

Labor polities go bush to meet families touched by suicide

EXCLUSIVEBy **ROSIE LEWIS**, REPORTER12:00AM JULY 8, 2019 •  23 COMMENTS

Armed with swags and cooking equipment, Linda Burney and four Labor colleagues will traverse remote indigenous communities in a couple of four-wheel-drives to hear from families of young people who have taken their own lives.

Labor's spokeswoman on indigenous Australians will be joined by fellow lower-house MP Warren Snowdon and senators Malarndirri McCarthy, Patrick Dodson and Murray Watt as they drive thousands of kilometres to communities in Western Australia and Central Australia for a listening tour. According to a rough itinerary of the 12- or 13-day trip next month, the West Australian leg will include stops at Nullagine, Newman, Meekatharra, Wiluna, Leonora and Kalgoorlie, while in Central Australia there will be visits to Laverton, Warburton, Ngaanyatjarra, Kaltukatjara, Yulara and Alice Springs.

"These communities are really, really remote and incredibly disadvantaged. The type of disadvantage where people are living in car bodies," Ms Burney said.

"They don't often see people and don't necessarily have the input they probably should."

Youth suicide, family violence and incarceration rates are key issues Ms Burney wants to discuss, but nothing will be off the agenda.

Constitutional recognition, remote housing, employment, electoral enrolment, cashless welfare cards and health are also areas on which the politicians will focus.

At least 78 indigenous people have taken their own lives so far this year, 20 of them children, - according to figures obtained by *The Australian*.

Mr Snowdon, the member for the Northern Territory seat of Lingiari who assists Ms Burney in indigenous affairs, said the group would stay in commercial accommodation in some locations but otherwise would camp.

“We may have a trailer which I’ll bring, which will have cooking stuff in it. We’ll have our swags and if we need to use them we use them. We’re used to that sort of stuff out in the bush,” he said.

Senator Dodson, who represents Western Australian and is Labor’s assistant constitutional recognition and reconciliation spokesman, added: “You can never have trouble with a swag and tuckerbox, and water becomes clearly a prime commodity. Unless you know where it is, you die in the desert.”

The five politicians will debrief at the end of each day and use the experiences of Australians in remote communities to expand their indigenous affairs platform. “It’s a matter of ensuring that what informs us is a perspective from remote, regional and urban first peoples,” Ms Burney said. “It’s also really important that in the constitutional area you are hearing from people who are not necessarily always part of the national conversation or would not be even aware in some cases of what that national conversation is.”

If the trip proves successful, Ms Burney may use the model to visit the Torres Strait and north Queensland, as well as indigenous communities along the east coast.

Mr Snowdon said Ms Burney and Senator Watt, who live in Sydney and Brisbane, would be exposed to life-changing night skies. “They will see a very different view of this country, the world and the universe, in fact, because there’s nothing like it,” he said.

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