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Committee Secretary  
Community Affairs Committee  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

## **Re : Inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities**

Dear Sir

I am aware that the main purpose of the current Senate Inquiry into petrol sniffing is centred around Opal fuel alternatives, but nevertheless I would draw to your attention my book *Heavy Metal. The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia*, written before alternative fuels were made available. It was published in 1992, but despite the time that has elapsed since then, I believe that the insights contained in it still hold true. I submit a copy for the perusal of the members of the committee who may not be aware of it.

It is still the only published study of petrol sniffing that delves into what sniffing means to sniffers and their families, the reasons why sniffing exists in some communities and not in others, and why families seem to be hamstrung in their efforts to exert 'control' over young men and women who engage in the practice.

Key issues addressed in *Heavy Metal* are the socially and culturally embedded notions of individual autonomy which are a normal part of the socialization of Aboriginal people in remote Australia. Because child-rearing practices are focused around permissiveness and learning by experience (techniques that worked extremely well in earlier years) adults rarely interfere in the activities of children or teenagers. By the time teenagers become young men and women, older family members have no automatic authority over them. 'I am boss for myself', and 'its my body, my business' are frequently heard statements. It would be embarrassing, shameful and simply socially unacceptable in many cases, for an individual to try to impose his or her will or to remonstrate with others (be they sniffing, drinking to excess, 'neglecting' children, or illegally selling petrol to sniffers).

Only when a critical mass of people, in effect a large proportion of a community – large enough to be 'anonymous' in a sense – collectively decides not to tolerate a certain behaviour, will there be any chance of 'community action' and group-based social disapproval. This has occurred in some communities that have taken a stand on alcohol abuse. In the absence of this rare circumstance, concerned Aboriginal people trying to deal

with the social disorder, disharmony, pain and guilt associated with sniffing need back-up. They need back-up from authority figures and agencies that can legitimize their desire to intervene. If communities and individuals are able to invoke outside authority figures to bring about certain interventions, this helps to deflect blame from community leaders and individuals. This is why the police are so often called upon. It is why communities ask for youth workers. And it is why communities ask more and more for someone *else* to do something. I am sure that there is much support for Opal fuel as there has been for Avgas, because it is an 'outside' solution, a de-personalised solution.

Reading between the lines of what many Aboriginal people have said over the years about sniffing (and despite the early rhetoric about self determination and not wanting outsiders to solve their problems), it is possible to see that there have been increasingly desperate calls for help with petrol sniffing.

We need to be sympathetic to these calls for help. They are both culturally appropriate (because individuals have the limited powers of authority and control over their fellows that I have mentioned), and they are legitimate. They are legitimate because in the wider Australian society we do not expect families or amorphous neighbourhood groups in the suburbs to deal unassisted with crime, delinquency and drug abuse engaged in by their members. We have for too long expected much of Aboriginal 'communities', allowing (indeed encouraging) ourselves to be deceived by the term 'community' and then shaking our heads when they do not act communally or in the public good. Indeed, earlier Select Committee reports (the 1985 SSC for example) and numerous official government statements since then have handed the problem of petrol sniffing right back to the Aboriginal 'communities', in effect washing their hands of the issue, and expecting that these struggling and disorganized collections of people were going to take ownership of this problem. As you well know, they have not – on the whole – been able to do that.

The roll-out of Opal across a wide area of Central Australia, covering *all* the relevant communities, is the best chance yet to break the cycle of sniffing by limiting availability. But other forms of social development are needed in concert with this strategy.

The Aboriginal population is, as I am sure you know, a classic pyramid shape, with far more young than old people. This means that there are hundreds of young Aboriginal people growing up in remote Australia who will over the next few years create large cohorts of teenagers and young adults. As my colleague Dr John Taylor has pointed out in his study of Wadeye NT, a community of more than 1,000 people is really a 'town' (Working Paper no 28/2005) [www.anu.edu.au/caepr/working.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/working.php) I note that Senator Vanstone herself is now using this terminology. Aboriginal towns demand and deserve the basic facilities and infrastructure that are the right of all Australian citizens. The roll-out of Opal should go hand-in-hand with a determined effort to provide competent youth workers and other (adult) social activities, as well as the infrastructure that any town of a certain size should expect, in order to help create a viable social environment.

Yours sincerely

Maggie Brady (Dr)

Fellow