



WA's Heritage Act changes herald a new era of racism, warn Elders

By National Indigenous Times
reporter Gerry Georgatos



Hundreds of people gathered at the steps of Western Australia's Parliament in Perth last week to protest the looming changes to the Aboriginal Heritage Act with respected Elder, Richard Wilkes warning the changes the Western Australian State Government intends to push through despite overwhelming opposition heralded the emergence of "dark times" for First Nations People.

Land Councils and Elders have criticised the changes with claims the Heritage Act would be compromised and allow "open slather" for miners and developers. Under the proposed changes Land Councils, Native Title bodies and Elders will have no right of appeal.

The crowd heard from a number of speakers including one of the Mabo lawyers, barrister Greg McIntyre.

"The purpose of the proposals is to streamline the approval process. It has certainly done that," Mr McIntyre told the protesters

"Power will be removed from the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee, from providing their expertise in the making of decisions about whether sites are Aboriginal heritage sites or whether they need to evaluate them further and whether they need to protect them.

"That power will be essentially transferred to the Chief Executive Officer, the present officer. It leaves one person vested with all power and that person can grant permits to give these sites significance or to remove sites from the register."

One the Nyungah People's most senior Elders, Richard Wilkes said the proposed changes to the Heritage Act was further proof First Peoples once again live in difficult times.

"These are dark times we live in," Mr Wilkes said. "Our people, the First Peoples of this continent, are being hit from all quarters here in Western Australia and also across Australia.

"We have governments in power with no

regard for who we are and what we are about, no regard for our histories and our cultures.

"Across the nation, this Federal Government is deceiving our people and using every trick to once and for all sell out our lands and sovereignty. It is the same here with this State Government.

"The true leaders of our people are not those who are said to advise government or who stand alongside this government. Our true leaders are not in the sights of the Federal Government nor in the sights of the State Government.

"Our true leaders would stand up against the Native Title offer from the State Government that seeks to cheat our people and sell out our Country from under our feet. We must say no to this Native Title trickery and we must rise to the occasion united against what they are

trying to do here with the Aboriginal Heritage Act," Mr Wilkes said.

Respected Noongar Elder, Emeritus Professor Sylvia Hallam has broken ranks with the State Government in arguing against the Heritage Act proposals.

"The Aboriginal Heritage Act is of concern not just to Aboriginal Peoples but to all Australians, to the world," Professor Hallam said.

"It is a world issue because Australian history is Aboriginal history foremost and Aboriginal history is important to the world.

"Our species is Homo Sapiens and as a species we got to Australia before we got to Europe," Professor Hallam said.

It is believed Homo Sapiens began living on this continent some 100,000 plus years ago, firstly in Western Australia. The Dampier Archipelago is a historical and geological archive of human settlement of more than 100,000 years. It has millions of petroglyphs rock art and other history. It is the oldest large collection of rock art in the world. Some if it has already been damaged by the expanding mining industry.

"We can find out more about us as a species, from our peoples, from us as the longest uninterrupted cultures," Professor Hallam said.



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State Greens parliamentarian Robin Chapple said he would vote against the proposals to change the Heritage Act but despite this he

was resigned the proposal would pass into law because the government has a majority in the Legislative Assembly.

“When parliament passed the Aboriginal Heritage Act in this very building behind us in 1972, everyone was united in bringing together the Aboriginal Heritage Act as it had been identified that the biggest point of protection was to protect against the excesses of the mining industry and their capacity to destroy Aboriginal heritage,” Mr Chapple said.

“Since that time we have seen the watering down of the Heritage Act and this is a disgrace and now we will see it further watered down which will put at risk heritage, the dreaming sites and many other places.”

Yamatji Labor parliamentarian, Ben Wyatt said the proposals to change the Heritage Act were “unacceptable”.

“The Government made the point they wanted changes so as to increase the Aboriginal voice and to include Aboriginal voice in the process but all that will occur with these changes is they will exclude the Aboriginal voice and put the power in the hands of one person,” Mr Wyatt said.

“It is unacceptable for Aboriginal people to not be able to appeal any decision. It is unacceptable to not be included in the process. I find it extraordinary an Act drafted in 1972 has more protections than something drafted in 2014.”

Nyungah Land and Culture worker, Iva Hayward-Jackson summed it all up.

“These draconian amendments are trying to crack our sacred connections,” he said. “Trying to crack our sacred connection to our sacred heritage, to our sacred lands, to our sacred waterways.”

One hundred and fifty-one submissions were received by the State Government on the proposed changes and 144 were against the proposals.

“We will be disenfranchised of any say once all is set. The proposals discriminate against Aboriginal peoples. They favour the State Government’s position,” Kimberley Land Council Chief Executive Officer, Nolan Hunter said.

The Swan Nyungah Valley Community’s Elder Bella Bropho said the changes would see a return to the days of the Chief Protector of the Native Welfare with one person deciding

on the fate of all Aboriginal people without asking what they want.



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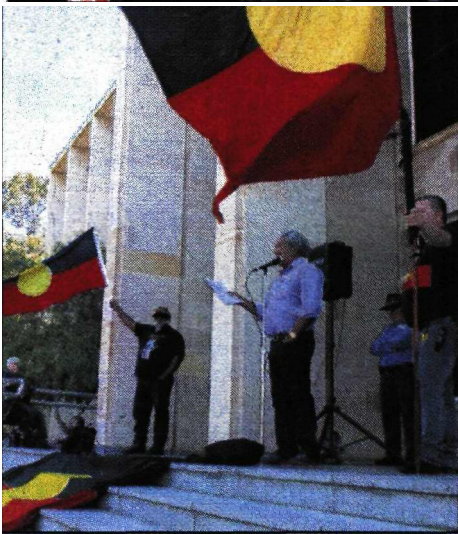
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Hundreds gathered including a dozen politicians, including Simone McGurk, Dave Kelly, Ben Wyatt and Robin Chapple pictured. Inset: "These are dark times we live in," Elder Richard Wilkes, flagged by Herbert Bropho and Iva Hayward-Jackson. Images: Gerry Georgatos