

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EMPLOYMENT PROJECTS SCHEME

Motion

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [3.51 pm]: I move -

That this house condemns the federal government for its lack of appreciation of the detrimental impacts that will arise from the changes to the community development employment projects scheme - CDEP - on Aboriginal people and other members of the community in regional Western Australia.

The community development employment projects scheme has been in existence for approximately 28 years in indigenous communities and has played an important role in many of the indigenous communities in which I work. Without the CDEP scheme, many of those communities would not have developed as much as they have. The CDEP scheme employs a quarter of the indigenous work force and is frequently referred to by those communities as “work for the dole”. It is a scheme for indigenous populations in regional and remote areas, and in some urban areas, of Australia. This depiction of the CDEP scheme underestimates the range of services that the program provides for communities. Some of the services that are provided to many of the remote and rural communities in the Kimberley and Pilbara areas include building works, the setting up of small stores, the maintenance of water supplies, the creation of gardens, artwork and much more. The CDEP scheme was introduced in 1977 during the Fraser government to respond to specific requests from remote communities and indigenous elders for an alternative to unemployment benefits. They said that the community wanted to look at how they could work for the dole. They wanted to pay for work done within their community, with a view to reducing the socially damaging effects of the introduction of unemployment benefits, particularly in the remote and rural communities in my area.

The CDEP scheme provided indigenous people, particularly in those communities, with some dignity of life. It is important to note that its introduction was largely at the behest of the indigenous people from those communities. They were concerned about the adverse impact of the introduction of unemployment benefits in their community. They were worried about the effects of sit-down money. They wanted a program of work for the dole. As can be seen from a study of the history of this matter, in 1977 the indigenous people were prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to give undertakings and enter into agreements with state governments, the federal government and the communities in which they lived to embark on work in exchange for a benefit. The emphasis was more on the development of those communities than on getting participants job ready for what we refer to as proper work. The federal government has recently demonised those indigenous people for being on the CDEP scheme by claiming that they are welfare-dependent, that they really do not want to work, that they are welfare bludgers and that they just want to sit around and do nothing. This could not be further from the truth in many of the communities that I visited.

The federal government has referred to indigenous communities in some of its papers as communist enclaves. I am not really quite sure what that means. I have done a lot of research into what this communist enclave reference is, but I do not understand what the federal government is trying to get at. We should be applauding what these communities are, what they mean and what they have done with the CDEP scheme and working for the dole, and for their foresight in introducing this very good scheme. We have spoken in the past two years about mutual obligation. In 1977 indigenous communities wanted to enter into what we now call mutual obligation agreements with the federal and state governments. They wanted to work for the dole; they did not want it for free. They requested that they receive those moneys in exchange for the provision of some form of employment in their communities.

We hear a lot from the federal government and others about mutual responsibility agreements and the need for people to not get something for nothing but actually work for the benefits that they receive. It is well worth pointing out to those who have made the changes to the CDEP scheme that the indigenous people are well in advance of the rest of Australia and in front of any proposals that the current federal government has put forward for mutual obligation in their communities. Indigenous people accepted a long time ago that they would need to work for the dole. They also accepted a long time ago that they would not receive the dole for absolutely nothing. They accepted that they would have to provide some form of employment in their communities because of that mutual obligation. They should not be demonised or disadvantaged because they are on the CDEP scheme but praised and further assisted to implement improvements to the program that will enhance their ability to provide employment to their communities.

The CDEP scheme operated by paying unemployment benefits to a community fund rather than to individuals or directly to a person. Participants were required to work approximately 16 hours a week, and some worked more than that, on the award rate, which would be equivalent of the unemployment benefit. Some of the jobs that were created by the community included mechanics, plumbing, office work, work in the health centres and work as community liaison officers. Many other jobs were also created.

After some time and following some problems with the formula that was put together, a new formula was developed by which about 76 per cent of the amount paid to these communities was to be equal to what participants would have received in unemployment benefits. The other 24 per cent of the moneys was allocated to CDEPs as on-costs for those organisations that undertook work required to implement CDEPs in the communities. This was a rather cost-effective scheme, especially for the communities.

The original proposal was for remote communities only. People in those communities had little hope of any sort of conventional employment. The real focus was in two parts: to improve the infrastructure and services for the communities while at the same time providing participants with a sense of purpose and an ability to become involved in the economic, social and cultural strengths of those communities. It was about providing them with some sort of work ability. Although it was based on the notion of mutual obligation, it was not primarily intended to provide workplace training as a means of transition to permanent employment. As indicated by the parliamentary debate in the House of Representatives on 26 May 1977, the first objective of the CDEP scheme was to -

provide employment opportunities ... at a cost approximating unemployment benefits, thereby reducing the need for unemployment benefit for unemployed Aboriginals within the community.

Although the scheme was initially slow to develop, the Hawke-Keating economic reforms of the middle 1980s saw its expansion from about 4 000 participants in Fraser's time to about 39 000 by the time the Howard government took office. There was also some strengthening of the notion that a significant purpose of the scheme was to train Aboriginal people for mainstream employment. Nevertheless, quite a number of reviews of the CDEP scheme were undertaken, and it was maintained that this remained an objective rather than a prime purpose of the program. That was the case until the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2004 and the assumption of the responsibility of the CDEP scheme by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. All the reviews tended to reaffirm the benefits for the communities of the CDEP scheme while placing an increasing emphasis on mutual obligation for those communities and on the fact that the CDEP scheme was a journey rather than a destination. Although there were quite a number of governance and administrative problems with the CDEP scheme, and we acknowledge them, overall it has been a very successful program that has not only provided its own useful training for Aboriginal people, but also fulfilled a role in providing services, particularly in remote communities, that should have been funded by other tiers of government.

Given the assumption of control of the CDEP scheme by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and the creation of a new indigenous affairs infrastructure by the federal government, it is not surprising that, notwithstanding the number of earlier reviews, the CDEP scheme was once again examined. The federal government, through the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, put out a discussion paper, "Building on Success: CDEP Discussion Paper 2005". The department initiated what I consider to be a hastily cobbled-together consultation process. This document states what the discussion paper is about -

This discussion paper sets out possible improvements to CDEP to help raise the living standards of indigenous Australians and provide more non-CDEP jobs, relevant community activities and business development opportunities.

That would be all well and good if there were jobs in those remote communities. Anyone who has been out there would realise and understand that only a certain number of jobs are available; there are no more. To say that the goal is to provide more non-CDEP jobs in those communities is an absolute farce. The report further states -

CDEP organisations will work more closely with indigenous communities to identify and provide the support they need

That has already been done; therefore, to say that the government proposes to do that is a farce. It has already happened and continues to happen. The report continues -

CDEP organisations will focus more clearly on the existing three key areas of activity - jobs, community activities and business development - ensuring flexibility to meet local needs

Currently there is no provision by the federal government to assist any of those communities with the development of jobs or community activities and, even worse, any form of business development. The report continues -

CDEP organisations will be able to tap into assistance from other services more easily, and change will be gradual - the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations ... will work closely with individual CDEP organisations to help them build their ability to achieve better results for their participants.

This is an absolute farce; it is an abject proposal by the federal government for what it will provide nothing for these communities. It says that the process will be gradual and that the department will work closely with the communities. In all the information that has been provided to me it is clear that the federal government did not work with the communities; rather, it dictated to the communities. It told the communities that if they did not sign mutual obligation agreements for CDEPs, the CDEP scheme would be removed from the communities.

Further on, the section of the report relating to the gradual process and discussions with the people involved in the CDEPs states -

Face-to-face consultation sessions will be held across Australia between 22 February and 25 February 2005 . . .

This provided exactly four days for a consultation process to be undertaken throughout Australia; that is, four days for everyone to look at this discussion paper, provide their submissions and put their views to the federal government. The attachment that provides the dates and times - I will refer specifically to Western Australia and where the discussions were to be undertaken - show that sessions were to be held in Perth on 23 February from 9.30 to 11.30 am; in Kununurra on 23 February from 11.30 am to 1.30 pm; in Geraldton on 24 February; and it goes on - Albany, South Hedland, Broome, Derby, Kalgoorlie and Fitzroy Crossing. Not one remote community in Western Australia was visited to gain any sort of knowledge about what the community thought of the changes to the CDEP scheme. This repugnant haste, I suggest, indicates that the federal government already knew what changes it wanted to achieve with the CDEP scheme, and that this so-called process is an absolute joke. One has to question the assurances of the federal government about those changes and the gradual process that was supposed to take place. In February 2005, the discussion paper from which I have just read was released. Submissions to this closed in March 2005 and the CDEP future directions paper was released in April 2005. The future directions paper set the scene for the changes to be implemented on 1 July 2006. The 2005 review process, which I have described, was widely criticised by many organisations, individuals and government departments for its offensive and, indeed, indecent haste.

The federal government did not offer to provide or pay for travel expenses for those people who wished to participate in any of the consultation sessions. People who live in Kalumburu, Oombulgurri, Cape Leveque or any other remote communities were not given the opportunity to participate in these sessions. Therefore, this excluded a lot of people upon whom these changes impacted. They were unable to participate in any form of discussion with anyone from Canberra.

People from remote communities were given the opportunity to make a written submission to the federal government on the CDEP discussion paper. However, those members who have been to the remote communities will understand that a lot of these people do not have access to the technology that would enable them to write their own submissions. Many of them do not have the English skills to write a submission because English is their second language. They do not have the ability to either fax or e-mail their submissions. The government disfranchised a huge number of people from these discussions.

The federal government puts a positive spin on the CDEP future directions paper released by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Generally, this paper is at odds with everything that I have read, including the 100 and more submissions that were put to the federal government and the comments that I received from people within my electorate. A paper that Lynda Carney prepared for Hon Warren Snowdon exposed that the discussion paper was lacking in reference to the issues confronting communities and the knowledge the communities had about the changes that will take place. The federal government has done nothing to bring these people up to date with how the changes will work. It is farcical for the federal government to say that it has provided sufficient time for discussion and that the paper was not hastily put together. To determine what changes should be made, six to 12 months should have been spent by the committee travelling Australia and visiting these communities to speak to the individuals who run the CDEP programs. They should have identified the impacts and issues. The federal government has ignored everything that the communities have put to it in their submissions.

The way in which the CDEPs previously operated provided the communities with a measure of political and economic independence. In its hastily cobbled-together process, the federal government absolutely ignored any sort of independence that the communities have gained from the CDEP scheme. The community actually controlled the payment of the CDEP funding. Those people who participated in the program were viewed as having a slightly higher standing because they worked and did not accept an unemployment benefit and sit around doing nothing. Even though those on the CDEP scheme earn less than those in mainstream employment, the flexibility of the program provides for a large percentage of people to participate in the projects. It provided indigenous people with a sense of wellbeing and gave them some confidence in their abilities outside their community. The CDEP scheme provided those who participated in it with a certain degree of economic and personal autonomy. It also allowed them, if they so desired, to involve themselves in mainstream employment

opportunities that may at times arise in those communities. Most people on the CDEP scheme live in remote and regional areas.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to sessional orders.

Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm