

## National Reconciliation Week

### SPEECH

Lindsay Dean WARG member

Today's meeting is held on the sacred ground, of the Whadjuk people and as such I would start my speech by acknowledging the Whadjuk peoples traditional and ongoing connection to this country and I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the Whadjuk representatives present today and I pay my respects to their elders past, present.

The Whadjuk custodianship of Wadjemup dates back tens of thousands of years from an ancient stone tool found on the island dating 25,000 years, examined and dated by experts at the Australian National University show this place as an important meeting place for Whadjuk people. Wadjemup is extremely sacred to the Whadjuk people as its the place where the spirits of their deceased travel on their journey to the Dreaming. Today on Wadjemup there are 17 sites listed under the Aboriginal Heritage Act.

I pay respect to the 4000 aboriginal warriors who arrived in chains aboard sailing vessel from ports as far south as Esperance and to Wyndham in the north, I and many other Aboriginal people visiting Wadjemup feel their presence. I also acknowledge the numbers of Aboriginal prisoners who were shot escaping or who perished on their journeys on foot and in heavy chains to the ports to embark on the journey to Wadjemup. 370 plus are buried in unmarked graves below where we stand today.

I wish to acknowledge my fellow speakers:

Ms Carol Innes the Co-chair of Reconciliation Western Australia; and

the Honorable Paul Papalia CSC, Member for Warnbro MLA and Minister for Tourism, Racing and Gaming; Small Business; Defence Issues; Citizenship and Multicultural interests

Michelle Reynolds CEO and members of the Rottnest Island Authority

Fellow members of the Wadjemup Aboriginal reference group

Members of the RIDG and other dignitaries present at today's opening of National Reconciliation week in Western Australia.

I applied to become a member of the Wadjemup Aboriginal Reference Group because of the need for the State to recognise the struggle for recognition of these prisoners and the impact the prison had on the Aboriginals nations of Western Australia. The unique and significant history of the island and its potential to become one of the most important focal points for reconciliation and healing.

To recognise this traumatic history and its enduring legacy throughout WA will take a huge step in the reconciliation process that continues to foster distrust and disharmony within the Aboriginal community.

Within a decade of the arrival of British colonists to Western Australia in 1829, Wadjemup was first used as a prison for Aboriginal men and boys. The first ten Aboriginal prisoners arrived on Rottnest in August 1838 and the Island was formally pronounced by the Colonial Secretary in June 1839 as a penal establishment for Aboriginal people.

For almost a century the Island served as a prison for Aboriginal people during which approximately 4,000 Aboriginal men and boys were imprisoned. Many of the Aboriginal men and boys were sentenced to hard labour for crimes which they did not understand, these sentences under a colonial legal system that did not recognise Aboriginal traditional lore, kinship systems or their rights as a sovereign people.

Between 1838 and 1931, it is reported that 369 Aboriginal prisoners died. While most deaths were caused by disease, it is reported that five prisoners were hanged. During their time here these prisoners were subjected to mistreatment, overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and many succumbed and died from diseases. An Aboriginal cemetery is located within the Thomson Bay Settlement.

Wadjemup as an Aboriginal penal centre became a central platform to assist the disbursement, disengagement, and dispossession of Aboriginal people throughout Western Australia. There are linkages between the movement and spread of the colonists throughout Western Australia to the arrivals of Aboriginal prisoners on the island. The prison combined with continual policies and practices of the invasion set about the dislocation of Aboriginal inhabitants from their traditional lands to missions and prisons to free these lands for use by colonists. Such practices to dispossess Aboriginal land holders in Western Australia were recognised by the British Colonial Secretary who refused to hand over control of Aboriginal affairs because of the colony's poor reputation in its treatment of Aborigines.

Western Australian Aborigines entered the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 as aliens in their own land. Their many contributions to the white exploration and exploitation of the hinterland were not acknowledged or rewarded. The measures taken by the Western Australian Government over the next thirty years, flowing from the 1905 Aborigines Act, gave unprecedented power over Aboriginal people to the Chief Protector. The freedom for Aboriginal people to work and live where they wished was curtailed, The forced separation of many children from their Aboriginal families, and the systematic exclusion of Aborigines from white society through segregation had drastic consequences for Aboriginal people. It was little comfort to Aboriginal people that most Western Australians continue to believe the government and Christian missions carried out these measures against Aborigines for their own good.

The removal of tribal elders, lore men and warriors from their lands of birth crippled indigenous resistance to colonialists. The loss of leadership resulted in the breaking down of traditional family and clan structures to facilitate non-Aboriginal colonisation. These losses have disrupted the cultural knowledge of many communities in the Aboriginal nations, Aboriginal people are afflicted by the loss

of culture but we are committed to focussing on conserving what we have left, reviving our languages, traditional practices and beliefs for our future generations

All my early childhood memories are of watching my family and extended families work on farms and clearing land, as I got older I started work with them. To me reconciliation is about acceptance, recognition and righting wrongs, I would hope the State recognise the Aboriginal people who worked and played an important role in the State economic development and growth. Aboriginal people helped to build this economy with hard labour. The people of Western Australia need to be taught our history in schools, the truth of Wadjemup's past needs to be made available or accessible to tourists or visitors in a genuine or meaningful way. The Aboriginal burial ground remains unrecognised for more than 100 years since the QUOD ceased operating in 1903.

Today marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a Federal referendum held on the 27 May 1967. The outcome was the removal of two references in the Australian Constitution, which discriminated against Aboriginal people, should be removed. I wish to share the following:

The sections of the Australian Constitution under scrutiny were:

*51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:-  
...(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.*

*127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.*

The removal of the words '*... other than the aboriginal people in any State...*' in section 51(xxvi) and the whole of section 127 were considered by many to be representative of the prevailing movement for political change within Indigenous affairs. As a result of the political climate, this referendum saw the highest YES vote ever recorded in a Federal referendum, with 90.77 per cent voting for change.

The 1967 referendum did not give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the right to vote. This right for Aboriginal people to vote had been legislated for Commonwealth elections in 1962, with the last State to provide Indigenous voting enfranchisement being Queensland in 1965.

As a result of the referendum the Commonwealth could make laws for Aboriginal people and we were finally counted in the Australian census. I believe there is still a way to go for reconciliation and that if the goodwill shown by politicians in 1967 could be replicated in terms of the rejection of proposed amendments to Native Title, the recognition of past injustices and to work with Indigenous people on programs to Closing the Gap measures we can move forward.

Finally, I thank you for this opportunity to speak today