

CUTS CAN LEAD TO BRUISES AND FAR WORSE FOR WOMEN

Indigenous communities will continue to speak out, hoping for an attentive ear

LINDA BURNEY

On Anzac Day last year, an 18-year-old Aboriginal woman was murdered by her partner in a small town in far western NSW. The story rated a brief mention in the national and local papers.

Lives forever ruined and a community further traumatised.

At that time the local "safe house" was uncontactable. A man's voice on an answering machine directed women to a disconnected phone number.

The blame for that murder lies firmly with the person who committed the crime but the failure of the system is the result of government funding cuts.

Such cuts do have real-world impacts.

I had spoken out at the time; it

was and continues to be my belief that family violence in western NSW and more broadly across the country is a national crisis, pronounced particularly in the Aboriginal community.

I was not breaking new ground. Senator Pat Dodson, for example, singled out for frankly baseless criticism in this paper recently, has spent an entire life acting to close the social justice deficit on this and in other areas.

The reaction of the media and the government has been a shrugging of shoulders.

The truth is Aboriginal women, men and leaders have been speaking out in their communities on this issue for a long time.

It seems to me that some people

simply aren't listening. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not just aware that communities are being ravaged by domestic violence, we go to the funerals.

We are angry, bewildered and sad.

The suggestion that our community, our mothers, fathers,

grandmothers, uncles and aunts are silent is simply wrong.

There is no doubt pressure from some not to speak about it — which is why it is all the more damaging to ignore the voices that have called out and continue to call out in the face of that pressure.

It is sheer duplicity to claim in one breath that communities and leaders are silent and in another to endorse half a billion dollars' worth of cuts to Indigenous Affairs programs.

These same people were silent when \$3.6 million was cut from the Family Violence Prevention Legal Service; silent when the state Liberal government closed

scores of specialist indigenous violence services; and silent when federal funding was denied to local programs that are working.

I welcome the decision of Warren Mundine to talk about the issue. The Turnbull government's chief adviser on indigenous affairs will be a powerful ally in this fight.

The conversation cannot be about victim blaming. It should be focused firmly on how to help women escaping violence now. It should be about how best to structure our policy responses.

The violent history of colonisation, policies of forced removal and the breakdown of kinship structures have long-lasting legacies. It must engage those in communities already battling the

issue.

After decades of work in this area, I can tell you what their response will be.

The only solutions that will work are those that come from inside communities, not those that are imposed upon them.

We have to break the cycles of poverty, drug addiction, educational disadvantage and the

economic malaise that afflicts so many indigenous communities.

We have to provide access to the legal services victims need and we have to give them access to the support networks that already exist in their communities.

Mundine isn't just coming to the table late, he's arriving after he and the government he advises have already told us they won't be splitting the bill.

It wasn't Aboriginal women who cut legal services. It wasn't Aboriginal politicians who scrapped the Brighter Futures program. It wasn't feminists who closed domestic violence refuges for Aboriginal women and children in NSW.

It was Liberal state and federal governments.

Policy failures rest with government, not communities that have been crying out for decades offering solutions, only to be ignored.

I sit in the 45th parliament with the biggest group of indigenous members ever elected, all with long records of speaking out on domestic violence.

Bill Shorten, our leader, has made his commitment to indigenous affairs clear to us.

We'll be pushing for action every chance we get, pushing for savage cuts to be reversed.

There is no question that we will continue to speak out; the question is whether Malcolm Turnbull and his chief adviser will listen.

Linda Burney is opposition human services spokeswoman.

Colonisation, forced removal and the breakdown of kinship have long-lasting legacies