



Darwin – Sean Ryan

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Speaker: Sean Ryan

Sean Ryan: Good afternoon panel. My name is Sean Ryan, and before beginning I would just like to acknowledge the Larrakia people on whose land we are now living. The point of my debate this afternoon, or my opposition to ... on unconventional shale gas mining would be around social impacts, as being felt by communities in the Beetaloo sub-basin region.

I'll just begin by stating my experience in the Northern Territory. I came up here in '83 to be a teacher, from Sydney. I grew up in Sydney in an Australian Roman Catholic family. Ordinary child, went to school and absorbed the values of Australia, in which we all share. Now, when I came to the Territory, I did my studies for a year, built on studies that I'd previously done in New South Wales and Sydney. I might add, in a religious order, but that's neither here nor there now. It was such a long time ago. But, I opted to, on graduating with a diploma, opted to go rural teaching. I went to a place called Killarney Station, which is outside ... three hours outside the western side of Katherine.

Now, it's a normal white cattle station. There's hundreds in the Territory, hundreds in North Queensland in the Kimberley, very similar. Black people worked there, many white people. They call on some expertise, such as bore mechanics and accountants and management. It's quite a big process to run a cattle station, because they're a little self-contained industry, often cut-off by weather, rain, and long distances and bad roads and whatever. But, I did gain some knowledge into that industry.

The indigenous people worked there. They were working for wages at that time. This was 1984. But there was still that kind of a division in the social set-up. Such as Aboriginal people living in sheds to one side, not sitting with the white Australian workers. Some Aboriginal people did, but mainly they were dislocated indigenous people from the region of Katherine, who'd lost contact with their traditional ways. That more traditional people were sitting, or living, in sheds across the way. But, they were not mistreated, as such, but you wouldn't say it was the equal treatment our sons and daughters would like to receive or our own family in those days. I taught the children.



I'm leading ... I'm presuming a bit to speak for indigenous people here, but I hope you can see it's just based on my experience of being around communities and being with indigenous people as a teacher and educator. I'm not speaking for them, as such, I'm speaking from my own experience and from what I've seen.

In Australia, at that time, of course, the children were to follow a curriculum, which was the same as Sydney, Melbourne, Darwin. But, after a few short weeks, I kind of realised the difficulty as a teacher to meet these expectations of literacy, and numeracy particularly. Try as I might, I had to really redesign my curriculum to meet those needs. Without faking a curriculum, or my reports, I had to bend the rules of a teacher as far as I could. These children were aged from five to fifteen in one classroom I was stationed. They're all indigenous children, except for the daughter of the owners, and I did teach her as best I could, in that one small classroom.

But, the children had no literacy aged eight, nine, ten, eleven or twelve, these indigenous students from around Top Springs area, the Territory. I'll be leaning to show that this is not uncommon through my experience of further teaching in places. I hope to doctor my programmes and to meet their needs, but I did feel disconsolate knowing that I'd leave that school after two short years and really not meet their needs. It was not shameful. You do the best you can in difficult circumstances.

I then went to the desert to a bilingual school called Willowra, not far from Yuendumu, the warlpiri people. It's in that region, central Australia, Tanami Desert, in from Ti tree, one and half hours drive. Again, very isolated and often this is the way of the Northern Territory, this isolation. But, I guess, it's not the main problem. The main problem, again, was with literacy and numeracy and forces of a white government saying that these children ... they did have their own language taught there. It was a bilingual school at that stage, in '86. But, again, the literacy outcomes were poor compared to Melbourne or Sydney or Darwin or other parts [inaudible] wherever. You can never achieve anything close to those expectations of literacy. And this is still an ongoing problem in the Territory. And, virtually, we don't know what to do.

We keep the schools open. They go on day after day, week after week. There's plenty of programmes, plenty of sports, music. But, the fundamental thing doesn't happen. I'm telling you. This is from my eyes. I was in that school for three and a half years, in a bilingual school, and the fundamental point of a school is to teach children and progress them from year, to year, to year to, say, a normal Australian standard of a year 10. We'd expect our children to at least get to year 10. But, the percentages coming through to year 10 in the Northern Territory, indigenous schools, bi-cultural schools, or just of schools like Ti Tree, or any other tree ... school ... these schools in the Beetaloo sub - region are very similar, very poor.

Things like metric measurement, you'd think that that's quite easy to teach. Such as what is a millimetre? Or, measure up that door in centimetres. Or, how far is it from here to Alice Springs? It's not a matter of intelligence, but



our understanding of education hasn't reached that level to know how to effectively teach these people of Australia. It's the same in the Kimberley. It'll be the same right through wherever you go.

People want the books. There's year-core students, but it's not the year 12 pass ... as good as it is, and teachers do tremendous work, I'm not belittling anyone here, I'm just expressing the difficulties, which will lead on to what my argument about any dealings in communities will come back to this issue of education levels and prerequisites to join a debate. If you can't enter ... if you don't know how to measure millimetres of bores or any, those intricate issues of engineering, where you've got very little chance of participating in the wider debate, as an equal Australian.

But, anyway, these arguments ... it's where I am ... it's based on, at least I lived in Tennant Creek later, after Willowra, three and a half years in a bilingual school. I became an adult educator. This gave me access to another 30, 40 indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Teacher training, basic literacy and numeracy work, certificate ones, twos, and three in ESL work. It was very basic. But, again, the same issues came up of literacy levels, numeracy levels, mass measurement, heights, weights, volumes. These things were almost intractable to get across to adult students who all wish to better themselves, educationally. It wasn't through, sometimes, lack of desire, but, in the classroom, I don't know if it's a question of time, or money or whether it's just more research needs to be done into the whole process of psychological processes of how, what's involved in really educating Australians, all Australians. There has been progress and bilingual schools do defend their cultures and you could argue that's a great thing, it builds up. But again, there's very little equal outcome such as year 10 qualifications and definitely not year 12. These mining bodies and companies say that they will engage in debate and explanations, but this is where it's going to become almost impossible to really do properly or fairly.

There will be land councils involved and they do great work, they can bring interpreters, yes? Kriol's speak in that region, around the Katherine Region. And actually Kriol language is growing bigger and bigger as the years go by. Almost equal to English as a common tongue throughout the north of Australia. But the Elliott people, Warumungu people, they will have their Jingili languages and Mudpurra languages. But even then it's still a big gap in explaining technical terms I think, and I'd really exhort companies to be involved in that, but the expertise, I don't know where it's coming from. And if they go ahead with the fracking in the Beetaloo Sub-Basin there's going to be a lot of misunderstandings, misinformation. And I don't think for the, speaking on behalf of the indigenous people and communities, the twelve or fifteen or twenty effected, I don't think it's such a good idea at this time to go ahead with the fracking industry for some of those point, particularly the educational point that I'm trying to raise here and get across to you, to the panel members.

But I'm open for any questioning now. Thank you.

Sean Ryan:

Thank you. Are there any questions at all?



Hon. Justice Pepper: Yes, Doctor Ritchie.

Dr. David Ritchie: Yea, just one. You're basic point I take is that, given all that cultural and the difficulties of translating information into a form that is really understood, that there'd be real difficulty in getting informed consent to proposals if that was the question being called.

Sean Ryan: Yes. Well, that's right. And the educational deficiency leads to dysfunctionality. I think every problem stems really from the lack of a good solid basic Australian education, such as housing, health, poverty. All those things I think stem from a good education and the dignity to be able to stand up and speak for yourself as a citizen of this country. And without that you're not competing on an equal footing. And crime rates against property, crime rates against the person in Katherine, I noticed from the reports, from the Coffey reports, have gone up in the last few years. Borroloola people are still poor. Basically 460 a week is the median income of Borroloola people.

There's been extractive mining in Tennant Creek for 80 years. But if you live ... I lived in Tennant Creek for two and a half years, and you just see the dysfunctionality. There is issues around alcohol, but again I have to say that they stem from this fundamental premise of mine, the lack of education in Tennant Creek at times is just, well it's a different town. Yea. I'm sure you've been there or you will be going there and you'll see the difficulties. Although you could claim, oh well what's mining been doing for the people there in 80 years. Jabiru has some difficulties that the people I see around Jabiru are told that Gunbalanya, the mine there. The Rio Tinto mine now, I think. The spinoffs don't seem to be so great for the people. The poverty, the dysfunctionality is still there. McArthur River, there's ongoing issues there with some pollution problems. The diverting of the McArthur River itself, which must have been a horrendous thing for some of the traditional owners at the time, for this to happen to their land for the sake of the mine to go ahead for another ten years.

And out at Nhulunbuy, Bauxite, they initially didn't want to go ahead with that. They put up the first petition as you know, the bark petition, back in the 70s, late 60s. The Ornapinka family, and all that. But they still went ahead and you still see public drunkenness and things that you shouldn't see in normal life amongst our indigenous brothers and sisters, yeah.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Any further questions?

Thank you very much Mr. Ryan for coming and presenting Today.

Sean Ryan: Thank you.