



Offer provides unique chance to settle historic issues

■ Ben Wyatt



The recent offer from the WA Government to settle native title with the Noongar people is indeed historic.

As I have written previously, in WA it is the Noongar people of the South West who bore the brunt of colonisation and the fact that the Noongar people have survived is worthy of great celebration. WA now has a big opportunity to settle an issue that has bedevilled Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships since 1829.

The Government's offer is comprehensive and includes, as expected, offers of land and funding.

Importantly, the offer seeks to embrace the recognition and acknowledgment of the Noongar people in our State. For many Noongar people this will be the most important aspect of the offer.

For generations, the Noongar people were subject to Government control, humiliation and force.

For generations the Noongar people, many dislocated from their traditional lands, have found themselves official strangers in a land they have owned for many thousands of years.

For generations, the proud Noongar history was held in disdain. If accepted, legislation will be presented to State

Parliament recognising Noongar people as the traditional owners of the South West.

Ultimately, it will be this recognition that will go the furthest in resolving the devastating impact of the now defunct concept of "terra nullius".

The echoes of Capt. Stirling are heard loudest in our Noongar community and it is a bitter sound.

Parliamentary recognition of the traditional ownership of the South West will give an official basis to the concept of being "welcomed to country" at events.

The responsibility for considering the offer falls to the current generation of Noongar people, very aware of their ancestral histories and very aware of the decision they make for future generations.

I do not envy them.

But the possibility of resolving the Noongar native title claims fills me with excitement at the opportunity we have as a State to move ourselves into a much deeper understanding and acceptance of our wonderful Aboriginal heritage.

There is so much to gain for every West Australian.

The prospect of an Aboriginal

cultural centre on the banks of the Derbarl Yerrigan (Swan River), the passage of the Bill recognising Noongar people coinciding with WA Day in a special parliamentary sitting, entrenched Aboriginal representation in local government — all of these are grand possibilities that will entrench our Aboriginal history from which are State is based.

Native title now sits comfortably within the broad spectrum of Australian life that highlights that we accept the cultural uniqueness of Aboriginal Australia.

It is time we set ourselves a target to resolve outstanding native title claims to ensure that native title can continue to be used in a productive way, outside of the destructive court process.

The 30th anniversary of the Mabo decision, in 2022, would stand as an ideal aspiration to resolve all native title claims in WA.

This should be our ambition.

Ultimately it is up to the Noongar people to decide the fate of the WA Government's offer.

Every single one of us has a stake in the outcome. It is the responsibility we have inherited from our past and one we must take up for our future.

Ben Wyatt is the WA shadow treasurer and a descendant of the Yamatji people



Culture: The river, Derbarl Yerrigan, is integral to Noongar traditions.