

ARMADALE LINE — CHILDREN AT TRAIN STATIONS

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [5.30 pm]: There was a launch of a report this morning that I want to mark by making some comments in this chamber about the report and the people who worked on the report. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend because Parliament was sitting. I would love to have been there. It was a report I have referred to before in this chamber. In talking a little about the report and the launch today I want to pay tribute to two truly remarkable women. It was while I was the shadow Minister for Youth that I attended a Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia breakfast and came across a woman called Jude Bridgland Sorenson. Jude asked a question at the end of the formal part of the breakfast presentation about support for her research into the lives of the children who were living at the train stations between Claisebrook and Armadale on the Armadale line. As the shadow Minister for Youth at the time, I was very interested to hear she was doing this research, so I made contact with her after the breakfast and we sat down some days later and had a long talk. It was one of the most extraordinary stories that I have ever heard. I found it deeply moving and deeply troubling and I have been very much looking forward to today when I could read the report, which I will be able to do later tonight because today that report was released.

The story is that children are living around the train stations. Apparently they hop on and off the trains, but basically they live at the train stations between Claisebrook and Armadale. Those places are extremely dangerous, as honourable members will know. They are violent places, frequently, and certainly not the places where I think that young children should be living in Western Australia in 2013. Nevertheless, Jude told me that at each of those train stations there are about 30 children who virtually regard the stations as their home. They live in the bushes around the station. There is light there and enough people around, perhaps, to keep them feeling safer than they would be if they were in more remote places. The reason we know those children are there is that there are a couple of Aboriginal transit guards, Uncle Jock and Auntie Tamara, who spend most of their time on the trains. It is quite some months now since I had the original conversation with Jude, so I do not know whether these two people are still in those jobs. At that time, Uncle Jock and Auntie Tamara spent most of the day and the night travelling up and down that line between those stations. Every time they got off at a station it would only be a matter of five minutes or so before they were surrounded by children who would recognise them as their friends. They would do what they could to help the kids—feed them or look after them if they were sick—then they would get back on the train and go to the next station, where they would deal with another 30 or so children. I asked Jude why the children were there. She told me exactly what is reported this morning in the article by Kate Emery on pages 6 and 7 of *The West Australian*.

Jude told me the story that is basically told in that article; that is, these children feel safer at the stations than they do at home. Jude told me that they go home occasionally, and when they go home they have developed the most extraordinary survival tactics, including going into their homes and taking the light globes out. If they remove the light globes from the light fittings it means that the drunken adults cannot come in at three o'clock in the morning and switch on all the lights and wake the children up. Sometimes they sleep in the cars; they take the keys into the cars and lock themselves in the cars, where they feel safe. That is the way that these kids keep themselves safe at home. But when they are not safe at home, which is most of the time, they live at the train stations.

I asked Jude what the children wanted and what they talked about when she was doing this research. She said they talked about music. Most of them love music, and they miss their music because they do not have anywhere to listen to it, to dance or to play their musical instruments. She said that one of the things that was raised most often in terms of what could be done to help them was, "Couldn't we have a space somewhere—maybe an old container we could turn into a little club for ourselves where we could have a couple of adults around who would keep us safe? We could go in there and listen to music and play our instruments." They are not asking for very much; they have almost nothing.

The other question I asked Jude was whether these children are literally lost to the system and whether they are enrolled at schools and with general practitioners and child health nurses. She said that they are not lost; they are mostly enrolled at schools, but they never go to school and the schools do not chase them because these children are trouble. When they turn up at school, they are often hungry or sick and they are troubled, violent, loud and noisy and aggressive to the teachers. She made a comment that has troubled me greatly ever since I heard her say it. She said that the truth is that there are racist teachers in schools and children can smell a racist a mile off. So the children do not go to school and the schools do not find them. The end point is that this remarkable report has been launched today. I urge honourable members to read the background to the report on pages 6 and 7 of today's *The West Australian* and then get hold of the report and read it.

The second person I want to mention who had a major input into this report is a young woman called Jenna Woods. I have not asked Jenna whether I can talk about her tonight because I am absolutely certain that if I had

asked her, she would have said no, because Jenna is a very self-effacing young woman. I came across Jenna some weeks after I spoke to Jude. I went to a breakfast of young activist women in West Perth and I sat next to this woman who started talking to me and I suddenly realised that she was telling me the same story that I had heard from Jude Bridgland Sorenson. It turned out that she was one of the main researchers on this project. Jenna is a 22-year-old Noongar woman from Bunbury, but she has spent the majority of her life to this point in Gosnells, which, of course, was a central area of this research project. When I talked to her in May or June this year, she was working as the national presenter for the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience and was studying for a double major in community development and politics, and politics and international studies at Murdoch University. She was in her second year then. She is a remarkably talented student; she is getting high distinctions in her degree. I am absolutely certain that Jenna is heading for a stellar career in some kind of advocacy or policy role. It was a great experience for me to talk to Jenna and I really wish her well in her studies and in pursuing her activism, which she is clearly going to do.

There are particular challenges involved in a project such as this. The heart of the project was a commitment by the researchers to make the young people themselves the drivers of the project. The overall sponsor of the project was Save the Children Australia. When I spoke to Jude, she was being funded by Murdoch University to the tune of about \$30 000. That money of course ran out; there is never enough money to do a project such as this. The project then migrated across town to Edith Cowan University, and I gather that the researchers at Edith Cowan put the final touches on the report that was launched by Save the Children Australia this morning. The challenge in the way that we, as policy makers and legislators, deal with this report will be the extent to which we can keep young people driving the project. It is absolutely essential that we do not simply commandeer the work that has been done and feed it into our own policy-making machines and lose the unique voice of each and every child who has contributed to this project. I know that Jude is 101 per cent committed to making sure that the voices of the young, particularly Aboriginal, children are not lost as this project moves into its second stage. I know that this has not been a wholly constructive experience for Jenna. I think this is probably her first time dealing with those big bureaucratic things that go on when dealing with a project of this kind. But Jenna brings a passion and dedication to these issues that will inspire many of us, and certainly anybody who meets her. I will give anybody on the other side who has not spoken to both Jude and Jenna their contact numbers and set up a meeting, because they will feel like a better person when they hear what these women have to say.

My main plea is that we keep the voices of these young Aboriginal people alive. There is a remarkable photo exhibition at Perth Town Hall. I urge everybody to have a look at it.