LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE COMMUNITY

Membership:

Ms M Scrymgour MLA (Chairperson)
Dr C Burns MLA
Ms S J Carter MLA
Dr R S H Lim MLA
Mr E McAdam MLA
Mr G Wood MLA

COMMITTEE BRIEFING

Tape-Checked Verbatim
TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Friday 16 August 2002

The Honourable Bob Collins

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Madam Chair: I declare this meeting open of the Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the community and welcome the Honourable Bob Collins who is here in his capacity as the author of the Learning Lessons Report also as the Chairperson of the Leaning Lessons Steering Committee and he has come here before the Committee to brief it in relation to its Terms of Reference.

If required copies of the Terms of Reference can be obtained from the Secretary. This meeting is not open to the public, however it is being recorded and a transcript will be produced which will eventually be tabled in the Legislative Assembly. Please advise me if you wish any part of your evidence to be *in camera*. The decision regarding this is at the discretion of the Committee. You are reminded that evidence given to the Committee is protected by Parliamentary Privilege for the purpose of the *Hansard* record I ask that you state your full name and the capacity in which you appear today.

Mr Collins: Bob Collins and I appear in the capacity that you have already noted. Madam Chair will I open it up?

Madam Chair: Yes we will just open it up to you.

Mr Collins: I just want to say very briefly is that the whole subject of substance abuse in Aboriginal communities has never been worse than it is at the moment and it is increasingly getting worse. It was not always so. There is a general impression around, that things like alcohol were always readily obtainable in Aboriginal communities, that is not the case. I worked and lived in Aboriginal communities many years ago when alcohol was extremely difficult to get. I spent four years working on an outstation in Arnhem Land in an extremely isolated situation where there was no alcohol at all. The major reason that I left that job was because alcohol arrived.

I lived in a community, I am not saying it was paradise, but I lived in a community that was at peace with itself, it was a happy, contented group of people, where there were no major difficulties or problems of any kind. Alcohol almost destroyed that community and indeed two days or three days after it arrived, which was generally once a fortnight, it was hell on earth. I just got personally weary of the problems that it caused and left. I would say that substance abuse is worse that it has ever been over a period of thirty years. Thirty years ago, even alcohol wasn't all that easy to get in a remote community. That is not the case any more it is freely available and of course on top of that commonly gunga and kava.

I simply state this as a matter of fact, not as a matter of any judgmental element to it at all. I simply state it from personal experience. The big difficulty in terms of the effect that these things have with Aboriginal people is that there is no concept or suggestion that if you have two cartons of beer you keep one of them until tomorrow. If it is there you drink it. If there is a bag of gunga there, you smoke it. If there is a bucket of kava there you drink it, until it is either finished or you fall over. Simple as that.

When I was the Member for Arnhem, there was a Uniting Church missionary, a Fijian, who died sadly of a heart attack on Goulburn Island. The then Moderator of the Uniting Church, Jim Downing and his wife Shirley and I took his body back with his family to Fiji for burial. As a mark of respect, I spoke at his funeral.

During the week that we stayed in the tiny little village community, not on the main island, I can't remember the name of the island now. Every night that we stayed in this little house, a group of men came around to the house with yaqona as it is called there, it is not called kava, same stuff though. A bowl of it was produced and three or four hours of conversation it was consumed. I have to say it is an acquired taste. It did not do anything for me, but never the less, what I learned in Fiji, I saw it first hand, the use that is made of it. There was a ceremony where the church welcomed us formerly at Suva with a kava ceremony, a huge community one. We were formerly served with it, along with all the other important people in the community first, handed up to us,

people would give it to you and avert their eyes, don't look at you, hand it up to you. I saw it first hand how it is used ceremonially in that community and there were several more in the community where we actually buried this man.

The reason I am telling you this is that there was strong community pressure against over consumption of it. It's strong. I asked if there were any yaqona addicts around and they said yes there were a few, but they were very rare indeed because there was strong community sanction against over consuming the stuff. If you had one bowl of it a night just like you have a cup of tea. You probably know how it is consumed here.

Now the reason I make that point is that the church brought kava into the Northern Territory. They went through a period of denial, I don't know why, trying to pretend they hadn't but it was done for all the best reasons. The first kava I ever bought here, two kilos of it sat in my office for years, I actually bought from this Fijian missionary who was the local agent for it on Goulburn Island. The reason they brought it is was that they thought it would be a more or better substitute than alcohol and the problem is that when you fill a bucket up with it and sit around drinking it until it is completely consumed it just turns you into a zombie. Gunga is the same problem.

Now there is a further problem with gunga and that is that the over consumption of gunga is, in my view, without question beyond argument directly related to suicide. It makes some people psychotic. I don't know, you guys would know, but I actually heard the tale end of an interview on the ABC a year or so ago about somebody at Melbourne University. Somebody has done some research on it that actually demonstrated that. I have never been in any doubt about it. The other thing that of course is linked to this is the phenomena that I am very familiar with, that it connected with over consumption - of substance abuse and suicide that it often results from attempted blackmail is the only term for it I suppose. The enormous stress and pressure that is placed on other family members by the people concerned when the demand is 'if you don't give me more money so I can go and buy more gunga, I'll kill myself" if the answer is no. Out on the street and up the pole they go and then there is a lot of argument and trouble afterwards with people saying you should have given money to them. So it is just enormously disruptive of families and communities. What can you say?

Substance abuse and particularly alcohol is the rock on which many Aboriginal aspirations flounder. That situation is getting worse and not better. There is also no question that it is central to domestic violence. Violence, particularly against women and children and also child abuse. And that needs to be said as well, which is also not only prevalent but getting increasingly serious.

We were given a great deal of evidence during the course of the review of that Report. You wont find it in the Report, we dealt with it in other ways but we were given evidence during the course of the review in 1999 by Aboriginal women as to their growing concern about the increasing amounts of child abuse that is now in communities and in terms of what we were told most of it seemed to be linked to substance abuse. Peoples behaviour, when they were intoxicated or stoned or both. So with those opening cheerful words, I might just take questions.

Ms Carter: Do you think there is any hope?

Mr Collins: Absolutely, otherwise I would cut my throat. You have to hope. But, it is a good question in a sense that there is no question that a lot of people have lost hope. Both black and white and for example getting onto educational outcomes and of course substance abuse has a negative – you can't overstate the negative impact that substance abuse has on poor educational outcomes. Domestic violence where you have kids that are regularly moving from one house to another house to another house to another house to escape the violence or in a lot of cases actually whole families running into the bush to hide all night. So it doesn't help the kids at school next day. The reason that we are concentrating so much on the pilots that we are establishing, that have now been selected and we are about to actually start the work – we have started the work on getting them up and running. There are four of those pilots.

The reason that we have only selected four isn't entirely related to budgetary considerations, partly that is it but the major reason that we have only selected four is because that these are going to have to be high maintenance operations. I think four was to ensure that we have some sort of regional spread and we have two in central Australia and two in the top end. They are going to have to be high maintenance operations, and the reason that we have only selected four is because we really do want these things to succeed and not fail. The reason we are concentrating on these pilots is to inject some hope into the situation, because there are many, many people, particularly Aboriginal people who do think it is hopeless and that nothing can be done to turn it around.

We want to try to demonstrate that it can be turned around, so that we can encourage people to say that if this community can do it then we can too. But sure there is a feeling of hopelessness around and there is also something which I think of all the time and refer to it as the grandmother syndrome. Thank God for the grandmothers. It is everywhere, central Australia, Kakadu National Park. I am thinking of one right now out there, women of that generation, because a lot of them are yet relatively young grandmothers, but women who are not only attempting to look after their own kids but are desperately trying to look after their grand kids as well because of the situation their own kids are in. Let me tell you that is a common phenomena right across the Northern Territory. Women of that generation are really desperately trying to get communities and families back together again. The one big thing to note is that of these women are themselves abused and are victims of violence, caused by alcohol abuse.

So it is a dramatically serious problem in communities. We had a meeting with the Learning Lessons mob yesterday to talk about this very thing. We have convened a meeting for next week with Family Services. I keep on saying this, you can't expect schools to be little islands of excellence, set in the middle of completely dysfunctional communities. It does not work like that. If these pilots are to succeed, we need to concentrate as much or more on an effort for community development outside the school day as we are concentrating on using the school I guess as the nucleus of improving educational and health outcomes because we are doing this in conjunction with, close co-operation with the Northern Territory Health Service. The real focus has to be on overall community development if educational outcomes are to significantly improve.

Mr Wood: I think there is also issues in urban areas. My wife taught at Sacred Heart and it just about drove her nuts because even though you have Aboriginal communities living within an urban society, if there are problems with people visiting and drunks coming in or whatever that child still has the same problems.

Mr Collins: Let me give you an example Gerry of how right you are. Following the recommendations of that Report, one of the things the previous government did, or the department did under the previous government, was to implement one of the recommendations of that Report to set up pilots of good practice, best practice in schools and they were called Principal Directed Pilots. They were under the leadership of the principals in schools. There is a school in Darwin which has got a very, very good record of significantly enhanced outcomes in attendance for Aboriginal kids and that is Karama Primary School where they had, it wasn't an accident, the school actually focused on doing it. One of the Principal Directed Pilots that they set up at Karama with indigenous staff running it, was to track the forty seven, I think from memory it was, forty seven Aboriginal kids in year 7 to actually track where they had been over the previous two years and the intention then was to track what happened to them the year after they left the school.

The information is available. I can't actually remember. I can't guarantee that his is precise so I just put that rider on it. But even though I should not have been surprised by results, I was. Some of these kids had lived in anywhere up to three or four different houses in the year. Some of them moved between two and three houses in the same week. Now again as Bob Hale, the Principal said to me, how helpful to a kids education is that kind of lifestyle. Now a lot of that was to do with grog and domestic violence. The kids would simply, as they do out bush, exactly the same in town, just pack up and go and stay with an aunt or friend or whatever when either, was drunk and tearing the place apart or somebody was stoned out of their brain and had blown the entire weeks income on gunga, not a cheap habit, and there was literally no food in the house to eat.

Mr Wood: No breakfast in the morning

Mr Collins: Yes, I know all about that also Gerry. I agree, it is a significant problem in urban communities as well.

Dr Lim: Bob, could I put a slightly different slant, perhaps a more positive slant on that, and I agree with you that that does happen with Aboriginal people living in urban areas. But isn't the advantage of extended families that in fact these children can have some safe places to go to whereas an urban white nuclear family their kids have to go back to that dysfunctional situation and have got nowhere else to go or else sleep in the streets. That is also the other side of the coin that some white kids exposed to the same dysfunctional family have got nowhere to go.

Mr Collins: I think that's true. Yeah. That's one nice thing,in terms of shelter and food Richard. I was talking specifically about education, I mean in terms of shelter, I think that is correct. And yes it is amazing how generous and helpful, and not even with relatives sometimes. I do know situations where Aboriginal staff at the school will routinely take in kids and feed them and look after them that are students of the school. Even though they have quite a few of their own to look after, that's true, but I just say again, I think the point is correct and that does help enormously in that the kid at least having a place to stay and food to eat, but it is comprehensively destructive to them getting any kind of education.

One of the things that Karama was looking at, as an outcome of this study was - just one of the other things that would happen too was that the school would lose them because they would have to shift to another suburb and then it was too difficult to get back to the school. They would either drop out of school altogether or end up at another school and start all over again. I know Karama were actually looking at whether they could, within reasonable resources get a system where they could actually provide transport so that even when the kid moved they could still bring them back to Karama and I haven't actually, checked whether anything came out of that.

Dr Lim: Would Yuendumu be one of the two central Australian pilots?

Mr Collins: No it's not. The two pilots actually in central Australia are both clusters of schools using common language. I don't want to nominate them because we have only just selected them and there is Ministerials and all that stuff.

Dr Lim: With somebody like Garry Fry, an outstanding Principal, it would be such a fantastic vehicle..

Mr Collins: Garry's doing an excellent job and let me just tell you without getting back into doom and gloom again, but I got a letter from Garry Fry and the reason I am happily telling you this is that because he made it public he had it published in the local community Newsletter. I had a letter from Garry Fry at the end of last term graphically highlighting the problems that you are up against. What he did it the last week of the last term at his school, he went around the school and took a photograph of each class and sent me a letter, a real cry from the heart and attached to it was the photograph of each class and he said in the letter that there were something like a hundred and eighty school aged children in the community that should all have been at school and the actual attendance at the school was around sixty kids and you saw these photographs of this handful of kids in each class at the school that day. I got that letter as I say I have no hesitation in telling you that because I subsequently discovered that Garry had actually published that letter and the photos in a local publication.

Dr Burns: Bob, this is going to be a bit of a long winded question but I hope you will bear with me. Richard has sent us a very interesting article. It is an article from the Australian written by Paul Kelly and it is analysing a speech that was made by Noel Pearson about Aboriginal politics and how in Pearson's mind Aboriginal politics is being dominated by the left and basically that Aboriginal people or Aboriginal political type people should be looking a bit wider that just the left in terms of allegiances and policies and I guess that brings me to the point about, and I know you address this issue in Learning Lessons but I mean some people might call it

paternalism or whatever but I mean is there a growing case for sort of more intervention to publish the fact that there is a lot of kids under stress in completely undesirable situations. There's a whole group of kids not attending school and I think for all sorts of reasons we know of we sort of backed away from , you know, I guess a stronger hand in the issue, so I just put it to you - I know your view, I read your view in Learning Lessons, but I mean, do you think, do you think there's room for sort of more intervention or a stronger policies in this? I know, it's a difficult issue.

Mr Collins: It is. Well let me take a very simple low audit in one sense form of intervention. Food, breakfast programs. Gerry has just mentioned it. They work. Now as an intervention and I don't dismiss the concerns about those programs. There is a strong concern that those programs are not a good thing, because they supplant the responsibility of parents and set up that interventionist sort of cycle or perpetuate….

Dr Burns: Bring back memories of the kitchens at Maningrida.

Mr Collins: Graphically for me. I used to eat with them.

Dr Lim: If the families were to contribute financially to the breakfast at school then they are contributing and they are taking some responsibility.

Mr Collins: They do contribute.

Madam Chair: Most of them do.

Dr Lim: Well I mean if you make a bigger point about it. This is your money, this is what you are buying for your kids, sure you are not doing it yourself but we are doing it and it becomes the white mans problem rather than my problem.

Mr Collins: That is an element of most of the programs, but Richard let's be blunt about this do you not feed the kids whose parents don't pay? Of course you don't.

Dr Lim: Of course you don't. But the thing is The long march starts with one step. But I think if you keep doing that maybe two hundred years is not long enough. I am not saying we shouldn't do anything about it, but two hundred years is not long enough and it continues to take time and effort and everybodys effort.

Mr Collins: People have been telling me for thirty years that it is going to take another generation before educational outcomes will improve. Have a look at the photograph that Garry Fry sent me of the year three class at Yuendumu. That is the problem. That's the next generation. Right there.

Dr Burns: Well that's the point I am making, I know that there were suggestions during your Learning Lessons Report from some quarters that child entitlement type benefits should be linked to a school attendance. I mean that has always been there. I mean I am not advocating, I am just trying to find out what your thoughts are.

Mr Collins: Well let me tell you, we spent a long time on that issue. We were approached by a number of women as it happened in every case in communities from the top end to central Australia who advocated that. Many actually said to us you should look at linking family payments to things like school attendance. We spent days examining that issue. I didn't have any preconceived objection to it. I had a totally open mind about it. You wont find it in Learning Lessons because, and we got full cooperation from the relevant departments.

When you look at the reality of trying to do it. First of all the one pre-position I did have was this, that the welfare of the child would be paramount in this exercise. I didn't have an argument with that. With that in mind the actual reality of trying to implement such a policy is just horrendously difficult. It is a Federal scheme.

The Racial Discrimination Act means that it has to be applied equally to everybody. You can't just implement that scheme selectively in one community or one Territory. You have to apply it Australia wide, and the difficulty you've got with implementing it is this. If I was an Aboriginal mother living at Port Keats, Wadeye and I had an administrative officer, because that is what would happen, take an administrative decision that, because my child wasn't attending school, I lost effectively the only income I had and it was taken away, I would go straight to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. I would stand up in front of that Tribunal and I would say that, I would tell them the truth. I am living in a house with twenty five other people, where the services in that house are normally wrecked. I've got ten substance abusers living in that house that trash it every time they get on the booze. It is a little difficult to get my kids to school. They would get the money back in about one second. That's the difficulty you've got. People who have had their payments revoked because of a link to school attendance have got an absolute right of immediate appeal to the AAT and of course eventually they have a right of appeal all the way to the Federal Court, if that is where they want to go. In most of the actual cases that I know about in reality they would have a very good case to tell. So I just think that that would be an horrendously difficult thing to implement.

But, I would draw your attention to something that only recently came to my attention that I have got great concerns about in regard to that. The Federal Government has brought in a new policy framework for all of this stuff which is called 'Australians Working Together' or something and every time you see one of those flags, and it doesn't matter which party does it, Labor Party or Liberal Party you generally just sort of stand it on its head and interpret it at one hundred and eighty degrees from what it actually says and you are probably close to the mark. But, there is a special section of that which I think has got about eighty million bucks. The only thing I knew about is what I read on the Web page. I had a researcher who is looking at all this come to see me about a week or so ago whose doing a Masters thesis on this who alerted me to this program. To my great interest, when I had a look at it, it's allowing for a situation where a community can actually opt to do that. Not just in respect of school attendance, although that is one of the things that is flagged, but a whole host of other things can all be linked to Social Security payments.

Now the technical situation you are in is, as you would know, is that at the moment in most parts of Australia, there are obligations placed on people in terms of receiving these payments. They have to do certain things, particularly those receiving unemployment benefits otherwise they are breached as it is called and they effectively lose the payments. There are other areas that are exempted from these breaching provisions because a determination has been made. You know, if it is a remote community there are no jobs. It would be inequitable to do that. So what this scheme is designed to do, is to allow a community and ATSIC is the agency that has been designated as being responsible for developing these programs. A community can take a decision as a community, not quite sure how you do that, through Council maybe, to allow itself to be breached.

Now the first question that I asked of course was – Well in the CDEP scheme that offers what is always a reasonable thing, an incentive for people to and the incentive is even though the people go out and work for unemployment benefits, which strictly speaking they don't have to do. The incentive is you get a loading on top of that. Not for you, but for the community, so you get an extra bit of money you build a community hall or whatever. Aboriginal people to their enormous credit have opted, voluntarily to do that long time before work for the dole was thought of . So the first question I obviously asked was, well if you get a community and are saying here is an opportunity to cut your own throat and allow people in this community to be breached and continue not to get these payments what is the carrot? Well there isn't one. There is no incentive. The next question I asked was – Well, if the council decides this is a good idea and if the council makes a formal decision to do this what is the legal position where I, a mother with six kids and I say "bugger the bloody council", what has that got to do with me, I have got a right to those payments, and I demand them, and I do not agree with being breached, what is the legal status, where do you get exempted from the *Racial Discrimination Act*. Where does the Council get the right to breach the *Racial Discrimination Act* on my behalf and deny me getting a payment? The answer was – well I couldn't get an answer to that. That is what the researcher said. She said, "I asked that question and no one knew the answer to that".

Mr Wood: It would just be racial discrimination, it would be a human rights issue.

Mr Collins: No question. And of course, I am not saying it couldn't be done, but where in this package was the legal underpinning for actually , the reason I am alerting you to this is that I didn't even know that this was there. Have a look it is there, have a look at Australians Working Together.

Madam Chair: I will tell you about a very interesting meeting I had with the Commonwealth Department of Family and Childrens' Services. I was alerted to this because Maningrida where there is real issues in terms of where people on the CDEP program have had officers from the Commonwealth that have gone out and go into these arrangements which is impacting on the CDEP program and causing problems.

Dr Lim: Do people understand the value of education and what it can do for them?

Mr Collins: Clearly not.

Dr Lim: Is there a way to start?

Mr Collins: That is the starting point.

Dr Lim: All of the band aids you put into it is after people have abandoned education already and then you start to patch it up rather than give people value education then there will be a community or family incentive to ensure that the child is educated.

Mr Collins: That is what the pilots are designed to achieve. Exactly that.

Dr Lim: So all these other programs we are just talking about through ATSIC and all that are really on the wrong end, may I suggest. While we need to do them, the concentration of effort should be at the family and community level where people have to start saying if we are going to get out of this hole, whatever the hole may be, we had better get our kids educated, because our kids will drag us out of the hole.

Mr Collins: Richard, I would agree with this . The fundamental thing you've got to address is making education relevant. To make it a priority in peoples lives. But when you consider and I again, hate going back to the women all the time, but I do. If you go back and have a look at the lives of these women who are struggling it is very hard to say, well you should make education the top priority in your life. At the moment, most of them are really struggling just to get through the day. But, I don't discount those, I don't think it is either one or the other, I mean, I think band aids are important too. When you need a band aid, you should get one. But no, I think the fundamental question is making it relevant and we had a visit here recently from a very interesting bloke, Joseph Etoulie his name was. He is an African Ophthalmologist who works for the WHO in thirty one African countries. He was brought to the Territory, first time he has ever been to Australia, recently by the Hollows Foundation and he spent four days in an Aboriginal community. I met with him and in fact, he has put what he sent to me in a written report which I will be happy to provide to this Committee. I said to him, before we say anything, can you please tell me what your fundamental impression of this community was, after you have been in it for four days, what really struck you more than anything else? This bloke said to me, "well I think the thing that really hit me"', he said "I have been in communities that have had poorer infrastructure and worse physical conditions and all the rest of it" he said, "but what really struck me was how low the aspirations were of everybody who lived in that community".

Dr Burns: Bob, just picking up on that, do you think looking back a generation or so, I guess even going back to the Missionary time or whatever you want to call it the 'welfare era' as it has been referred to. When I suppose there was a stronger hand for people to go to school and basically people were given promises when you go through school you will be in charge of your community. People I can think of and you probably know heaps more people that went through and then for whatever reasons, structural or local political reasons, they

didn't stick at it and so you see some of these characters around Darwin in the long grass. People that I know that are highly educated that have, in some cases held very senior positions in their own community but they have lost hope. Now if the younger generation sees them and say or you know Joe Blow he went to school, he might have even gone down to Adelaide for school, look at him now, like he is, what is the use of all this. Do you think that is part of the reason why the expectations are so low and that some of this stuff is structural and maybe some of the promises that were made were probably a bit more than should have been said because it is not just that easy about getting an education there is a bit more to the equation than that.

Mr Collins: I think that is right. For example, I have been involved in setting up a number of training schemes in the Northern Territory for Indigenous kids and one that has won national industry awards is the one that we set up at the Crocodile Hotel out in Kakadu National Park for training indigenous hospitality workers with nationally accredited training. One of the absolute key elements of any successful training scheme is that there is some prospect of jobs at the end of it. That you are not training people for nothing, and that was the case for decades in the Northern Territory. The Baptist Hostel, where I lived, we spent years and years and years bringing them in from Aboriginal communities training them to be brick layers, training them to be motor mechanics going back to communities where they did not have the slightest prospect of getting jobs.

You have got to provide training schemes and this one has been going for three years now at the Crocodile Hotel. We were doing it as a company, Kakadu Tourism, which is an Aboriginal owned enterprise, was doing it in house and Six Continents Hotels, one of the largest hotel chains in the world who manage those properties have now taken over. They were so impressed with it, they have taken over the training scheme themselves as a company and are providing fifty, positions, guaranteed positions for Indigenous graduates. From that trainee scheme at any of their hotels throughout Australia. That is a key element and seventy three kids have now gone through that training program and we have in excess of eighty percent success rate in placing them in employment. So, yes you have got to demonstrate to people that there is worth and value in education.

Dr Lim: What you have said about Aboriginalisation of jobs in communities or even in Aboriginal owned urban organisations and enterprises. I see very little of that, because, again the people who are trying are not trained well enough, hence are not able to secure those jobs to do it properly and adequately so the jobs do not get Aboriginalised. The logic is that those jobs should be Aboriginal held, but they are not because the people who should be holding them are not well enough trained. So, somehow, somewhere your training has got to be of such standard that the person gets the training can slip into the job without difficulty. That's no positive action in that regard. At least I can say that in South East Asia as the groups moved down that there was localised local programs that allowed the local inhabitants to take over the jobs.

Mr Collins: Maybe we should move out then Richard.

Dr Lim: Well why not, why not. Make sure that people of similar calibre move in.

Madam Chair: I think what you are saying is right from the past, but I think I know a number of organisations and I know ATSIC is just recently trying to enforce this policy of succession plans and meaningful succession plans, not just saying two years after your contract we want you to hand this job over. Because that is where the failure has been Richard, is that people come in with all the right intentions and say at the end of the two years I am going to be able to put this "black fella" in this job, I can walk away with my conscience clear knowing that I have now succeeded with localising that position. That is where the failure has been in that there hasn't been any real written commitment in place.

Dr Lim: That is because the bureaucracy looks after itself.

Madam Chair: Not just the bureaucracy but the bureaucracy within Aboriginal organisations themselves and I am not absolving Aboriginal organisations either from this fault. But certainly indigenous organisations have adjusted to that and proper succession plans supported by bureaucracy. I mean governments have to support

this in terms of funding and allowing this to happen. I know ATSIC is certainly trying to enforce succession plans in terms of organisations that they fund. Positions that come out of those ATSIC funded programs must have properly detailed and meaningful succession plans for those people.

Dr Lim: Unfortunately the bureaucracy would not like to see itself pushed out of its own bureaucracy and so hence it sets up systems that will fail. Unless there is strong motivated policies that says it has got to happen.

Madam Chair: In the health sector is certainly happening.

Mr Wood: I was one of those who left Bathurst Island on the basis that it was time for me to go. It was time for Aboriginal people to take over. It failed for two reasons. Because there was no advanced education. I ran a garden with a Diploma in Horticultural Science and I will argue until the day the cows come home, unless Aboriginal people get people to that standard you will just have a mundane approach to business. The other one is substance abuse. The reason you can't run, and Bob knows well, a garden, it a seven day a week job. We had poultry to run as well. Substance abuse is the main reason that I knew that it would fail. Not that I wanted it to fail. The people that worked for me, all wanted to knock off at 4.00 o'clock. Then club opened and they wanted to knock off regardless of whether there was work that needed to be done. You couldn't get them on Saturdays and Sundays. I would get school boys to help me and that was the sad thing. So it was complex. I mean I would have loved the Aboriginal people to have run the garden, because they knew how to do it. But they did not have the more technical skills and the Club was open. That was the crunch of it.

Dr Lim: OK again, I mean, there is always barriers, but I like to focus on the positive side of things. That is what you need, good strong Aboriginal role models for. Look at Garry Fry, he would be one of the best role models you could ever hold up to Territorians.

Mr Wood: I will put up my wife and her five sisters who go around to communities now doing similar. They are old grandmothers but they do go around and the very reason they go around because they themselves, regardless of their religious motives, have a real deep concern that their own communities like Belyuen are just going down hill. Their people have lost their spiritual affiliation with anything. They recently went to Daly River and would you believe that for the first time ever I think, there was a mass held at a funeral at Pepperminati. So I don't know if something is slowly turning around but that is what happened.

Mr Collins: That is a world first.

Mr Wood: It is a world first. It was the death of the bloke that was stabbed recently. So there are some people trying to bring some hope back, but it is a hard road. I don't think we should give up hope.

Mr Collins: Of course not.

Madam Chair: No and if we give up hope we may as well all go away and forget about it and shut up shop. I would like to ask your opinion on and perhaps open it up to this Committee. I suppose for a long time and having worked in the health sector the issue of dry area and wet area legislation and just the wet canteens in some communities. I know one community in particular that I knew as a child that was classified a dry, no drinking zone; life was quite good and I know people constantly tell me you cant go back to the past and live in the past. Compared to where I can see it now it is like dynamite waiting to explode, the youth suicide, sexual assault, domestic violence. The use of cannabis and the abuse of alcohol is just explosive on that community at the moment and waiting for, certainly something else to happen.

Mr Collins: It is no longer dry, is that what you are saying?

Madam Chair: It is no longer dry. It went from a dry area and now it has an established canteen. The whole issue and I suppose it is something that this Committee have to weigh up and have a look at. What is your view in terms of dry and wet I mean the whole area of legislation.

Mr Collins: My view hasn't changed forever. I mean I know there are constant failures with that operation but I think it is an option that should still be available for those communities that want to keep trying. It is like trying to get off the grog in a community sense that people keep on falling over and I mean some of the most heartbreaking experiences I have had in my life, one of the little benchmarks that when I was at the garden, I had about fifty people working the garden but I had fourteen men working with me who were the same age or who were younger than I was, and I was a young bloke, this is a long time ago. Not a single one of those fourteen men are alive today, not one of them. Well I watched them die one after another, every single one of those deaths without exception was alcohol related. Everyone without exception was related to alcohol and not one of them made it passed the age of forty five.. One of them who died, and these things are tragic to see. One of these young, blokes, I keep saying young, not young any more, but one of them struggled his entire life to get off the booze. He would come into Darwin, check himself into the Uniting Church place

Madam Chair: CAPS or FORWAARD

Mr Collins: No it wasn't FORWAARD, CAAPS, the one on the highway, it used to be a motel.

Mr Wood: The Irish Motel.

Mr Collins: Yes it was that is the place. Sorry I just can't remember, and he would come in and used to get him in my office. He would come and see me in my office in tears because he would have been thrown out because after about two or three weeks of drying out he would get back on the booze. But he actually personally struggled to get on top of that alcohol habit for his entire life. And in the end it got him. He died too. But the reason I am saying that is that at least he kept on trying and he may have succeeded. So even though there may be constant failures with dry areas it is still and option for a community should have available to them if they want to try it. And good luck to them if they can make it succeed. I mean I know a number of outstations, one in particular out near Oenpelli where because of the leadership in that particular outstation they have remained dry for a very long time and it has been, without doubt a very successful and happy community as a result. So there are situations where it can work.

Dr Lim: I mean it is a form of prohibition.

Mr Collins: Yes it is.

Dr Lim: Imparja TV is a totally commercial TV station and now it has very little in the terms of content that is socially directed. When it first started in the mid eighties…

Mr Collins: You talking about Imparja?

Dr Lim: Imparja TV I mean

Mr Collins: I remember their first broadcast.

Dr Lim: Back when they first broadcast there were heaps of advertising if we could call it that, that related to good food, good health, good hygiene, lots of programs. Programs that lots of Aboriginal people watched in the bush. That was a great way of mass education if nothing else. I don't see Imparja doing anything like that any more.

Mr Collins: Well those programs do help.

Dr Lim: Make a big difference.

Mr Collins: Government programs are important. Places like FORWAARD are important. My wife was President of FORWAARD for years. Those places are important. But the one thing I have to say from personal experience is this. Alcoholics Anonymous and all of the schemes that have been in operation for years, the camp down at Daly River and all the rest of it and Andy Howley's work it is all based on one fundamental premise. Alcoholics Anonymous have known it for years, it doesn't matter whether you are Aboriginal or non Aboriginal at the end of the day, the only thing that will determine whether someone with an alcohol problem doesn't have an alcohol problem is if they personally want that to happen. That is the fact. It doesn't matter if they are Aboriginal or non Aboriginal. There is not a government program in the world that is magically going to solve that problem. Unless that individual makes a decision that they have a problem and that they want to actually do something about it, all the programs in the world are not going to have any affect. But those programs are important to support those people who want to have it. I know the problem, I don't drink, but I am one hamburger away from the gutter all the time.

Dr Lim: Isn't that again educating the children if the parents are incapable of teaching their children what good living is about. Televis ion programs can do some of that. They can at least achieve marginally what the parents can't do.

Mr Collins: I think marginal is the operative word.

Dr Lim: But still it is better, one step in a long march.

Mr Collins: Well look I don't want to be a wet blanket but again, understanding the reality of television in the bush I think that it is marginal. I mean, nothing can replace in my view, programs that operate one on one in communities. I don't think television is a substitute for personal contact. I think that active programs, Strong Mothers, Strong Babies, all those programs that actually interact personally with people in communities face to face are far more effective.

Dr Lim: I would not suggest that TV will replace the individual nor would you use Sesame Street to replace the caring mother. I am not suggesting that at all, but I am saying that with all of these programs that are in place that one useful tool that should be used is not being used.

Mr Collins: No, I think that all those band aids as I said are important. They should be used sure. But I have to say I don't know, we don't watch Imparja. We don't get Imparja in Darwin, I wish we did, but we don't. On the odd occasion that I managed to watch it when I was at Batchelor ….

Dr Lim: In Arnhem Land. I am not talking about Darwin, I don't care.

Mr Collins: But Richard what I am saying is….

Madam Chair: But it goes into most Aboriginal communities.

Mr Collins: What I was saying is that I do not get to watch a lot of it. But what I was going to say to you is that little bits of it that I do manage to see when I am in Alice and Tennant, I have actually seen quite a lot of community development ads on smoking and not drinking and particularly ads on family violence associated with alcohol.

Dr Lim: They are the more urban ads rather than for communities.

Mr Collins: It is something maybe you can have a look at but in my experience they do run that stuff.

Madam Chair: The Road Safety Council is a good ad where you have the two ACPO's, who are well known and respected around the Daly River region that are running ads about people sleeping on roads, because that is a huge problem in communities. I mean not all of them are urban based, I mean they are running. The smoking commercials that they run on Imparja, I mean everyone relates to that because it shows a community store setting.

Mr Collins: I don't know how much of it is run Richard, but I have seen quite a bit of it.

Madam Chair: Bob, I will pick up on what Richard was saying before in terms of leadership and he was saying that Garry Fry, and I know Garry and a number of his family members and he is a great guy. In a lot of our communities though that is something that and let's not pussy foot around this issue I think in terms of when we look at our communities, that is what is missing in a number of our communities is the leadership. I agree, band aids are good and coming from the health sector, we keep saying prevention and band aids aren't good and we have to start fixing the problem. The leadership and I only look from our own Tiwi leadership where the leadership that is there making decisions and the educational gap between that leadership compared to a lot of the kids on the Island today is about twenty years and having talked to some of that leadership they say they are in a dilemma because they have had access to education and training and yet their children or their grand children don't have the same educational levels that they had. Which is true, I mean you only have to look at some of these kids.

Mr Collins: But they have access to it.

Madam Chair: They do have access to it. The educational facilities are there. There are good teachers out there in some of the schools. Certainly some of the practices need to change. But at the end of the day, I think with substance abuse with anything it is that leadership that has to be challenged and needs to be looked at in terms of what it is doing. Do you agree?

Mr Collins: Yes I do. And with great respect to Garry and I do, I am a big fan of his, he is doing a good job down there. But I know exactly what you are saying, but he is not from Yuendumu and what would be great would be some prominent community leaders that are actually wanting to deal with these pilots, I am going to put a lot of effort personally into them and everybody is. But the deal is basically this. We are offering it to these communities, additional resources, targeted, very carefully targeted, additional ESL resources for example. Additional early childhood resources. On the health side we have nominated, there are a million problems as you know, but on the health side we have nominated nutrition and hearing as the two major ones and we are going to be putting in food programs, yeah breakfast and lunch programs and special additional hearing assistance. What we want and what we have been told we will get from the communities is that they are prepared, the leadership of the communities to actually make a real effort at prioritising a community lift and focus on better health and education in the community. That is the deal, that is the contract.

Ms Carter: Are they dry communities?

Mr Collins: No. No, now they will be an early indicator if there is going to be any turnaround. The long term indicator is educational outcomes. That will take a while to get. But the early indicator will be if the attendance improves. We will see that over the course of a year. Whether that has picked up or not and that is where you have got to start. but, Gerry you said something that touched a cord again with me on a personal level and I know that there are people sitting here and certainly one that I am looking at now that knows exactly why I said earlier that alcohol abuse, particularly alcohol, but substance abuse is the rock on which so many Aboriginal aspirations flounder. The reason that I say that is that I have known so many individuals in my life in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal individuals who were supremely talented. They were well educated, had all of the skills and yet failed because of an addiction to alcohol, which they could not get on top of.

Mr Wood: Some of the women, I mean the reason that some of the women are outstanding is that they don't have that addiction.

Mr Collins: Correct.

Mr Wood: It amazes me how in my wife's family the two people that are dead are the two males. Both diabetic and both would have drunk a fair bit in their earlier times and then five women that are alive and have not touched alcohol or other drugs at all. You would have to ask why, they are all Aboriginals.

Mr Collins: But the bottom line, and again all you have to do is look around at the role models, and role models are as important now as they have ever been. You look at the role models of the ones that have succeeded. In every single case of the ones that have succeeded that has been something that they have been able to deal with effectively. Again, I think the bottom line needs to be, that there needs to continue be a relentless effort to try to get on top of this problem. Using quite often, tools that appear to be inadequate on the face of it or band aids. You've just got to keep trying.

Mr Wood: Could I just mention one band aid, and I mentioned it in the House the other day. I have been down the path where we have full employment on Bathurst Island and then the unemployment benefits came in and to me there was absolutely no excuse that no one had any work because we had the funds and we had the work available. I have been to a couple of communities and I must admit I felt quite depressed. After seeing the work we did at Nguiu where we cleaned up rubbish, we planted trees, we had fire wood groups we had all sorts of people, working over a whole range of areas where it wasn't really a matter of having a high education. What is was saying that there was adequate work there with money provided.

One of the problems with substance abuse I think, is boredom. We could say at one place we went to they have a sports program, I am all for it, but you can't play sport twenty four hours a day sort of thing. You need a mixture of work and sport and home life. I just see that we should go back to the simple things. Alright it might cost some money, but if we can say to a community that the Commonwealth, instead of providing money for unemployment, will provide an adequate amount of money for employment. And say well if you don't want to work well unless you are a pensioner, invalid or child, I am not against that. There is work available for you there. We will promise that there will be money and work available for you.

Mr Collins: I think that is something that should be looked at and I spend a lot of my life in discussion with other people and in fact I am more than happy to pursue it with you Gerry. As to how you do that.

Ms Carter: What's the difference between that and CDEP?

Mr Wood: With CDEP they can say we don't. We can say that the vacancies are here.

Ms Carter: Is it optional at an individual level?

Mr Collins: Yes.

Ms Carter: Right

Mr Collins: Absolutely and it gets back to why I asked the questions about this amazing scheme that the Commonwealth Government has just put up and I was interested to hear Marion that you said that you got the same answers from the Department that we got when you asked the Departments that are actually involved in implementing it and you say that but what if somebody wants to and they haven't got any answers. Same with CDEP. If I am out at Jabiru where they have a very good CDEP program operating, one of the better ones that is around,. If I want to assert my individual rights as a citizen out there to collect unemployment benefits I can.

Again you can't overstate the contribution that welfare dependency is making to this situation. There is a single page in that document, called the Socio Economic context. It took me about fifteen drafts to write that page. It took me about a fortnight to get it. I was determined that I would put it there and it is there. It is in diplomatic language, but it says what you are talking about. The point I was making there is that people were talking about going back to the old Mission days. I had a meeting with the Catholic Indigenous leadership. In fact they met here. They met at Parliament House and out at Berrimah last year. It was a very interactive meeting and they said they would like to go back to the old Mission days. When we actually dissected that, they didn't really want to go back to the old Mission days.

Dr Burns: Absolutely not.

Mr Collins: No, but what they meant was, and they actually discussed what they meant was they wanted to go back to a time when everybody had a job and everyone worked doing something and there was no booze. No alcohol. These were mainly women in this group, they didn't have their house trashed and their heads bashed in after the Club closed.

Mr Wood: And the kids sat in the class room.

Mr Collins: But welfare dependence is a big problem. It has to be said that it is a big problem. You have a look at the history of it. In the late sixties and early seventies there was one single form of income into Aboriginal communities only. That was old age pensions.

Mr Wood: Training Allowance.

Mr Collins: No, no we will get to that. Training Allowance, but that predated Training Allowance. So you had Old Age Pensions. Then you had this thing called Training Allowance where everyone got paid fifty bucks a week. That's how I employed everybody in the garden. No matter what you did you got paid fifty dollars a week, that was Training Allowance. What then happened in the seventies there was a concerted effort, now it wasn't because people weren't eligible for these things, but that they didn't know about them and no one told them. In the 1970's there was a concerted effort made, a positive effort made by government departments via Social Security to advise people what their entitlements were, and they actually did it. There were teams of people, I was out there when it was going on. They flew to communities, I am not saying it was a bad thing, but I am just saying that this is what happened. Teams of people from the departments went out to communities and signed up thousands of people for Unemployment Benefits. You then had, there was no such thing as Supporting Mothers Allowances and stuff. That didn't exist at all back then, it wasn't there. So you then had Supporting Mothers Allowances came in on top of wide spread applications for Unemployment Benefits and that injected a very, very large amount of money at a community level in the communities that previously had been getting very little government support.

Now, I am not saying for one minute that those programs aren't desirable or, I support strongly, single mothers allowances and whatever they are called now. Family payments but you track the historical shift of income back in those early years the only way that people could get income in the community I worked in was to work for it. Other than old aged pensioners, that was the reality. Everybody in the community had Training Allowance, but the only way you could get Training Allowance was you had to do something.

Dr Lim: What you are saying is – you don't work you don't eat, you don't eat you die and that is why you work.

Mr Wood: Daly River Training Allowance. We had a brick making machine. The houses at Adelaide River, there were skills being improved. I think the skills have gone too. There are skills in mowing a lawn.

Mr Collins: But you talk about putting a value on education. There are many communities now where there is, and again, there is not one ounce of judgmental attitude in what I am saying to you, I am simply stating it as a matter of fact. There are communities, and by the way I stress again, particularly with kids the bottom line for me in looking carefully at ways of doing something about stopping this welfare dependency, which is something that Noel Pearson is on about all the time is that peoples welfare needs to be paramount. You can't make people worse off than they are now. But it needs to be said that it is a profound disincentive to any kind of community spirit in terms of advancing a community. It is a profound disincentive to valuing education when you get a significant amount of money for doing, and as Aboriginal people themselves refer to it 'sit down money'.

Dr Burns: Bob if I could make a couple of reflections I suppose this has been a pretty interactive session and it has certainly…

Mr Collins: Not particularly well focused!

Dr Burns: I will probably lose focus even more, by what I am about to say, but I heard what you say about alcohol being the rock on which quite a number of Aboriginal people have fallen and been broken.

Mr Collins: And non Aboriginal people too.

Dr Burns: I guess so, but in my mind, in my view anyway it is a combination thing. I think alcohol is a symptom or substance abuse is a symptom and for my part I would never like to lose sight of that. But it also becomes a cause in all the things that we have talked about today with domestic violence and one thing that John Matthews whose probably influenced my thinking a little bit…

Mr Collins: Oh yes.

Dr Burns: He used to put up a , I am drawing back on history now that he used to show a print by Horgarth of Drury Lane during the Industrial Revolution whereby you had basically you had people, there was alcohol abuse, there was poverty, there was malnutrition, there was impoverishment, there was child abuse and that , he always used to say well if we look back in European history here is a time in European history where people are under stress, under great transition and all things became apparent. Now I often remember our mutual acquaintance Mr M W from Maningrida and a picture that Axel Poinyon had of him and his dad when he was on his fathers shoulders. Now this is going back to the 50's and 60's that's when his father was a full on hunter and gatherer. So within forty years he was dead. Now I don't think there is a better example illustrating what we have been talking about today, so I will come back to the point I made before about the welfare era and this is going back to what Altman says that the welfare ere up to about 1972 followed by the era of self determination. Well I would probably argue that the welfare era has continued under the veneer of the era of self determination.

Mr Collins: Absolutely agree with you.

Dr Burns: Basically the structures that have been in Aboriginal communities and the organisations may have the veneer of self determination but underneath it all I think there has been the control by government departments and in some instances in some communities, individuals or groups of individuals non Aboriginal people. I think Aboriginal people have become discouraged about the structures and I think in some cases unfortunately they have disengaged with them and become a bit disheartened. So I know I have rambled on a little bit here, but I consider the whole issue of substance abuse as being symptomatic of this great transition that has gone on for Mr M W on his fathers shoulders full on hunter gatherer, gone through the whole business of having structures and buildings and interactions with government departments to his own personal battles, that I wont go into here. I am not going to speak ill of the dead because he was a friend. There are many other cases. You talked about welfare so I think all of these things like I was just thinking of Mr M W. All these things have fallen out of the sky at him and his generation and the generations that have followed and I think that the people

have just been overwhelmed by this transition. There you go I have had my bit of a ramble. I am not sure what the way forward is, obviously time.

Mr Collins: I think you are right.

Dr Burns: Is part of it and I hope you didn't interpret what I said about Noel Pearson or about the Mission era, I am not advocating going back, I am just looking for ways to go forward, and I am open to that, that's all.

Mr Collins: By the way if it is possible, I would appreciate getting a copy of that Paul Kelly article. If one of the staff could organise to run a copy off for me. I didn't see it. All I can say is, I agree with you. He was a close friend of mine. I knew him from the age of twelve and there was one of those guys, full of talent, ability, flare, charisma, education that you could wish for. John Matthews, I tell you has made as big an impression on me as he has on you. I think that there is one particular speech of his, he did put it in speeches many times but the forward, address that he wrote I think it was the 1995 from memory, Annual Report of the Menzies School of Health, contained a lot of this, and I have quoted from it many times. But I think that the point that he made was well made. In terms of the health problems that Aboriginal people are suffering from now, most of which are generically referred to correctly are environmental health problems, lifestyle problems. Matthews pointed out the fact that all those health problems, tuberculosis chest infections, gastro intestinal infections were all the same medical problems that the white community suffered from at the turn of the last century in Australia. Of course, I saw the print of Drury Lane many times, but poor housing, slums, overcrowding, all the same problems, grog abuse, alcohol abuse and so on and there is no question, and it is a big band aid that I keep on putting it on the top of the list in terms of getting better educational outcomes providing people with incentive. Let me tell you in terms of government policy that is wrong headed and silly. One example, talking about valuing education.

What sort of incentive do you give those people who do go out and get themselves and education and get themselves qualified? What I am talking about and then you actually give them a day by day demonstration that it wasn't worth two bob to them. I will tell you. You go to Batchelor College and you go there for three or four years and you get your self a teaching qualification to teach. You go back and teach in your community, which is not only what you want to do, it's what we want you to do too. Us white folk, we want you to go back and work there because we want to cut down the horrific turnover of teachers that are going through those communities. Maningrida it is in there. The biggest Aboriginal school in the Northern Territory. One hundred and forty replacement teachers in one year. That's not teaching that's child minding. A disgrace, an absolute disgrace. I mean you only have to be a parent to know what a turn off to a kid, ten teachers tracking through a classroom in a week is like.

Madam Chair: What does it give those kids.

Mr Collins: Housing right. But what sort of incentive is it, so what we want Aboriginal people to do is to go and get qualified and go and teach in their home communities, stay there. They want to do that too. But what sort of incentive is it when they go and get trained, they go back and teach and they still live in a shit house with twenty five other people. In fact in the case of one, in the case of one particular individual whose home I visited, and there aren't to many people who actually go into homes. I can tell you who she is afterwards. While I am sitting in her slum of a kitchen, I actually noticed a sheet. dirty sheet laying on the floor under the sink. It was just a sink, nothing underneath it, and underneath the sink was this sheet laying on the floorboards, and that is where she and her husband were sleeping because the house had twenty five people in it. That was out at Maningrida. Because she doesn't qualify for housing. It has been like that for thirty years. I have talked about it in there, it is still the case. We are working on it now, but you know you talk about valuing education, I will tell you one positive thing that could be done to demonstrate to Aboriginal people that there is a value in going to get qualified. Now the point that I am making is this. You get a nineteen year old graduate from Flinders University who has lived in the community for one day and will probably leave after one year; she has a house to live in.

Ms Carter: But that is not her home community.

Mr Collins: No.

Ms Carter: If she was living back in Sydney where her family is she would have to find her own accommodation.

Mr Collins: How do you find that at Maningrida?

Ms Carter: That's true.

Mr Collins: I know all the arguments. I am just talking about how it seems on the ground. A young teacher from Lajamanu, I talked about her on the radio the other day Richard. A young teacher from Lajamanu, I am standing in her class room with her kids all around and her Aboriginal teaching assistant. The Aboriginal teaching assistant had been working at that school for twenty three years, continuously. This young kid, and I would have been delighted if she had been my kids teacher, she was the best, you know keen and concerned and she had a Batchelor of Science Degree and a Diploma of Education and she said to me, she said Bob, she said, two things she said to me that were salient. One was she said, nothing I have been trained to do has taught me how I can teach these kids, nothing. She said I am in my second term at this school and I do not even know how to program a lesson for them. She said I am completely lost. She said if it wasn't for the Aboriginal assistant I have got she wouldn't have a clue what to do. And she said the thing I feel really terrible about is that I have never lived in this community before and I am living in a nice demountable with one other teacher, she's been here for twenty three years and she is living in a…

Madam Chair: Shit hole.

Mr Collins: Crappy house with twenty five other people.

Ms Carter: Just, not wanting to stir up a huge argument here.

Mr Collins: By all means, I am happy to have an argument with anybody. Brighten my day.

Ms Carter: I heard for example, through a friend who works out bush in a certain community that there is some graffiti appearing that says culture sucks. Now…

Mr Collins: Whose culture

Ms Carter: Aboriginal culture is the inference.

Madam Chair: Well go on.

Ms Carter: Take for example the Aboriginal teacher wanting a house. Due to cultural rule and considerations, is there a very strong possibility that within twelve months she would have the twenty four other people back in the house.

Mr Collins: I have absolutely no idea, because you have no opportunity to test that theory because she can't get a house.

Ms Carter: Well obviously

Mr Collins: So what do you do? Do you make a judgement in anticipation that is going to happen. So you don't give her one.

Ms Carter: No, no that's not the reason.

Mr Collins: Good approach.

Ms Carter: Well I mean it is going to be interesting to see over the next few years how it does pan out in that regard. It will be interesting to see it. But is one of those situations, and I do have a teaching qualification, if I worked here as a teacher in Darwin, I would have to provide my own accommodation.

Mr Collins: Of course.

Ms Carter: But if I went to a place like Maningrida there is no rental accommodation available.

Mr Collins: Correct.

Ms Carter: So that's…

Mr Collins: I am not disputing, the need, I'm sorry, I wasn't suggesting that the teacher from Flinders should go and live in a shit hole too, just to even it out. To take up you argument. That wasn't where I was going at all. Of course, I am not questioning the provision of housing where there is no housing stock available for ex-patriots. Of course it has got to be provided. But what you seem to be saying to me is that, because there is a need to provide housing for non local teachers, that justifies that, which it does. But because there are cultural reasons that indicate that the new house for the trained teacher might be filled up with extended family then you shouldn't provide her with one.

Ms Carter: No that is not my point. My point is that, it is not necessarily going to provide the solution because, like I lived in Katherine next to an Aboriginal family. They had to have barbed wire around their house and high gates to prevent their family getting in. That was through their desperation to keep that aspect away from them and to enforce the fact that they wanted to live as you and I would call a nuclear family situation. My point is that, in some Aboriginal circumstances the provision of a unit or house won't necessarily solve this problem of overcrowding, because of the fact that the pressure that the culture.

Mr Collins: I am not talking about over crowding.

Ms Carter: And another thing is the fact that when somebody dies often the houses are not used for a long period of time which increases the pressure on a community to provide more houses to allow for twelve months or so of empty houses.

Mr Collins: I understand that. I am not talking about over crowding, what I am talking about is rational government policy. I mean, by the way, what I am curious about what's the relevance about the graffiti, I don't understand what "culture sucks" what's that, what's the relevance of it.

Ms Carter: Somebody came and told me about it, that it had appeared in top end community as a sad reference to, obviously one would assume young peoples feeling towards their culture.

Mr Collins: But that's, I mean...

Dr Burns: We can see evidence of that around our town. It mightn't necessarily say "culture sucks" but I just want to back up what Bob says, I don't think we are talking about over crowding here what we are talking about is incentive.

Mr Collins: Yes.

Dr Burns: For people. When I did that feasibility study for the provision of health services out at Maningrida, that Commonwealth one that was a very strong view that was put by the Aboriginal health workers, some of which had been faithfully working that Health Clinic for twenty years and a lot who were not in the Health Clinic who I also spoke to even amongst the ones who had been there a long time who basically were the lynch pin along with the resident sister there, who had also been there for a long time of the service and they spoke of the resentment that they had. Not on a personal level to the new nurses that came along. Maybe, there might have been an element of that but the fact that they could step off the plane and go and get a house or a flat or what ever it was out there and that they were living in terrible conditions. When I asked about, well how can we encourage more health workers, because there is a problem with retention of health workers at that stage. I am not sure whether the same is true today. They said, well housing, if we were to get housing as part of the job that would be an incentive for us. Now that is not to say that you take on a Trainee health worker and bang them into a house straight off. But if someone demonstrates their bona fides for X years, then that is when you say to them OK you have gone through your training, you have stuck at your job for X years, you have got the house but if you leave the job you will have to vacate the house.

Mr Collins: I will tell you something else you can do too. Just to take up your question. You can do the same thing in an Aboriginal community that the Northern Territory Housing Commission does now with Aboriginal families who live in Housing Commission properties in Darwin. There is no reason why you can't. That is you lease the houses, you have a set of conditions that you apply to those houses, this is how it works in Darwin. You have a set of conditions that applies to those houses, that are strictly observed, in other words these are not impositions that you are imposing on your family, these are conditions that the person that owns the house is imposing on that house. That acts as a protection and an effective – I know Aboriginal families in Darwin, some have been resident here for years from Maningrida, Shorty Jimmy for example is one that you know out at Lee Point. That's exactly what happens. It is all written out for him, and if he needs to and he still maintains his family relationships without any difficulty. There is a limit on the number of people who can live in the house, an absolute limit. There are annual inspections in terms of its condition. If he breeches those conditions, he is out of the house. He does not want to be out of the house. So when things get crook he can pull that thing out and say "these are the Housing Commission rules, I can't let you in, love to but I can't, you have to go".

Dr Lim: You are gilding the lily there a little bit Bob.

Mr Collins: Oh really.

Dr Lim: Yes, when you compare urban Aboriginal housing to community housing.

Mr Collins: Oh yeah, tell me how.

Dr Lim: I will. I think you guys are deliberately misinterpreting what Sue had to say.

Mr Collins: Well you speak on her behalf then.

Dr Lim: I will…

Ms Carter: He's a lovely chap.

Dr Lim: I will. Now we all agree that there should be an incentive for people to want to seek education, whether to become a school teacher, health worker or whatever and return to the communities to contribute their skills. And by providing them with a house it would be seen as an incentive and a reward for upgrading their

skills. What Sue was trying to interpret, and correct me if I am wrong, is that, providing a home for that person as an incentive so that they do not live in bad circumstances that they were in prior to their education does not necessarily translate into anything more than the reward is there for awhile, before the reward is then whittled away. And then the twenty five people from that poor home comes to the new home and you are in.

Mr Collins: How have you got the right to make that judgement in advance?

Dr Lim: Let me finish, let me finish. When you then talk about rules the Housing Commission impose on Aboriginal people living in urban Darwin or any other regional centre. Territory Housing has ownership of those residences, community housing is owned by IHANT.

Madam Chair: No it's not

Dr Lim: The community gets the money given to it through IHANT. The money contributed by ATSIC, Territory Housing and the houses are "gifted" to the community.

Mr Collins: They are not owned by IHANT.

Madam Chair: No It's not.

Dr Lim: The community then runs those homes, not Territory Housing.

Mr Collins: You have lost me completely with this argument. What are you talking about?

Dr Lim: Nobody owns the home. Nobody even leases the homes from IHANT, they are "gifted".

Mr Collins: Richard, I am talking about administration. There is nothing preventing the entity that administers the houses in an Aboriginal community from imposing the same conditions on leasing those houses or allowing entry to those houses than the Housing Commission. It was simply an example of how the Housing Commission dealt with, and I conceded an extremely difficult problem where a lot of Housing Commission houses were being turned into slums in this town and in Palmerston. There is no question about it. They reacted to that. First of all they let it go for a long time and they reacted to that by imposing quite strong rules and conditions, it has nothing to do with the legal entities or leasing. They simply imposed a set of rules which were imposed externally on who ever occupied that house and if those rules were not observed in terms of the care and maintenance of the house you lost your right to live in it. No reason why those same rules can't apply in a community.

Dr Lim: The community that received the housing, the IHANT homes will then impose its own restrictions.

Mr Collins: No.

Madam Chair: Can I, with the IHANT stuff, a lot of the Housing Associations have now got to the point where they have had to develop very strong rules in terms of, and part of the IHANT funding to match what they get for repairs and maintenance the community has to set up and they do charge everybody rents. I mean everybody pays rent for that house.

Mr Collins: That's correct.

Madam Chair: It doesn't matter if you have twenty two people, everyone contributes towards rent. The money, the rent monies that are collected by those Housing Associations and just to correct you on that issue of that IHANT owns those houses, any fixtures on Aboriginal land actually doesn't belong to any organisation it belongs to the Land Trust.

Dr Lim: Gifted to the…

Madam Chair: Hold on a minute, hold on I was listening to you talking and also Sue. In terms of that policy there has to be some adjustments and having worked alongside very skilled Aboriginal health workers and in remote communities, not just sitting in Katherine, but also living and working with very skilled Aboriginal health workers who are more skilled, and I know the situation of a young indigenous health worker, male who a senior surgeon had commented had some of the best skills, better skilled, than any nursing sister that he had worked along side. But was never given any incentive or support even though he was the first on call, he had to attend to every incident that happened because the nurse was the second on call. This indigenous male health worker was on the first. When I started working with that community, I went to and had a look the hovel that that young fella was living in and it was a hovel, I mean you wouldn't put your dog in the housing situation that that young man was living in but he was expected to be on call every night and then turn up to work at eight o'clock the next morning because if he was late he would get criticised. It is about incentive but more, as I witnessed through this young man, it was about status. I mean it is – and they should be given that incentive and it is a policy shift that government has to look at. The turnover, I mean, I have read this Report, I mean the turnover of teachers that have gone into some of the communities. Maningrida we point out. There are, you know I could go out to any one of these communities and talk to ex teachers that have, indigenous teachers that do have the skills and qualifications but have left that system because there is no incentive to stay in it. And there is a number of things, it is not just housing where policy has to shift in terms of trying to create incentives for these people to stay in it.

There is a number of other things that have to be provided so that we can keep those people in the work force. Because the reality is that the students coming up from down south and it is good that we have got those students coming through. But at some stage, someone has to bite the bullet and say heh what about your local people. The whole issue of this policy that has been in place where teachers or Aboriginal health workers that do have that skill or qualification that can't go into, and I have heard the arguments through the years where oh well it is a community decision and the Council should then take the responsibility of housing that person has been a convenient excuse for governments to bite the bullet and say alright they are our employee, because at the end of the day those Aboriginal teachers are on the same payroll system as the non Aboriginal teachers. The Aboriginal health workers are on the same payroll and under the same conditions as the nurses that they work beside. So you have two sets of disciplines working within an area that are on the same payroll under the same sort of award agreements or the nurses have one agreement and the Aboriginal health workers – that's the other gripe that I have is that indigenous health workers within the government hasn't had a proper working agreement in place even though there has been some sort of career path. But you have these two disciplines working for one employer, same payroll but two sets of differences in which they operate.

Dr Lim: You are trying to make it as if there is something there. That there is discrimination between indigenous and non indigenous employees. It is about local recruits, outstation recruits. It is the recruitment. It is not about indigenous and non indigenous people.

Mr Collins: Who said it was?

Dr Lim: That is what she was talking about.

Madam Chair: No. no I am saying discipline. No I will use the experience and this is where to co-ordinated care trials were important in terms of their success in the Northern Territory. Tiwi and Katherine West and I tend to ramble on but people underestimate the success of those trials and I will tell you why. In terms of Katherine West where the department was controlling and managing, all of the clinics in that Katherine West Region, which were the responsibility of the Northern Territory Government. The management of those clinics then got handed to the Katherine West Health Board. We managed to keep all the nurses contrary to the fears that people had that handing services over to an Aboriginal Board was going to mean that services were going to

decrease. Anyway the rest is history. But one of the biggest changes that happened, out of the four major clinics that have the biggest population the Board made a decision to implement and put in place the senior Aboriginal health workers from each of those clinics, each of those communities as Clinic Managers. That was a real change and a real shift in how the Board wanted to operate – and it was fully supported by the nurses.

We went through change management processes with the nursing staff and everyone in there. I actually personally sat down with these senior health workers and said we will give you the same houses that the nurses you work with. We put those senior Aboriginal health workers in the houses that were occupied by the nursing staff. Three years on and I talk regularly to the Director who took my place, three out of the four are still there, still Clinic Managers. No they haven't shifted twenty five of their family members into those homes. They care for the houses, I mean even better than, I mean they couldn't care for the houses they were in before because they were sharing with twenty five thirty people. But there is a pride, I mean three out of the four of those senior health workers now looking to going on to specialise and gain more specialist skills in the field of health and so it has kept them in those positions. So I think it is dependant on the commitment that organisations and governments offer to those workers. And it is about not giving up hope. It is about coming in and we all have these preconceived ideas, ie. 'givem a house and they are gunna move their whole countrymen in'. We have to get rid of those preconceived ideas and come with a view OK there have been situations where it hasn't worked in the past but we have to give it a go.

Katherine West has proved it. Tiwi has proved it where health workers would have lived in community housing and two senior health workers are in duplex accommodation they don't have all their family members and Bob knows the Tiwi cultural obligations as a Tiwi person and what will come on in those terms. I have just seen the more positive side.

Mr Collins: I was just going to say, you guys will have to give this an extensive edit afterwards.

Ms Carter: What do you mean.

Mr Collins: The transcript. It has been a wide ranging debate.

Madam Chair: I think it is important to have that.

Mr Collins: No. I agree.

Mr Wood: Can I just say one quick thing. That is not to take away from anything you said, and I agree with what you are saying. Sometimes I think in this debate, people say things about history and Missionaries and that, but I can guarantee that in some cases that the people who came to work with Aboriginals worked in very similar conditions with no pay and they did it because they wanted to do it. I saw a number of teachers that went through Bathurst Island and it used to concern me. They went because, oh for some reason, but in a lot of cases, people did not have, I suppose it is a deeper feeling for why they were there. There were people that went because they had a higher, I am not saying higher in that new beaut way, but…

Mr Collins: There is a calling if you like.

Mr Wood: There was a calling to help people and it didn't matter where they lived or what they got. Of course things changed and a lot of those changes didn't come from the people who worked there originally. They came from the Commonwealth. They just went, well we will put housing in for the teachers.

Recording ceased.
Recommenced.

Mr Wood: If people are just walking around the streets with nothing to do then should we at least, it is a band aid. There is a simple method in getting people to work.

Mr Collins: I agree that it is a contributing factor and in that context, I was interested to hear a comment that was made by Richard Trudgen at this thing that you went to, where Richard, and you know I have great respect for Richard. Richard said as a sweeping statement and I don't like sweeping statements anyway, that in itself is a sweeping statement. I don't always like sweeping statements. But Richard said that "boredom was not a contributing factor to petrol sniffing". Now I dispute that. In some cases it may not be, but in some cases that I am personally aware of, I am absolutely certain that it is a contributing factor.

Mr Wood: Yuendumu, they said that it was.

Mr Collins: I disagree with Richard if that is what he said.

Madam Chair: We saw that at a number of communities in central Australia that we visited.

Ms Carter: Boredom. I can tell this group in my fourteen months experience of long term unemployment I was so desperate I went nursing.

Mr Collins: And then more desperate and went and became a politician.

Ms Carter: No – after about six months, the gang that I was in, because we had all left school and couldn't get jobs. We would do and take anything to have something to do and that was a fact. And it was boredom and it was only boredom that drove me to nursing, because I couldn't stand it any longer. So I believe that boredom plays a big role in this sort of thing.

Mr Collins: I agree with that. Again it is not the whole story, but it is part of the story.

Ms Carter: Part of it.

Mr Collins: No question about that. I mean you look at – you know, I had the great enormous privilege of living in an Aboriginal community for four years. One hundred odd people out there and me, leading a largely traditional life style. In terms of that traditional life style that they were living, they were fully occupied all the time. They were either going out hunting or ceremony. Which from an Aboriginal perspective is looking after their country. They were engaged for probably about half the year in quite intense religious activity and conducting ceremonies and there was an enormous amount of organisation and work went into that. For the rest of the time, and I am talking about the people who were not involved in working in the garden and that was the majority of the community weren't involved in the garden. They were always occupied and people would take off first thing in the morning down to the billabongs and they would come back with food at the end of the day. people were fully occupied. So it is certainly not part of an Aboriginal traditional life to be sitting around staring at your navel doing nothing.

Mr Wood: You would starve if you did.

Dr Burns: But I think if you are talking about petrol sniffing specifically, I think Maggie Brady hit it on the head when she said that it is just not activity per say, the activity has to be challenging and rewarding and meaningful and I think that that is an important distinction. It is not enough to put a basketball hoop up and pay someone to throw a basketball, it actually has to be a bit more than recreation or sport.

Mr Wood: During my time at Bathurst, the people were always proud to show their place to people and I think one of the good things about working with that group of men. Not only were we working, but it was a social activity. I mean people went out gathering the fire wood, three or four of them, the older blokes. They weren't sort of on their lonesome. It just wasn't a job, you were part of a group that were going out to do something.

Mr Collins: Specifically, might I say on this point that I do think that some creative work needs to be done, to continue to be done on the whole question of government payments to communities. Providing that the primary criterion is that the welfare of the individual on the community is kept paramount and that nothing be done that would reduce the rights that people have, I think on the whole, that alternatives need to be found, to simply getting paid Unemployment Benefits for doing no work.

Dr Lim: I agree with you there. If I could give a cynical view. You talk about being occupied all day in getting food and whatever they do. I mean if you are a hunter, gatherer and you come up to this spot that has a tree laden with food and a waterhole that never runs dry, why not stay here in the one spot until such time as the ground cannot sustain me any more because it is unhygienic or whatever or the food runs out. The tree is a social welfare tree that I can pluck dollars out of every day. Why should I move away from that spot. That might be a cynical view but that is the reality of it. If I have this tree that never runs out of food why should I leave this tree?

Dr Burns: For the same reason that Sue left the tree.

Mr Wood: Hunters and gatherers it applies to all of us.

Mr Collins: Look the other thing that needs to be said about that and it is something that Richard Trudgen has been on about for years in terms of what he does. The best effort I have seen made to produce something that does explain all of this very well was done by the mob in Alice Springs. But what I am talking about is that I know for a fact that there is very little understanding by the majority of Aboriginal people as to the origin of those payments and as to why they get them. I mean there is no understanding that it is public money that comes from other Australians that pay taxes etc. The simple fact for an Aboriginal person from the majority of Aboriginal people receiving those funds is, that is simply money that the government gives you.

Dr Burns: Bob, this is I suppose on a serious note and I keep on saying that I am going to distribute this to the Committee but in the Phd I did on petrol sniffing, I made a number of recommendations to government, particularly directed towards the Commonwealth. I think probably given the nature of petrol sniffing, particularly in central Australia, I know I didn't go down there the last time, but there was a good reason for that, but given the cross border nature and whatever, and part of those recommendations were about when government departments are carrying on works or building infrastructure that that is both the Territory and the Commonwealth that they give particular thought to the employment and training, particularly of young people and I know in terms of the rollout of the NARS housing project. There has been a bit of that. I don't feel that there has been enough. We know that some of these places have a very limited economy or whatever, but I think we should be looking at ways in which governments can support training and work and I suppose I don't want to tickle anyone up here, but I did say in the House the other day speaking about education and training that it was unfortunate when the Howard Government got in they slashed that funding.

I personally know of a number of cases where there were a lot of people who had been ex petrol sniffers. I am talking about Maningrida here, who were gainfully employed, being trained in all sorts of things including laying blocks, being electricians, demolishing houses, doing pest control, doing a whole range of things and suddenly when that, when that funding was withdrawn it fell on its face. Of course what happened, they didn't go back to petrol sniffing but they certainly hopped into the gunga. I mean this is what happens with a lot of government programs in that, okay the community gets used to it and things start to happen and then there is a new government, of whatever persuasion and they say we are going to do it differently and basically everything

gets turned on its head and people get discouraged, so I will put it in there to circulate to members those recommendations, policy recommendations I made some years ago now, specifically in relation to petrol sniffing but I believe that they are relevant to other forms of substance abuse.

Mr Collins: Well I strongly support that view. I just talked about what I think is the need to continue and I am part of this process myself, creatively looking at ways of fairly and equitably providing an alternative to simply paying sit down money to people. But in the meantime you should be on the positive foot doing that. You should take every opportunity with the funds that are available to create training for Aboriginal people . Now a couple of weeks or a month or two ago, I heard a big announcement made about $40m of money that is coming to the Territory for Aboriginal housing, and as soon as I heard that I wondered how much effort and push there is going to make sure that as part of that $40m we extract the maximum training opportunities and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people out of it.

Dr Lim: Big time. This is…

Mr Collins: Well I wonder. But it should be looked at.

Dr Lim: This is IHANT money and I did a presentation to the building industry in Alice Springs and the departmental policy then was that there has to be a huge local component of employees and training so that people were getting builders skills outcomes of the local community and that has to be part of the costing.

Mr Collins: Pleased to hear it.

Dr Lim: In Alice Springs alone there is going to be something like $24m in the next two years. That is big dollars we are talking about now, for housing in Central Australia.

Mr Collins: Twenty four of that forty.

Dr Lim: I don't know if it is $24m of that $40m or $24m plus the $40m that is coming in.

Madam Chair: There is no policy in place though to dictate that 20% or 30% of that money must be….

Dr Lim: There is, you talk to your Housing Minister…

Madam Chair: In the Northern Territory Government there is, but I mean a lot of this is Commonwealth money.

Dr Lim: But it is through IHANT so it's under control, under Territory control.

Madam Chair: I understand, IHANT is Northern Territory matched Commonwealth funding, but in terms of the Commonwealth funding, and I have seen situations where and I have spoken to Jack about this where the Northern Territory yes there is that policy that tries to get community contracts and engaging the local community. But the Commonwealth, there has to be lobbying in terms of the Commonwealth changing their policy in terms of a percentage of the funding they give that that is ear marked.

Dr Lim: The way to do this is for the Commonwealth to give (inaudible) money to IHANT.

Madam Chair: There are Commonwealth bureaucrats that are interfering in that process.

Mr Collins: Sure. But it would be a great tragedy, as Chris has said if the opportunity to maximise the training and employment opportunities from the already existing opportunities weren't made. Again I hate going back to the Missionaries, but there is a perfect example of how it can be done properly. Recently right on

your doorstep and I talked earlier about the initiative by the Independent Christian Schools Association in conjunction with the Aboriginal community to establish these houses in Darwin. What I didn't mention was that from that start of one house they have now got eighty four kids accommodated in those houses around Darwin and after two years they have a retention and attendance record of almost 100% of those children. It is a commendable effort. Too early yet to look at educational outcomes, but the first beginnings of that are that the kids are going to school. Now that same organisation, in conjunction with the Woolaning community in Litchfield National Park have built and are continuing to build the first residential Aboriginal college which will take students from Daly and Keats in Litchfield National Park on the Pethericks land at Woolaning I have had a close involvement in getting that thing off the ground over the last two years and I have actually been dragooned to being the inaugural Chair of the school college council, along with the other fifteen things I chair. We have had our first meeting, but what really impressed me, it is worth looking at, because the Independent Christian Schools Association have got the detailed budgetary break up, right to the last dollar of how it was done. And they insisted on this from the start.

The college was built using indigenous, local indigenous labour. A lot of people said you wont be able to do it. They are all going to get pissed. They wont turn up for work. Well, some of them did get pissed and didn't turn up for work. But they found others who were pissed and came to work. But the reason I thought don't go back to the Catholic Missions, I went down there a month or so ago, they had a big community day at the college which was terrific and a lot of Aboriginal people came from Keats and Daly.

They have got their first twenty four kids at the school that started at the beginning of this last school term and the guy, there is only one non Aboriginal person that is actually employed on the building site and I recognised him. I am so hopeless with names, but I recognised him and he knew me and he used to work for Catholic Missions. But he was to overseer, supervisor or whatever who used to work for Catholic Missions and they grabbed him and he is the guy who has actually brought in these trainees. It was quite extraordinary what they did in four months they actually built this college to the stage where it has taken its first twenty four kids.

They did it all using Aboriginal trainees. So there is a real life example that is still in the process of going on with detailed budgetary records. I actually asked them to produce these records and they did. Because I said to them can you tell me what the cost impost was. Because obviously there is an additional element, if you are going to build something with trainees and not tradesmen, it is obviously going to take you longer to build it and there is a cost implication. But it is not huge. So the other point I would want to make is that here has been a real shift of focus in terms of these construction activities in Aboriginal communities away from trainees. Away from and it is all done by external contractors now, who just get the money, go into the communities and build the things. I think there should be a refocus on maximising local training opportunities from money that is spent in Aboriginal communities.

Dr Lim: Is this where the Council Clerk comes into it.

Mr Collins: Right.

Madam Chair: Thank you.

Mr Collins: It has been a pleasure!

The witness withdrew