervention is very important. I believe Hon Barbara Scott put her case to Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich very well. Hon Murray Criddle hit the nail on the head when he said that the Department for Community Development operates from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, and in those communities it just cannot operate on those times. DCD must operate 24 hours a day. In a longer debate, we could probably work something out. However, the doors cannot shut at five o'clock. When I worked at DCD and a social worker had a domestic violence case at five minutes to five, what did that worker do? Shut the door? No. He or she kept working. However, that makes it hard for the workers. Hon Ken Baston said that in his area the kids are too tired to be educated. They are out roaming the streets and are too scared to go home. We know why they are too scared to go home. They get raped and abused, and their parents are drinking and are violent. That must be a horrible situation for any child, black or white - any colour. If that is politically incorrect, I will take the heat on that.

In Kalgoorlie, there was a breakfast program called the Henderson project. That was probably the first one of its kind in Western Australia. It was started by a principal. I think the cost of breakfast was down to 40c a day. That was privately organised; it was not departmental funding.

Hon Ken Baston also mentioned principals leaving schools because there was no accommodation for them. If good principals are in that isolated area, we need to keep them there. Hon Ken Baston mentioned Balgo in that regard. Hon Adele Farina mentioned that there were only eight sexual offences. She had some very good points to make, but I interjected at one stage that the problem was very well hidden. Aboriginal people do not come forward with allegations about sexual offences because that would mean their men would be taken off to jail, and that would start a whole string of consequences. We need to put more workers in there to teach the women that these are offences and that they should come forward. There will always be entrenched problems, and

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Hon Adele Farina made some very good points. I asked whether any money was being spent on safe house programs, because it was in the budget, and the money was not spent. I saw that \$58 000 had been used for that program and \$48 000 had been for the early childhood strategy.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.