

The Chief Minister's view

By The Hon Clare Martin MLA, Chief Minister

Later this month the Northern Territory Government will provide its comprehensive response to the 97 recommendations of the Wild/Anderson report. It will include legislative changes and build on the extensive work already undertaken by this Government to protect children from abuse.

The first recommendation of the report the Government commissioned, said it quite clearly. Protecting children from sexual abuse is of urgent national significance and that it was "critical" that both the national and Territory Governments together commit to genuine collaboration with Aboriginal communities to combat this scourge.

The third recommendation is that the two governments, "develop long-term funding programs that do not depend upon election cycles nor are limited by short-term outcomes".

And that is precisely what we in the Northern Territory intend to do—and have been working on for the past five years.

The protection of children and families has been at the heart of our concerns.

Amidst the current controversy, it is forgotten that our Government received widespread criticism in our last election campaign for adopting the strongest measures in the nation against widespread abuse of alcohol, including options for court-sanctioned treatment for alcoholism. In the two years since then we have been working towards the roll out of alcohol management plans across the Territory from cities such as Darwin through to small communities - over 100 of which are already legally protected as "dry" communities. Already we have seen successes, from the townships of Groote Eylandt in the north, to

Alice Springs in the Centre.

To further protect our children, we have introduced the nation's first—and so far only—legislation dealing with petrol and other inhalant sniffing.

To work towards giving our children a better chance in the future we have massively increased the levels of specialised literacy tuition—in urban as well as remote schools. For the first time in the history of the Northern Territory we are now seeing students graduate from Year 12 of secondary schooling on their own remote communities.

These are not isolated, random acts of Government. They are often not particularly popular, and they require extensive commitment of Government resources.

They have come from a deep commitment—not least from our Aboriginal members of parliament—to redress the damage and neglect that Aboriginal towns, communities and town camps have endured for over three decades.

But we have always known that, as the jurisdiction with the smallest population in the nation spread across a sixth of the continent, we cannot do it alone. We have always needed a helping hand from other Australians of good will; from individual acts of generosity through philanthropic organisations, through to sharing the common wealth of the nation through Federal assistance.

It is why I personally wrote to the Prime Minister over a year ago calling for a 20 year approach to resolving the too often dire circumstances facing Aboriginal Territorians. In that letter I called for new alcohol restrictions in communities, for ways to prevent welfare money being spent on grog, increasing policing on communities and working towards

strong strategies dealing with domestic violence and crime. All of these issues, I am happy to see, have now been picked up by the Prime Minister.

There are some things in the national intervention the Territory can't accept – primarily the abolition of the permit system and the five year leases of townships. Throughout this whole process we have said we would support any practical and worthwhile initiatives which are directly linked to protecting children from abuse. There is no link between permits and child abuse, and the abolition of permits could actually make the problem worse.

We welcome the renewed national interest in moving forward in the future: the era of short-term solutions is behind us, and Aboriginal Territorians must be included in any partnership between the Commonwealth and Territory Governments.

But it will only work if we commit to the long term. The days of quick fixes and pilot projects—if they worked at all—are well and truly over. It will mean financial commitments that will travel far beyond election cycles: in health and child protection, in housing, in education and training, in improved governance of our remote towns and communities and in economic opportunities particularly for Aboriginal Territorians.

It will take enormous effort, but I am sure with the goodwill of so many Australians whose interest in these issues has been re-awoken we can make the difference that is needed.