



# Act of betrayal

by STEVE GRANT

ABORIGINAL groups, anthropologists, archaeologists and the QC who launched Mabo have savaged the Barnett government over proposed changes to the Aboriginal Heritage Act.

About 120 people staged a protest on the steps of Parliament House on Tuesday, saying the government is silencing Aborigines while making it too easy for miners and developers to get projects approved.

"They are destroying the heritage act," Nyungar elder Richard Wilkes told the crowd, which included Labor indigenous affairs shadow Ben Wyatt.

"We are strangers on our own land."

He also took a swipe at the Department of Indigenous Affairs, saying it had been manipulated by the government to the point it was no longer a voice for Aboriginal people.

"Where is the department?" he thundered. "It's in 'silver city' in East Perth in one of the buildings with the education department and the health department and it's almost defunct; it's dormant and we have no voice."

## Unlawful

One of the most contentious changes is the scrapping of a statutory committee which assesses Aboriginal sites.

The power to determine which sites are significant is to be handed instead to a

single bureaucrat—the CEO of the indigenous affairs department.

A former member of the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee who resigned out of frustration

says that's a concern, particularly because current CEO Cliff Weeks doesn't have a heritage background.

Worse, says anthropologist Mike Robinson, when Mr Weeks (a Yamatji man) is on leave, he's often replaced by staff with mining backgrounds.

"In recent years the character of the committee and the department has changed. DIA staff don't have a strong background in Aboriginal heritage," Dr Robinson told the *Voice*.

He said he resigned because as the committee became increasingly focused on smoothing the way for miners and developers, his expert advice was ignored.

But that presents a problem for the Barnett

government. The act requires a qualified anthropologist approved by the state's universities to be on the board. Dr Robinson's position hasn't been filled in almost three years.

That means hundreds of decisions made by the current committee are possibly unlawful. The *Voice* understands indigenous affairs minister Peter Collier has advice the decisions are safe, but Dr Robinson says that's been challenged by a number of people.

Another contentious issue is that there is no right to appeal for Aborigines if a site is knocked back as

significant, yet miners can if their projects are put at risk.

Mr Wyatt says while the right of review didn't

exist in the current act, he's stunned it wasn't corrected in the proposed changes.

Mr Wyatt said Labor would oppose the changes, joining Greens MLC Robin Chappell in promising to put the government through a torturous weeks-long debate to try and force changes.

"There is less role for Aboriginal people in this act than the one drafted in 1972," Mr Wyatt said.

"Aboriginal people know the heritage and have the right to be a part of the process."

Notre Dame University professor Greg McIntyre QC (right), who gained prominence when asked by Eddie Mabo to launch his



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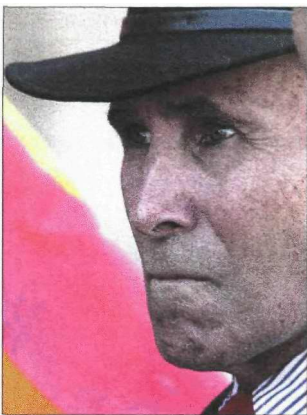
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• Herbert Bropho told protesters that changes to the state's Aboriginal heritage act would rob them of their voice.  
*Photo by Steve Grant*



historic land rights claim,  
said he'd been through the  
changes and said the only  
thing they'd achieve was to  
make it easier for "miners  
and developers to get their  
sites."