



Child abuse claims slur on remote communities

■ Ben Wyatt



When the Government makes the decision to declare that a community has failed and that the community will close, those people will move to another place. The Government has an obligation to ensure that shifting these people is going to provide a better result for them and their new neighbours.

The key part of this debate about the future of remote Aboriginal communities is missing — how do we manage a community of people who have been moved on?

For the closure policy to have any success, the investment and policy must focus on where those people go and what services will be available.

As Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan knows, Broome is a prime example of a community unable to service its existing population. And this is having dire outcomes.

From 2008-12, there were eight homicides in Broome. Most of the perpetrators or victims were visiting Broome from other parts of the Kimberley and Pilbara and most were sleeping rough. How our larger communities manage the movement of people once communities have been closed is the absolute key issue as to whether this policy will succeed or fail. This should not be an afterthought but must be handled before any closures occur; otherwise the problems will stay the same; the locations will simply change.

Child abuse in Aboriginal communities has been raised before. It

was child abuse that led the Gallop government to commission the Gordon Inquiry in 2002. Sue Gordon came up with 197 recommendations. In 2013, I

asked the minister for Aboriginal affairs how the Government was tracking in meeting those recommendations. His reply was that he “would not be requesting that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs continue to report on the implementation of Gordon initiatives”. That’s where child abuse has sat until the recent debate.

The Government’s approach has been inconsistent, ham-fisted and so disrespectful of Aboriginal people that the closure policy is destined to produce bad outcomes.

About six months after Premier Colin Barnett announced his intention to close 150 remote communities, we do not know the basis on which these decisions will be made. Originally it was a financial decision. Now Mr Barnett has moved to child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse — nothing is as emotive or horrific. To support his case, Mr Barnett advised Parliament that in 2013 there were 39 cases of gonorrhoea in children aged 10-14 and “not one single case” in the wider community. This is simply incorrect. There were indeed cases in the wider community, both in children and more broadly (a total of 1967 cases in 2013). What Mr Barnett didn’t go on to say was that between 2013 and 2014 there was a 19 per cent decline of gonorrhoea cases in the Aboriginal community and a 47 per cent increase in the non-Aboriginal community. What parliamentary questions have also shown is that of those 39 cases used as justification for remote closures, the Government has no idea whether these were reported from



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remote communities or bigger towns.

These are all horrible statistics, but we need to analyse them honestly to have a fair and respectful debate, not use them to slur, demean and intimidate an entire community.

Oombulgurri's closure has been used as an example of success. The

Police Commissioner wrote on these pages yesterday that those people moved into housing in Wyndham. Again, this is incorrect. Many people from Oombulgurri are now homeless in Kununurra or surrounding communities, adding pressure to services unable to handle the current population.

Funding for Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women's Resource Centre, which operates a children and family centre in the Fitzroy Valley, servicing many smaller communities, has been dropped by the Abbott Government and will also lose its funding from the Barnett Government at the end of June. It is organisations such as this that have improved the health of Aboriginal children and their mothers in the region. Similarly, the Barnett Government's decision to cut funding to the Kimberley Interpreting Service will ensure that many people from remote communities (where English is a second language) will find it difficult to access the services needed to ensure the statistics used by the Police Commissioner and Premier improve.

When the Government is willing to wield the horror of child abuse to justify a political decision, it is difficult to bring a rational and evidence-based argument. Some remote communities might not have a future, I accept that. But I do not accept the Government selectively using child abuse statistics to defame entire communities.

Clearly, there is little co-ordination going on within Government, as their cutting of services that would assist in any community moving around the Kimberley shows. Without a clear strategy accepted by the broader Aboriginal community and investment in the communities which are likely to swell as a result of the closures, we will not be able to honestly say we have improved the life of one person.

Ben Wyatt is the WA shadow Aboriginal affairs minister