

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

*Eleventh Report — “Learnings from the message stick:
The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas” — Tabling*

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [10.26 am]: I present for tabling the eleventh report of the Education and Health Standing Committee, entitled “Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas”. I also table the open submissions received by the committee during the course of the inquiry, and I take the opportunity to table the message stick from the community of Beagle Bay. This message stick was handed to the member for Kimberley in 2013 by the families of Beagle Bay who had lost relatives to suicide. The message stick has been described as “the baton of life”, in the hope that it will encourage better approaches to suicide prevention, and I table it today in conjunction with the many other submissions received during this inquiry, in recognition of the Aboriginal voices that contributed to the committee’s work.

[See papers 4892–4894.]

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Abetz): Members, before the member for Eyre continues his speech, I wish to provide some information on the tabling of this message stick. Standing order 151 provides that records in any form may be laid upon the table of the house by the chair of a committee when presenting a report. Given this, and the importance of the message stick as part of the Education and Health Standing Committee’s inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide, I think it is appropriate for the chair to table the message stick in conjunction with other evidence received during the committee’s inquiry. Although the message stick will be treated as any other tabled paper, a photograph will be taken in order to make it available online via the Parliament’s website. I also direct that it lay on the table of the house for the duration of this day’s sitting, after which arrangements will be made for it to be displayed in a public area of the Parliament.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Of all the work this committee has done in this term of Parliament, this inquiry has been the largest and the most challenging. The challenge lay in not only the complexity of the work but also the committee’s social responsibility to contribute to reducing the number of young Aboriginal people surrendering their own lives. The background to this inquiry was the Kimberley region of Western Australia having the unfortunate and tragic claim to being home to one of the world’s highest suicide rates, with one recent study finding that the rate may be as high as 74 per 100 000 residents, compared with the rate for the general population of all Australians of 12.2 per 100 000.

Since her election to the Western Australian Parliament in 2013, Ms Josie Farrer, MLA, the member for Kimberley, has consistently spoken about the ongoing tragedy of suicides in the Kimberley. In her inaugural speech to the Legislative Assembly, the member for Kimberley told Parliament that the issue had been “in her heart for a long time” and asked why “so many Kimberley children feel that the only option they have is to take their own life?” The member for Kimberley has been a strong advocate for her constituents continuing to discuss the ongoing tragedy in the Kimberley and indeed in the state of Western Australia.

The member for Kimberley on 16 March 2016 moved a motion in the Legislative Assembly that this house urgently calls for a parliamentary inquiry to determine what more can be done to halt the worrying number of youth suicides among Aboriginal youth in Western Australia, particularly in remote communities and to determine what resources have been set aside to tackle this crucial issue facing our state. The Education and Health Standing Committee, in recognising the motion moved by the member for Kimberley, resolved to inquire into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote communities on 22 March. The terms of reference of this inquiry can be found in appendix 1.

Before I read the terms of reference of the inquiry, we were conscious as a committee of the plethora of inquiries that have already been conducted. We felt that to contribute to Parliament and indeed contribute to Western Australia and the communities, we should look at some of the inquiries that have already been done, what they have recommended, how those recommendations were or were not implemented, where the gaps are and what we can do about those gaps. In light of that, the Education and Health Standing Committee set the terms of reference as follows —

- (a) The status of previous inquiry recommendations related to Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas.
- (b) The allocation of resources to current Aboriginal youth suicide prevention strategies and services in remote areas, and the effectiveness of these strategies and services.
- (c) The gaps in strategies and services available to reduce Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas and ways to address these gaps, including broader mental health strategies and services.

The committee resolved to report to the Parliament by today.

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Before I forget, I indicate the challenges of the work that we had to do to bring this report to Parliament today. I recognise the committee staff, who have done an enormous job in this inquiry. The body of the report is around 200 pages and it involved looking at 40 reports and their recommendations. I will go into those a little later but I would like to recognise the principal research officer Alison Sharpe, who is in the gallery today, and the other research officers, Alice Jones and Catherine Parsons, and Franchesca Walker in the latter phases of our inquiry. I also recognise Mat Bates for his involvement as a consultant, if you like, on some of the issues and matters that we had before us. I also recognise the members of the committee: Janine Freeman, MLA, member for Mirrabooka; Hon Rob Johnson, MLA, member for Hillarys; Murray Cowper, MLA, member for Murray–Wellington; and the co-opted member, as I have mentioned, Josie Farrer, MLA, member for Kimberley.

Mr M.J. Cowper: Rita Saffioti.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I also recognise Rita Saffioti, the deputy chair, the member for West Swan. I hope she will forgive me; I skipped to members and did not see the deputy chair. I am very sorry about that.

Ms R. Saffioti: That is okay, Graham.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: She will have her chance.

As I mentioned, there have been many, many inquiries undertaken, reports written and recommendations made that attempt to address the crisis of Aboriginal youth suicide. Significant government funds have been spent, providing a variety of programs and services to address the complex and interrelated risk factors that may contribute to a young person's suicide. It was important to the committee to not just repeat what has been done in the past. As such, it decided to analyse the many recommendations of those 40 reports that I mentioned and look at whether they had been effectively implemented. In many cases, we found that they had not. The rising rates of suicide clearly confirm this.

The committee travelled in this inquiry; it had not travelled much previously. Part of that travel was our trip to the World Indigenous Suicide Prevention Conference in Rotorua, New Zealand. I want to share with you the words of Sir Mason Durie, who presented at the world conference on First Nation people and their experience in New Zealand. Sir Mason Durie spoke of the determinants of suicide as the six Ds. Forgive me if I simplify this, but it made an important impact on me. Although most of us are aware of the role of disadvantage, destructive environments and disorders, the effect of dispossession, desertion, and indeed becoming dispirited are particularly relevant when considering how to respond to the unique nature of Aboriginal youth suicide. As one witness put it, the culmination of these factors is a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, which are at the core of Aboriginal youth suicide.

The various reports and inquiries that the committee considered during this time made a broad range of recommendations. Perhaps the most important, yet least enacted, was the role of Aboriginal culture as a primary protective factor to build resilience in young people and to ensure that programs and services are culturally appropriate. How many times did we see that communities were serviced by a half-day or one-day service from the closest larger centre—drive in, drive out? Similarly, many recommendations advocated for greater engagement of Aboriginal people in developing the strategies, programs and services, yet the committee was presented with little evidence demonstrating that the government was meaningfully consulting or partnering with Aboriginal communities.

Many programs and services offered have never been evaluated so their effectiveness is unknown. It was telling from way back from the Gordon inquiry in 2002; having spent significant amounts of money, the real meaningful evaluation of that program was eventually abandoned. The effectiveness of programs is really unknown. Further, the disconnected way in which government agencies operate means only a murky picture of the distribution of funding can be gleaned. Perhaps there is no better example of that than the implementation, as I mentioned, of the outcomes from the Gordon inquiry, which goes back some 14 years now. Monitoring of the implementation was eventually stopped as it became too difficult to track the progress of actions against particular recommendations. Further, an accurate account could not be provided of the \$72 million in expenditure spent across a large group of agencies.

A glaring matter for us was that no one organisation or agency takes ownership or leads the response to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The committee could not identify who takes ultimate responsibility and is accountable for government action. In order to take responsibility, as government and as part of the broader community, we must work together to ensure that the human rights of all Aboriginal young people are upheld.

Before I make some closing remarks, if I may, Mr Acting Speaker, I will give the house a flavour of some of the report's 44 recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That Western Australian Government agencies revisit reports listed in Appendix Six —

Which is very good; it is in here —

and outline their actions of how the intention and recommendations of these reports will be implemented.

Recommendation 2

That the Premier coordinates and provides a response to the recommendations of this Inquiry which have not been directed to a specific agency or Minister.

Recommendation 3

That the Premier and each Minister to whom recommendations are directed should report to Parliament at six monthly intervals for no fewer than five years after the tabling of this report on the progress of implementing recommendations made in this report.

Some of those recommendations include: that the Mental Health Commission broadens its scope of suicide prevention for Aboriginal people to encompass all the identified risk factors; that Western Australian government agencies recognise the importance of cultural knowledge as a protective factor preventing Aboriginal youth suicide; and that the Western Australian government set aside an appropriate portion of grant expenditure to fund more culture-embedded programs for Aboriginal young people.

These matters are important in order to make a difference in the alarming events that face us as a First World nation and as a state. As a Parliament, this is our responsibility—where we can and where it is our role—but also as a community. To reiterate, in order to take responsibility, as government and the broader community, we must work together to ensure that the human rights of all Aboriginal young people are upheld. We must walk the journey with Aboriginal young people to turn hopelessness into hope, and helplessness into empowerment.

Again, I thank the members and the staff of the committee. All the members on the committee will make comments to this report as an indication of the importance of this matter and this report. We hope it will make a contribution to reducing the number of these tragedies in Western Australia.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Abetz): Member for Maylands. Sorry, the member for Maylands got up, so —

Several members interjected.

Ms R. Saffioti: I feel a bit invisible today—Miss Cellophane.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for West Swan.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan) [10.45 am]: I rise to speak to the committee's report, "Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas." I start by thanking my colleagues on the committee. I especially acknowledge the chair, the member for Eyre, for his conduct throughout the entire term and the fact that he managed our committee very well given some of the strong personalities on it. Can I also acknowledge the member for Kimberley, who was co-opted onto this committee, and her role in helping frame this report. I want to say up-front that I did not travel to some of the places that my colleagues went so I did not have the opportunity to attend many of the meetings and forums. However, I know that my colleagues learnt a lot from those visits and that helped to frame the report. I also acknowledge the committee staff. There was a lot of information to try to go through and it basically took a big effort to produce this report in such a short period.

It is a big report and there are a number of recommendations and findings so I want to focus on three key areas. Firstly, particularly for youth suicide in remote areas, we need to take a holistic approach and look at the entire set of conditions that many Aboriginal people are in. Secondly, it is about capacity building in remote areas. Thirdly, it is also about government coordination and how we operate as a government to deliver these services. The recommendations and findings that I want to talk about relate specifically to these three areas. Firstly, I will turn to recommendation 2. It states —

That the Premier coordinates and provides a response to the recommendations of this Inquiry which have not been directed to a specific agency or Minister.

I want to highlight the point made by the member for Eyre that governorship and service delivery to Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas, is very disjointed and there is no coordinated front. As a result, there are massive gaps in service delivery and there is a lack of consistency in how we deliver services. I want to talk about finding 27, which states —

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Despite its name, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has a limited administrative responsibility in responding to matters relevant to Aboriginal people.

Further, recommendation 27 states —

That the Premier, in conjunction with Cabinet, create or designate a government agency or authority to lead the Western Australian Government's actions in responding to issues affecting Aboriginal wellbeing.

In addition, the agency should be fully resourced and provided with sufficient authority to fulfil its leadership role.

I think this is an acknowledgement that, across government, different approaches have been taken by different agencies and there is a lack of consistency. I think the member for Kalgoorlie outlined the fly in, fly out or drive in, drive out approach to service delivery in much of regional Western Australia. In dealing with remote communities and Aboriginal communities in particular, a consistent approach is needed as well as a commitment to building relationships. Without them, some of these services fail. I think that is a very, very important part of our recommendations.

In relation to a holistic approach to mental wellbeing, I will talk to finding 5, which states —

Mental health in an Aboriginal context is a holistic concept, incorporating the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the individual and their community.

It is about understanding that Aboriginal communities face unique challenges and issues. It notes that we cannot look at just one part of a problem but must take a holistic view whether it be building capacity in community leadership, which recommendation 17 suggests as follows —

That the Western Australian Government support the development of future Aboriginal leaders, by providing support and funding to existing leadership development organisations, funding scholarships and connecting future leaders with secondments opportunities to gain specific skills, and assisting with the early identification of leaders through school based programs.

It is all about encouraging Aboriginal leaders and ensuring employment opportunities and future career paths so that many can look to and work towards a future. Recommendations throughout this report are about creating or improving employment targets and encouraging local employment in many instances. We have had discussions about local employment and, in many instances, we have seen Aboriginal people lose out on local employment opportunities. A lot of government agencies are delivering a lot of services and if they were to encourage and work with Aboriginal people in delivering these services, that would be a much, much better policy.

Another point I note is about spending and resources. What came out a lot during the committee's inquiry was that money is spent in many areas but the issue is: is it well spent and does it reach the people it needs to? Members on the committee all acknowledged that that money could be much better spent working with and empowering local Aboriginal communities and fostering the leaders and service deliverers of tomorrow so that people are not continually going in and out of communities, trying their best but developing relationships that are too short to make a long-term, meaningful difference.

Spending on Aboriginal communities is a problem. We spoke to a number of agencies. The Gordon inquiry is a good example of how, initially, its objectives were being monitored to see where they were being met. However, particularly after the change of government, it is evident that over time, monitoring or reporting on any of those targets stopped. That is not a good thing. The Gordon inquiry was a significant inquiry and to have lost some of what we learnt from that is not good.

I refer to finding 42 of the report. We asked the Department of Regional Development to outline how much royalties for regions funding had been directed towards Aboriginal specific or youth specific prevention or postvention initiatives. It was very little. We heard that \$6.9 billion in RFR had been spent over the past number of years. I cannot remember the number but hundreds of thousands had been allocated to specific initiatives in this area.

This report of the inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas is a significant report and we hope the future government will look at it and allow it to become a blueprint for how government services are organised in the future to work with Aboriginal communities to ensure that what is happening with very, very young Aboriginal people taking their lives does not continue and that we create for them more opportunities and a better future.

MR M.J. COWPER (Murray-Wellington) [10.53 am]: I would like to make a contribution to the tabling of this report of the inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas. From the outset, I would like to thank my colleagues in this chamber for being part of what I think is the most important inquiry I have been associated with in all the years I have been in this place. Although I acknowledge the Joint Select Committee on Aboriginal

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Constitutional Recognition that I was on with the member for Victoria Park, this has greater significance inasmuch as Western Australia is a great state and Australia, generally, is a great country. We are capable of marvellous things, particularly with advancements in technology: we have wonderful hospitals and various other facilities. However, there is a dark side—an underbelly—to this state. It is the manner in which our people live in remote areas, specifically Indigenous remote areas of Western Australia. The terms of reference of this inquiry are to examine —

- (a) The status of previous inquiry recommendations related to Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas.
- (b) The allocation of resources to current Aboriginal youth suicide prevention strategies and services in remote areas, and the effectiveness of these strategies and services.

However, this inquiry was not intended to be another inquiry aimed at being a fix-all. It was to try to work out what was working, what was not working and why those that are working are working well and why we are maintaining strategies that are not as successful. That in itself becomes a very complex issue across the broad spectrum of Western Australia.

As a Western Australian underbelly, a section of our community is crying out for support and that is evidenced by the message stick placed on the table from the Nyul Nyul people of Beagle Bay who had a lawman from the desert bring that stick to the Parliament. I suspect that we as Caucasian Australians do not understand its significance. It was brought to this place on another occasion and its significance was not understood. Although it was presented in the Parliament, it left here because no-one knew how to deal with it. If members care to look at YouTube, they will see a video that deals with it and the very heartfelt sorrow felt by the people of the Beagle Bay community at the loss of a number of young people from their community. That is reflected right across Western Australia, but in preparing this report we had to confine it to the Kimberley region of Western Australia due to the time frames. It also coincided with the motion the member for Kimberley brought to this place some time ago.

I became a member of the Education and Health Standing Committee a little over 12 months ago. I have been involved in a number of other inquiries, but I was very keen to look at this issue because of my experience as a young police officer in the Kimberley for a number of years. I was immersed in the culture of Indigenous people in that area and learnt many, many things. I was privileged and honoured to be part of their community. When I was in the Kimberley all those years ago, some things troubled me about the life and hopes of people in the Kimberley and how we deal with them on an ongoing basis. Probably, in a fashion, one of the reasons I came to this place was to try to improve the lives of others. When I went back with the Education and Health Standing Committee to visit the Kimberley, we visited a number of Aboriginal communities I had previously been to and it came as something of a shock to see the current state of play. A number of communities—I will not mention their names—are doing okay, while some communities are doing not so well at all. On visiting some of these communities, discord in the delivery of services became apparent to me. I will relate to the Parliament one example that struck me of a community that had a very poor water supply for the town people to drink but a different water supply for the local oval to be watered and cared for. Unfortunately, the pump that supplied the water for the recreation oval failed to operate and there was no money to maintain the serviceability of that piece of equipment, yet they had recently taken delivery of a brand-new lawnmower worth several thousand dollars. They had this state-of-the-art lawnmower, but no capacity to use it, which was nonsensical. That shows, by way of an example, the sometimes terrible lack of coordination in being able to deliver services. That is just a minor issue by comparison with the health, education and employment, and a whole range of other issues that this report touches upon. I hope members of this place will take the time to refer to this document on an ongoing basis, because it serves as a very good blueprint for the circumstances that attend the challenges of the people who occupy that area. I am sad to report that in some of the communities we visited, there is a distinct loss of hope by some people about their future prospects and, that being the case, they are losing their culture and, if you like, their will to go on.

The committee travelled quite extensively. We had a chance to go to New Zealand and we attended a world Indigenous conference there. It was very interesting to see that this phenomenon is evident in not only our Australian Indigenous community, but also other cultures. We know that the North American Indian First Nations also had similar experiences with high rates of suicide and we know that other jurisdictions, particularly the Maori community, face similar issues. This phenomenon is not unique to Australia or Western Australia, but what is unique to us is that we have a vast and differing cultural platform that we need to address in dealing with this issue. I take some pride in saying that this Parliament had representation at an Australian conference in Alice Springs. I suppose some of us were a bit like fish out of water when we went to that conference, but I am glad that we did go, because probably for the first time the Western Australian Parliament was recognised for at least identifying that there is a problem and at least trying to address these issues because of the desperate

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situation that exists. When I heard about the tragic loss of a young girl in a community in the Kimberley at a tender age, I had cause to ring the chair of this committee, my colleague the member for Eyre, and say to him that we really do need to do something about this tragic situation. I am not comfortable in saying, as an Australian, that we have a great, progressive state if we do not engage and involve everyone along the way. We will never progress to be the great nation that we can be unless we take these people on this journey.

I also would like to take the opportunity to thank the staff. The body of work in this document was achieved in an almost superhuman fashion. I thank Alison, Alice, Catherine and Franchesca for their great work. There are some personalities on this committee and trying to control them was a bit like herding cats! I thank the staff for their great effort.

MS J.M. FREEMAN (Mirrabooka) [11.03 am]: I am privileged to stand here to make a contribution to this report, “Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas”. The message stick looks fantastic on the table next to the Mace. It would be amazing if we could grow into a community that went beyond what are still vestiges of the commonwealth—I understand its parliamentary system—and looked to the history of this nation as one of a continent of many nations. One part of those nations came to us in this Parliament and gave us a very important message and asked us to respond. I thank the member for Kimberley for raising this issue. This Parliament asked us to respond to the issue of suicide among fly in, fly out workers and we took that on. There was no empirical evidence for that as such—there was a concern about whether the level of suicide amongst that group was different from that in the mainstream community—yet that issue got lots of talkback, lots of publications and lots of highlighting about how we as a community could respond and assist and ensure the wellbeing of those people.

It is really clear to me that we needed to respond to a crisis in our community to ensure that those people who can best deal with these problems in their communities are empowered to do so. This is a mammoth report, but no more so than many other reports. This report tries to bring together other reports to give them some coherence and to ask the government to look at what it has been asked to do before, to report back and to do those things that many other learned people have told it to do. The report refers to Aboriginal suicide as being different, but, in saying that, it does not try to marginalise it. I go to paragraph 2.9 on page 19 of the report, where it outlines some evidence given to the committee as follows —

Dr Tracy Westerman, a psychologist and Managing Director of Indigenous Psychological Services, has a broader view of mental health and mental illness which incorporates the importance of culture and cultural norms in understanding and identifying mental health in different cultural contexts. Dr Westerman cautioned against creating a different set of criteria or measurements to explain Aboriginal suicides.

We do not want to use this report or any other to marginalise the issue of Aboriginal suicide. We want to say that this is a concern for all Australians. At page 118 of the report, it states that the work of Michael Chandler notes —

[a] far reaching consequence of attempting to paint the whole of the Indigenous world with the same broad and indiscriminant brush is that doing so promotes the dangerously mistaken assumption that it is reasonable to imagine arriving at some ideal, one-size-fits-all intervention approach; some nation- or province-wide suicide prevention strategy that lends itself to being universally put in place.

When we talk about this issue, we need to know that there are some very healthy Aboriginal communities as well. We need to understand that some communities need to be able to find solutions for themselves to youth suicide, but we also need to understand that there are other communities in remote areas with entrenched wellbeing and health, which assists them in dealing with the many difficult issues that are faced in remote areas.

I will also talk about the staff and thank them—Alison Sharpe, Alice Jones, Catherine Parsons and Franchesca Walker—and my colleagues. They were great. We did have some very informative trips. We had the experience of going up to the Kimberley, but as the member for Kimberley will point out, the Kimberley is not Broome! We did also go to Derby and Kununurra. When we were in Kununurra, the member for Kimberley, the committee staff and I had the opportunity to meet with a group of women. They were really concerned about their children and the impact and the devastation and suffering that this blight on the community is causing. One of the members of that community gave me a letter of which some extracts I want to read into *Hansard*. It states —

This letter concerns, about the people aboriginal and non—aboriginal about the white card, it’s not right for the Federal Government to dictate people’s lives.

They have taken away community living rights on their community and never talk to their owner the corporations like MG Corp and Warrigarri Corp threw the people out of their community from all the funding’s that came into Kununurra, they were left out in the dark in 2004.

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She goes on to state —

I am Tired of seeing children suiciding from Derby, Broorne, Kununurra, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham, Mullan Community, Balgo, Kalumburu since 2007. It hurts me so much that family ask for help from me that, I cannot manage this crime will not stop because of the funding is going in the wrong hands. From the 70's until 90's people lived happily and culture was strong.

Now the elders are gone we have young dictators that run corporations and unable to speak language they do not even support their own people in the community. Now the new generation of kids, were the “children are lost without their country” and “the country is lost without the children”

She was very concerned about these issues.

I want to finish by referring to action on the ground. I point the house to Alive and Kicking Goals! and I particularly point to the action being taken on the ground by the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre. The coordinator, Wes Morris, who is an absolute advocate in this area, told the committee —

... culture is the compass that can guide young people away from suicide and towards increased resilience.

I want people to look at the report's chapter about culture and identity and perhaps reflect on the words of Tracy Westerman, who explained —

... that those who have a robust sense of cultural identity are at lower risk of suicide.

She goes on to say —

The group that has the highest rate of suicide, in her experience, are:

The people who are caught in the middle ... who just do not fit anywhere, they are marginalised, they could not fit in their communities, they do not fit in mainstream for whatever reason and they are the ones who have the highest rates of suicide.

I note the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project report and the following recommendation in the Education and Health Standing Committee report —

That the Western Australian Government urge the Commonwealth Government to now release the funds for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy.

I note most of all that this says that we need to be on the ground. It needs to deliver on the ground, and it needs the government agencies to do so.

In conclusion, when we look at this mace and our role and some of the things that we can do, we have made great strides in this Parliament, but we could go beyond those and start to look at other measures. We now fly the Aboriginal flag outside Parliament House, and Parliament should be congratulated for that. I take members to recommendation 21, which states —

That the Western Australian Parliament explores the option of employing an Aboriginal liaison officer based on the Queensland Parliament's experience.

Queensland has an Aboriginal liaison officer in its Parliament. This recommendation should be adopted not just so that we in this place have a better understanding of the first nation's people, but that people, including Aboriginal people, who visit can get a better understanding of how the commonwealth parliamentary system operates and how they can make sure that the system serves the first nation's people to benefit the community as a whole and to address this crisis—this terrible blight of health consequences for people. I commend this report to the house. It is an important report. I was very privileged to be involved with it, and I thank all members of the committee.

MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys) [11.14 am]: I also wish to make a very small contribution to this very, very important report. Before I run out of time, I start by thanking our committee staff who have done a fantastic job and worked way beyond the duties that would be expected of them. They spent many hours putting this report together, arranging hearings and arranging travel for members of the committee. Like the deputy chair, the member for West Swan, I was unable to go on the committee travel to New Zealand, Alice Springs and even some remote parts of WA, but we benefited tremendously from the members who travelled and imparted the information, research and knowledge gained in those areas. I thank Alison Sharpe, Alice Jones, Catherine Parsons and Franchesca Walker for the tremendous work they did, and in putting up with us sometimes, because some committees are not always happy little places. I have to say that this committee was a very well balanced committee. There were no arguments amongst any committee members. No politics were involved whatsoever in this committee. Every single committee member was committed to this final report. We

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were committed to doing this and finding out what we could in order to try to address a very, very serious issue that is one of the most important issues in the world—that is, the tragic suicide death of any person, and particularly young persons. We wanted to try to make a difference in some way by carrying out the work, the inquiries, the hearing and all that goes with it.

Without the member for Kimberley’s presence in the committee, we would not have the knowledge that the committee has today. The knowledge she imparted to committee members was invaluable. Her cultural knowledge, her knowledge of all the people who the committee met, including those who attended hearings, and her knowledge of Aboriginal culture throughout the whole of Western Australia, not just in the Kimberley, that she imparted to the committee members was absolutely invaluable. She was an absolute gem for the committee.

I would also like to acknowledge the member for Murray–Wellington, because in his earlier days when he was a young man and he had hair, he was a very hardworking police officer who spent a lot of time in areas the committee visited that suffered tragic Aboriginal youth suicides. With those two particular committee members, we had an advantage, without a doubt, because they both had much knowledge acquired over many years that was totally invaluable to the committee—and that goes without saying.

There are not many recommendations in this report. I have served on many committees in the 24 years that I have been in this place, and they have all been important—but any committee that deals with tragic suicide deaths, particularly of young people, is very important. I refer to not only young people, but everybody who feels that they can no longer live on this earth and they take the option of ending their life. It is tragic—absolutely tragic. When it is young people, and very, very young people, the tragedy is even more compounded. We learned that there were far too many—we would all like to see a zero number for this for young people, particularly in the Aboriginal community—taking their lives and depriving their families and society for the loss of the input they could make over many years. It is truly a tragedy. I think that was felt by every single member of the committee.

There are some very important recommendations in this committee report, one of the most important of which is that the Premier and cabinet take a very serious look at this report and coordinate a response. This applies whoever the Premier might be after next March. I do not think anybody will do anything between now and March. We have to accept reality. We will be in caretaker mode in the not-too-distant future. I cannot imagine for one minute that any minister or the Premier will make a response to this report before this Parliament is prorogued, after which the government cannot table a paper in this Parliament. We must look to after the March election. It will probably be a month or two at least after that before we can in any way expect to have a response to this committee report.

From my perspective, I found also was that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs virtually has been neutered. It is not carrying out the sort of functions that one would expect of a government department.

One would think that with the words “Aboriginal Affairs” in the department’s title, it would encompass so much more for Aboriginal people and be of assistance to them, but they have very few facilities. It seems that many different government departments want to have input in some way but they are not coordinated properly. It should be done through one agency. As I said, the Premier should take charge of this—whoever that might be after March—and he or she should ensure that we have a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs who is truly dedicated to this portfolio and to assisting Aboriginal people, particularly young people in remote communities because they need the help, but it must be coordinated. We cannot have so many different people going in and doing what they think is best. They all go in there with the best will in the world, but they are not coordinated enough to produce results. I have been in this Parliament when other inquiries have taken place; in fact, many have taken place and we have seen no massively successful outcomes from those inquiries. The reports seem to have gathered dust, as so many of them do, on the shelves of Parliament House. I hope that that does not happen with this particular report. As I said, I have served on many committees and it upsets me to think about that when members have spent so much time on a committee and been truly committed to achieving positive outcomes through the findings and the recommendations of an inquiry. One wants to make sure that a committee report such as this does not simply sit on a shelf somewhere in Parliament House, gathering dust and not achieving the outcomes that certainly every member on this particular committee would want to achieve.

I would like to thank the Chairman of the Education and Health Standing Committee. The member for Eyre has done a tremendous amount of work and he is a truly committed chairman. He has spent many hours working on this outside of normal committee times. I have seen him at meetings around Parliament House and I know that he has come up —

Dr G.G. Jacobs: That is what I am paid to do.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I am praising you, my friend, because you are a very committed chairman.

The member for Eyre has a big heart and he certainly puts everything he has into whatever he does—he certainly did that with this committee work. As I said, every committee member is committed to a positive outcome, but

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[ASSEMBLY — Thursday, 17 November 2016]

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Dr Graham Jacobs; Ms Rita Saffioti; Mr Murray Cowper; Ms Janine Freeman; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer; Ms Simone McGurk

I just want to thank the chairman for chairing these meetings in a very positive and absolutely apolitical way—no politics were involved in this whatsoever, and nor should there be. I thank all my fellow committee members: the member for Mirrabooka; the deputy chair, the member for West Swan; the member for Murray–Wellington; and a particular thankyou for and recognition of the member for Kimberley, Josie Farrer. Once again I will say that without the presence of the member for Kimberley, we would not have the knowledge that we have today to impart to this Parliament and the people of Western Australia. I say thank you to each and every one of them. I hope that members take the opportunity to read this very important report because it deals with the lives of young people, and we have to try to keep as many young people alive as we can.

MS J. FARRER (Kimberley) [11.23 am] — by leave: First of all, I would like to pay my respects to the Education and Health Standing Committee that I was co-opted onto to talk about young Indigenous suicide. I personally would like to thank Graham Jacobs for his patient way of really listening and understanding. I would also like to thank the deputy chairman, Rita Saffioti, for her understanding as well and the committee members Janine Freeman, Rob Johnson and Murray Cowper, whom I have known for a long time. I would like to thank them all for co-opting me onto this committee to assist with that part of the report that deals with Indigenous youth suicide.

I would like to start by saying that I never knew that this committee existed, especially its report on suicide in the fly in, fly out work system—I was not aware of it. In a sense, this really opened up my thinking, especially with the death of a 10-year-old Indigenous girl at Looma that became something of an alert that something really bad had happened and that we should take notice of it. Between all those talks and me saying that we should have a parliamentary inquiry into the death of this little girl, I wondered why some members said that we could not have one because we already had—I did not know that. This takes me back to when I was first elected to Parliament and made my inaugural speech. I talked about the loss and the suicide of my young grandson and how much it deeply affected not only us and the local community, but also communities right across the Kimberley. When a suicide happens, nearly every member of any family in the Kimberley, even though they do not know the affected family, goes along to pass on their condolences and to say goodbye and pay their respects in that way. Indigenous people have had to come through a long line of survival. Our people were taken from their homelands and put onto pastoral stations to work. This created intergenerational trauma that has been passed down to families. We have this survival instinct because we have always been subject to trauma, and I think that makes the Indigenous suicide experience very different from that of non-Indigenous suicide, because we are people of the land. Our people lived on their own lands and did not go into another person's area. I guess that that social impact on our people right from the beginning up until now has had a tremendous effect on our young people. First we had the gathering up of Aboriginal people who were taken in and used to work on pastoral stations, and they also experienced abuse. From there, our people were taken and put into missions where they were taught about the spiritual beliefs of some of the different denominations. Aboriginal people have their own spiritual belief that is more closely attached to our land and everything that surrounds us, so all of that had an effect on our people as well. Some people have said that it was good for them to be brought up in missions and they gained a lot of things from that experience—I was even taken and put on a mission in Fitzroy Crossing—but we do not really understand how those types of things will affect us and our kids later on.

We were all part of this thing called “Aboriginal affairs” whereby somebody was set up as a minister to administer what they thought was best for us and how our lives should be. It was a way of dictating to people how they should live their lives, and this is how we have been living ever since. The 1967 referendum then came along and, all of a sudden, Aboriginal people were thrown off stations and plonked onto the edges of towns. That had another impact on our people.

With the referendum and the change to accept us as being equal, or part of the mainstream, our people were introduced to alcohol. That was one of the biggest downfalls for our people. My old tribal father worked on the station and I heard one of his co-workers say to him, “Hey, mate, you blackfellas can drink just like us now.” That started something that our people have never been able to get off—that train of consuming alcohol. It is still rife; it is very rife to this day. Our children have been through all this and they pass that on to their children. This is the social impact that has been placed on us. We need guidance, because a lot of our people have never been taught to live in houses, to drink alcohol and to do the things that they do now. All that has had a big impact and our kids suffer, our young people suffer, because they do not know what is right for them. We talk about cultural activities for our kids, and some of us would like to take our kids back onto our own country to teach them about culture, but some of us are prohibited from going on country. We have all these things that are against us as well. I would like for this government to support us; it needs to show that support. We have the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and he needs to be a part of this. We need them altogether to sit down and listen to what we are talking about. I am glad that this report and its findings have been written, because that is the way that I guess the mainstream deals with things, but I am just giving an overview of the whole impact of how we have journeyed and been able to survive. For the future, if we do not do things now, our young people will not be our future leaders; they will probably not survive a lot of the changes. But thanks once again.

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Dr Graham Jacobs; Ms Rita Saffioti; Mr Murray Cowper; Ms Janine Freeman; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer; Ms Simone McGurk

MS S.F. McGURK (Fremantle) [11.32 am] — by leave: I want to make some comments on the eleventh report of the Education and Health Standing Committee entitled “Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas”. I thank the committee for its work on this important report. In particular, it is timely I should make my contribution after the member for Kimberley, who talked about the decades of disadvantage and disruption that have occurred for Aboriginal people of the state and this country, which has led to the situation considered in this report.

There were a few things raised in the report that I want to make mention of. Some of the themes covered include the lack of evaluation of government programs, and I think that is important work that could be done better. As shadow Minister for Community Services, I have been discussing that with a number of not-for-profit agencies, and some organisations such as the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia have started to work with the not-for-profit sector to look at how there can be better evaluation of what social programs are taking place in our community sector. This is nothing revolutionary. It is something that could be done a lot better, and government has a role to play. At the moment it is not particularly engaged in that important work, despite putting millions and millions of dollars into important community programs. The work on evaluating those programs is still relatively rudimentary.

The committee report also refers to data collection and again, I think, the government has an important role in not only utilising its own data collection, but in liaising with agencies in the not-for-profit sector and research agencies such as those at the university I mentioned and organisations such as the Telethon Institute. They could do some really important analysis of what exactly is going on in the social sector generally so dollars spent can be better targeted and there can be a better understanding of how work can be more effective through the government partnering with the not-for-profit sector and research institutes and better utilising data.

I particularly wanted to mention the references in this committee report about it making sense to invest in the early years of childhood. It can pay important dividends when it comes to child–parent bonds and can address developmental issues for young people. That has been recognised for a number of years. In WA it is recognised when we invest in a Commissioner for Children and Young People and ask that person to give us advice about how we properly look after young people in our community. On page 169 of the report comment is made that parenting programs need to be invested in and that it needs to be ensured that young people are connected with the people closest to them—that is, their parents—and that that bond is fostered and invested in. In 2011, the Commissioner for Children and Young People recommended that funding be increased to ensure the availability of universal and targeted parenting programs across WA and that the then Department of Communities lead the coordination program delivery. Yet, just this year there was the cutting of important early intervention work for young Aboriginal people, with the cutting of the Best Start program. That was a program targeted at young Aboriginal people from zero to five years old. In this year’s *Economic and Fiscal Outlook* that program only warranted one paragraph. The *Economic and Fiscal Outlook* stated the following —

To avoid duplicating the KindiLink program run by the Department of Education, the Department will cease the Best Start program at the end of the 2016 school year, delivering net savings of \$3.9 million.

The problem with that analysis is that KindiLink is targeted at three-year-olds to get them ready for kindergarten; it is a great program, but the Aboriginal Early Years Best Start program looked at children aged zero to five years, so the very important early years. When we think of the billions of dollars that the National Party boasts has been spent as part of the royalties for regions program, its members could have not only spoken in defence of the Aboriginal Early Years Best Start program, but found the \$3.9 million in this government’s budget to invest in that program. I am disappointed that no members of the National Party have seen it fit to be in the house at the tabling of this report or to speak on this important issue. I continue to want to work with the member for Kimberley and other members of this house to make sure that we do what we can to stop the terrible incidence of Aboriginal youth suicide and, importantly, to invest in early years programs amongst the Aboriginal community.