



Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria



**Senator Steve Fielding
Leader of the FAMILY FIRST Party
FAMILY FIRST Senator for Victoria**

Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Bill 2007

Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007

Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Northern Territory National Emergency Response and Other Measures) Bill 2007

Appropriation (Northern Territory National Emergency Response) Bill (No.1) 2007-2008

Appropriation (Northern Territory National Emergency Response) Bill (No.2) 2007-2008

Second Reading Speech

13 August 2007

The government's emergency response bills are a response to problems of child sexual abuse confirmed in the *Little children are sacred* report. The legislation is a sweeping and far-reaching response to a terrible problem and it goes more broadly to address Aboriginal disadvantage.

It relies on a momentum powered by widespread revulsion across the Australian community at numerous cases of child abuse. The *Little children are sacred* report found evidence of child sexual abuse in every one of the 45 communities visited. Family First wants this momentum used to achieve a better life for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, a life that is free of child abuse and free of alcohol abuse and illegal drugs, a life that offers hope of an escape from poverty through good education, health care and housing.

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This is an emergency, and Family First does not want to have any child living in an abusive situation for one more night. But this legislation is also a radical change in policy direction that will have long-term implications for Aboriginal people and their communities.

Family First is concerned at the speed at which the legislation is expected to be passed, given that it was introduced just last week. Yes, this is an emergency. Yes, we need to act quickly. But this is 500 pages of complex legislation on a complex issue that deserves Senate scrutiny. I know Senate committee inquiries can be uncomfortable for governments, but they are useful for picking up problems with policy or legislation, allowing community input and allowing some adjustment before the parliament votes.

Family First is pleased the government has recognised there is a role for the Senate in examining and reviewing the package of bills, though the inquiry was very, very short and rushed. Family First acknowledges that most of the elements of the bills were announced by the government weeks ago and that there has been some time to debate the intent, if not the detail, of the legislation.

The concern is that this legislation will alienate some Aboriginal people and increase the gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Last week I spoke to a delegation of Aboriginal people from the Gulkula Leaders Forum, who oppose much of the legislation. I have considered their comments and the written material they provided, as well as written material from other groups. Their reaction to the legislation is understandable. This is a radical plan. I can understand not supporting major change that upturns the way your community operates but, at the moment, the choice is either more of the same or the government's sweeping and far-reaching proposal for change.

Aboriginal people all have families and many have children. Of course they love and want to care for and nurture their kids. The disagreement is about how best to achieve that. Family First believes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, like all Australians, have rights and responsibilities. Indigenous Australians have the right to good education, housing and health care, but they also have a responsibility to make sure their children go to school, their homes are well maintained and they look after their family's health.

In March my wife, Susan, and I made a trip to the Northern Territory. Neither of us had been to Darwin or Katherine before. We went to see firsthand some of the Indigenous communities. We went to see and hear for ourselves the stories of people, to try to understand what was the real problem. This trip was about helping us to be better informed. Living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, we had not been confronted with Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage. Like many, we have not grown up with Aborigines in our community.

Our trip was deeply depressing and disturbing. We walked away stunned and shocked by the problems facing the Aboriginal community and that kids were growing up in such an environment. As we listened to men and women, Aborigines and white people alike, tell us their stories, our disbelief only grew. How could this be so? How could a community of people live like this? How could we all, black and white, have allowed the situation to reach this level of hopelessness? As we listened, the depth of the problem began in surface. We began to see the complexities.

What struck and alarmed us was the sense that no-one had the answer; no-one really had the solution. There was a defeatism that hung over every conversation. Everyone could tell you about the problems: the police called to the domestic disputes fuelled by alcohol; the paramedics called to patch up those who injure themselves on the roadside because they are blind drunk; the school teachers who cannot teach children who do not turn up; the welfare agencies that have turned away alcoholics who want to detox, because they have no funding. Most of all, we heard about the children. We were told about the kids who see their parents and the communities awash with alcohol, the kids who are on the receiving end of drunken behaviour, the kids who are not kept safe and who grow up as victims and often become abusers.

Every conversation we had ended up being about grog. In both Katherine and Darwin there were Aboriginal people drinking alcohol to excess. We could see that much for ourselves. Aboriginal people walked, some staggered, around the streets with bottles in their hands. There was such a sense of aimlessness. There was drinking in car parks, under the trees in the parks, in the doorways of shops. Australia has a huge binge drinking problem in the broader community, but what we saw in the Aboriginal community is much worse. Yet the sheer acceptance of the alcohol problem by most in the community was staggering. In Katherine it seemed to us that this was 'the way it was'. The term 'dry community' seemed farcical when, outside the gates of these communities, you would see dozens of empty tinnies littering the entrance before you drive in.

We visited a couple of communities to see how people lived. The houses seemed derelict; vandalised, graffitied, burnt, damaged, some almost destroyed. It was like driving through a war zone. We knew we should not stare but we were stunned. Who would want to live in these houses? They were like squats. There was an air of dejection; what was the point? The enormity of the problems that we saw was overwhelming. The Aboriginal people and the welfare workers who are trying to make a difference all sounded tired and worn out. We admired them for their dedication, but they were battle weary, some close to burn-out. We heard some success stories, but they were all on such a small scale. Why couldn't they

be replicated a hundredfold? We were told the government departments were part of the problem because of lack of care, lack of action, lack of funds.

What affected us was our absolute powerlessness to help these people and the abject failure of current government policy and of Australia. We were horrified that many of the next generation were being condemned to an endless cycle of abuse. As parents, we were outraged. If the adults could not be helped, or would not help themselves, these kids faced a desperate future. And we were ashamed. I reckon most people would be ashamed too once they actually see the situation for themselves. These are our fellow Australians living in these conditions.

Standing around blaming governments, state or federal, suddenly seemed a total waste of time. Whether the Prime Minister should have acted years ago is a moot point. He did not, but neither did previous prime ministers nor chief ministers. It is fruitless and time-wasting to ask the question at this point: why was nothing done earlier? These questions can be asked after we have rescued the children. And they should be asked, but not now. Every minute we waste arguing, we lose the chance to intervene and rescue a child and give them back a future. Aboriginal leader and commentator Noel Pearson hit the nail on the head when he said that we cannot let children be abused tonight or next Wednesday or the following Wednesday night or the one after.

We left the Northern Territory depressed and demoralised and with the same sense of despair that no doubt many feel. Yet we also felt that, just because there was no obvious or simplistic solution to the underlying and complex cultural problems that many Aboriginal people live with, that is not a reason to do nothing. We did not return home with any answers. We came home with a sense of disgrace. Our generation must be a part of the solution. Ignorance is no longer an excuse.

I do not want to give the impression that governments are responsible for everything. Clearly, Aboriginal people and their communities have to bear some responsibility too. But they need a helping hand and the hand being offered to them at the moment is not one that works. Noel Pearson argues that once you acknowledge the reality that so many Indigenous communities are dysfunctional, suffering from alcohol abuse and violence you have to take immediate action. Pearson said in the *Australian*:

There is no time to waste when children and adults are not living in safe environments ... [there has to be a] primary focus on safety and the restoration of social order by increasing police services and controlling the 'rivers of grog'.

Family First supports the proposed increased controls on the movement of alcohol around the Northern Territory. Controlling the alcohol problem and

providing police to improve the security of people in Aboriginal communities is a basic first step.

Family First also supports the ban on X-rated and unclassified pornography. I still remember an article by award-winning journalist Caroline Overington about pornography in Aboriginal communities. Overington wrote of Judy Atkinson, head of the College of Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University, saying that Aboriginal communities were ‘saturated with pornography’. Atkinson had seen men, she said:

... ‘uncles’ watching hard-core, violent pornographic movies while three and four-year-olds in nappies played in the dust around their feet.

Again, pornography is a problem in the wider community, but not to the extent of these accounts where some children are brought up to regard this material as normal. Family First notes that all government-funded computers will have special pornography restrictions. That is important, but it is also an irony given that federal parliament does not place the same restrictions on the computers of its members and senators.

Family First is concerned about the blanket approach of some of the measures in the government bills where Aboriginal people will have part of their welfare payments quarantined whether they are doing the right thing or not. Such an approach risks demoralising rather than encouraging people to find their way out of welfare. Family First also acknowledges that there were many CDEP projects run well and successfully and is concerned they are being shut down and hard work not acknowledged because of the failure of other projects where they were little more than sit down money. Family First thinks that Aboriginal housing does need urgent attention and a different system in place whereby housing is properly maintained over time.

Family First understands that abolishing the permit system for Indigenous townships will be a concern for some Indigenous people, but towns should be public areas. Permits isolate some Australian communities by saying that only some people can enter. Permits have not protected communities from child abuse, alcohol or drugs. But given the haste of this legislation, Family First also wants a Senate inquiry into the legislation to start one year after proclamation and to report back six months later on whether the legislation is proceeding as expected. This is too short a time to assess outcomes but enough time to point to any adjustments that are needed.

These bills should be the first step in a long-term commitment to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians. Family First will support the government’s emergency response. We cannot as Australians continue to allow this situation to

continue. Family First has reservations about some of the changes, but all change is difficult and uncertain and we owe it to the children of Aboriginal communities to try to give them a better future.