

Transcript ABC Stateline

Former Governor John Sanderson talks about his travels through the Kimberley.

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REBECCA CARMODY (PRESENTER): Six months ago the state government appointed the former governor, Lieutenant General John Sanderson to the newly created position of Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs. During that time, he's travelled extensively throughout the Kimberley and the Pilbara with a brief and a dogged determination to identify ways for aboriginal people to share in the state's development and wealth. It's a lofty goal which many before him have sought to achieve, never with much success. I spoke with General Sanderson about some of the challenges ahead. General Sanderson welcome to Stateline.

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON (INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS ADVISER): Thankyou. It's good to see you again Rebecca.

REBECCA CARMODY: In the past six months you have visited dozens of remote aboriginal communities throughout WA. What are your observations?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Well first of all let me say that it's not all bad news. There's a lot of communities out there that are having serious problems with family violence and dysfunction, lack of education opportunity, those sorts of things but there are also a lot of communities out there that are actually taking control of their own destiny, they are struggling to do the right thing.

REBECCA CARMODY: But just how bad is the bad news?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: The bad news is pretty bad and the bad news is that a whole range of young children who live in what you would have to classify as violent circumstances, that have no sense of having a future, who are not equipped to enter the education system by virtue of the environment in which they have been brought up, either health problems or a lack of constructive behaviour towards them, a lack of love and affection. You know in many senses this is not really a characteristic of aboriginal communities it is a characteristic of dysfunction, it's a characteristic of dysfunctional communities.

REBECCA CARMODY: But you have described the conditions as worse than those in third world countries.

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Sure.

REBECCA CARMODY: What is it that makes you arrive at that conclusion?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Well one of the things that makes me arrive at that

conclusion is the extent of the alienation of young people in Western Australia. You know I think of figures of, you know, like ninety percent of the prison population north of the Tropic of Capricorn being aboriginal, I mean that is alienation on a grand scale and if forty two percent of the prison population of Western Australia comes from three percent of the population that is alienation on a grand scale.

REBECCA CARMODY: What can you do to make a difference then in this new role?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Well I am in the business of advising the government and of course the government doesn't have to take my advice.

REBECCA CARMODY: Do you believe though that you can make a difference?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Well I do and I believe that I can. I mean I can identify for the government some serious shifts in the way in which we do business in this state which would make a significant difference to the way in which we embrace aboriginal people.

REBECCA CARMODY: But successive governments have failed in this regard, aboriginal leaders themselves have failed in this regard so what has got to change?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: The only way we can solve this problem is if aboriginal people solve it themselves and the fact of the matter is that they need to be empowered to solve it. I mean we in the past we've actually, if I could put it this way, inflicted solutions on them these have been white solutions to aboriginal problems. Aboriginal people have to be embraced in the partnership, they have an input into it and they have to have a sense of being in control of their own destiny. Now a significant part of that I believe is actually an understanding on the part of the non indigenous community of how important aboriginal people and aboriginal cultures are to the future of this country.

REBECCA CARMODY: You have spoken about the state governments and the federal governments deserting the regions but surely governments can't be expected to have a presence everywhere especially in a state as vast as WA.

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Well you see there is one of the problems isn't it, I mean basically we have gone through this process of economic rationalisation and we do things on a very efficient basis so we concentrate things. You know information technology has led us to believe that we can actually run things from Canberra and Perth but people out there where people live don't respond to this you have to share the environment with them to understand and be part of that.

REBECCA CARMODY: You've said that you were recently introduced to the rock art on the Burrup Peninsula does that rock art need protecting?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Absolutely. I mean this is an amazing collection of art, we are talking about tens of thousands of pieces of art, twenty thousand years old carved in granite. I mean most Australians would watch the television shows and think that it was a few primitive scratchings on rock. We are talking about an ice age culture, we are talking about aboriginal temples in the rock.

REBECCA CARMODY: Does it need protecting through heritage listing?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Absolutely.

REBECCA CARMODY: So what's your message to the Federal government which is still making a decision?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: I think the idea is that they have to appreciate exactly what we have got there, I don't think there is any thing like it in the rest of the world. I mean I'm not just some sort of extreme environmentalist talking about this. Go in and have a look at it, it is staggering in its significance.

REBECCA CARMODY: And if that means that Woodside can't go ahead with Pluto in that location?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: We have spoken to Woodside about this. I think they are very conscious of this. I mean they are trying to continue what they are doing there with minimum effect on the art there, they know how precious it is as much as any of us do and I would not like to see any more disruption to that.

REBECCA CARMODY: So they should take their project elsewhere?

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Let me say, you know one of the great problems is that this country is now almost totally dependent on the commodities extraction in the North West and the North of this state. You know thirty five percent of Australia's export income coming out of Western Australia, we've got ourselves into a syndrome nationally where it is very difficult to resist these things but we've got to recognise something that's lasted twenty thousand years. We would hope that it would last a lot longer and that we would recognise it as a totality rather than just as individual pieces.

REBECCA CARMODY: General Sanderson thank you for joining me.

LT GEN JOHN SANDERSON: Thank you Rebecca, it's a pleasure.