

## Robert D Neville

Hon Simon O'Brien MLC  
Chairman  
Standing Committee on Environment  
and Public Affairs.  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Mr O'Brien

### **Petition No. 133 – Culture and operations of Port Hedland and South Hedland Police Stations**

Following the tragic and death of 22 year-old Ms Dhu in the South Hedland lock up in August 2014, it was obvious to someone like myself that there was something wrong with the policing system out of the South Hedland Police Station, and not just at that particular time.

I came to the Pilbara WA in November 1971 following my immigration from England the previous year, and after some months in the Tom Price and Paraburdoo area, and then three years from November 1972 in Newman WA, I transferred to Port Hedland in December 1975.

I lived for almost 40 years in South Hedland, leaving in March 2015 to begin my transition to retirement and a different life Toodyay.

My time in South Hedland gave me a lot of life experiences: working with the iron ore industry until 1987; as journalist with the Northwest Telegraph for 12-months; An Electorate Officer with a local Member of Parliament for four years; the Department of Housing for four years, and then in 1997 was privileged to be asked to join with an Aboriginal organisation, Bloodwood Tree Association as the CEO, where I am still partially employed until the end of October when I fully retire.

I also served as a Councillor with the Town of Port Hedland for some 13 years, becoming Deputy Mayor in 2002 and then as Mayor for eight months until 2005.

My time as an Electorate Officer with the local MLC, and in various positions with the Department of Housing, and specifically my almost 20 years with Bloodwood Tree, taught me a lot about Aboriginal people, their culture and unfortunately their mistreatment for so many years in the Pilbara, some of which I have witnessed within Newman, South and Port Hedland and within some of the surrounding remote communities.

As the CEO of Bloodwood Tree Association, one of the issues that kept arising time after time in our services (Substance Use; Sobering Up; Patrol; Homeless Support; Crisis accommodation; life-skills and work-skills training and education and employment) was the incarceration of Aboriginal people for what I would term, misdemeanours.

Within the daily work with Bloodwood Tree, staff were always looking for ways to get Aboriginal people released from the lock up and/or Roebourne Regional Prison who were there for fines enforcements and or minor traffic infringements (driving without a licence etc).

The expansion of the mining industry beginning in 2003 saw many companies ramp up their workforces and install targets for the employment of Aboriginal people (led by the mining companies), with hundreds visiting Bloodwood Tree to learn the skills and training, including driving licences, to be able to get work around the town.

Bloodwood Tree employed the "Keys for Life" driver training program to be able to skill up Aboriginal people ready for their big test: the Driving Assessment. Mining and contracting companies were keen to employ Aboriginal people, but they needed to have a WA C Class driving licence.

Staff however were frustrated by the fines enforcement system, which saw a large percentage of people without licences, however due to the fines enforcements system saw their licences suspended for unpaid fines and/or driving without licences. Some of these were able to get enforcements lifted through a lot of hard work by Bloodwood Tree staff in conjunction with the local court house.

However it appeared that there were a lot of people who spent time locked up due to outstanding unpaid fines, or indeed some who preferred to spend time in Gaol rather than pay the fines. This was an obvious concerning issue.

Bloodwood Tree in 2008 made inquiries to the Department of Justice for funding to be able to install the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme, a recommendation under the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report, which had not been installed in our region.

Further inquiries discovered that although the AVS was apparently funded to operate in South Hedland, funding was handled by an organisation OUTSIDE of the Pilbara, and consequently the service was not effective and disappeared after a short time.

The Pilbara Regional office of the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA) supported Bloodwood Tree in their endeavours to be able to offer this service, along with the local Member of Parliament in 2009, however this service was never delivered into South Hedland in any appropriate manner.

In 2014 Bloodwood Tree placed a proposal to the Department of Justice for an intervention program designed to assist Aboriginal people in obtaining a drivers licence while staying out of the justice system. This proposal became successful, funded through the Department of the Attorney General in October 2015 for the Driver Training Justice Intervention Program.

This Justice Intervention Program in South Hedland, has seen more than 150 personnel referred to the program from mainly the AJS and some from the Youth Justice System and Community Development. Five clients have already earned a pass on their Practical Driving Assessment following intensive training and log book hours, while Bloodwood Tree staff are still working with the other clients to help bring about that final PDA outcome, which can take up to 12 months.

There is no data available to Bloodwood Tree that would suggest how this program has helped in keeping people out of the prison system, however Staff do believe they are making a positive difference, while the program is assisting people not only in obtaining driving licences, but also to apply for jobs in the area for which a drivers licence is required and enables the participant to get to work.

It needs to be noted that remote regional towns such as Hedland, do not have a regular passenger transport system which can take people to work and bring them home again, particularly to and from the light industrial area of Wedgefield in Hedland, where most of the work is available, with work starting at 6am and ending after 5pm. The two towns of Port and South Hedland are also some 20 kms apart which makes it difficult for people to work "across town" unless they have access to transport.

Bloodwood Tree itself organises its own transport system for the Shift workers at the Sobering Up Centre and Night Patrol, as most of our employees have no license along with hefty fines enforcements and/or suspensions/cancellations of licences.

While some service areas are making a positive difference for Aboriginal people in the Hedland area, there is still a long, long way to go, and one can only hope that the State Government's Regional Services Reform Unit program can enable Aboriginal families to have the same choices and opportunities that are available to all Western Australians, and that the incarceration of Aboriginal people is reduced substantially into the future.

I have made the decision not to outline any specific instances in this letter, however from my initial induction into the North West in 1971, including in Newman in 1972 where I witnessed Aboriginal people being driven out of town by the local Police and left on the side of the Great Northern Highway (where Parnpajinya is now) to a similar incident some 44 years later in 2016 involving Aboriginal children in South Hedland, there is obviously some issues that need to be addressed.

Finally, I have known and worked with many Police officers in my time in South Hedland, and have a deep respect for the officers and the work they are expected to complete on a 24x7 basis, while there is obviously some element within the system that appears to bring about an unacceptable culture such as has been seen of at the South Hedland station.

I can only hope that the issues in South Hedland are ironed out in whatever way is needed through the relevant use of training, procedural reviews and policy assessments, as well as the very important issue of placement and duration of staff.

Yours sincerely

Robert (Bob) D Neville  
3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016