

Aboriginal Corporation demands public apology from Minister Wyatt

Petulant – *“someone who is easily annoyed and complaining in a rude way like a child”* (Cambridge English Dictionary)

In responding to questions from The West Australian last week, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ben Wyatt, described the Chairman of a Pilbara Aboriginal Corporation as petulant and labelled comments made by him as offensive. The Chairman of the Aboriginal Corporation had called out the State Government for making a premature, ill-informed and irresponsible decision approving the destruction of 50 sites in a sacred area.

For a State Government Minister to characterise an Aboriginal leader as petulant when he and the Corporation he represents have acted in a responsible and reasonable manner is both surprising and unfortunate.

The “petulant” comment perpetuates a negative stereotype that Aboriginal people are childish, immature and emotional and aren’t able to play by the rules. The remark is insulting and degrading and is seen by some of our Aboriginal members as racist. For the remark to be made by an Aboriginal Affairs Minister is bad enough. For the remark to be made by a Minister who is himself Aboriginal, is unforgivable. One does wonder whose interests he actually representing.

What would prompt the Minister to make such a remark? Was it just because the Pilbara Aboriginal leader had labeled a government decision as premature, ill-informed and irresponsible? Was the Minister upset about the comment that his Department had essentially outsourced their responsibility to the mining company involved? Is the Minister feeling the pressure? Is he starting to realize that his Department has monumentally messed up?

The Minister goes on to try to discredit the number of sites involved and portrays the issue as a common dispute

involving heritage interests and mining companies and that one side always loses out. This is a clear attempt to diminish and deflect the issue. It would seem that the Minister has already taken sides in this matter.

The fact is that 50 sites were identified in this area through the heritage survey work that had been undertaken over the past ten years. There were 50 sites in the documentation that was placed before the Minister’s own Committee. Whether the ACMC recognise all 50 of these places as sites for the purposes of the State heritage legislation process is totally irrelevant. They are still important cultural sites to the Eastern Guruma people.

It is also a fact that, from the outset, the Aboriginal Corporation has been clear that it is not against the mining activity. The Corporation have simply asked that the mining company’s current expansion have consideration for cultural heritage places. This involves the realignment of 2% of the proposed railway. There need not be a winning and losing party here.

The Minister is demonstrating a surprising lack of knowledge when it comes to Aboriginal heritage (unless he was deliberately trying to discredit the claims made by the Eastern Guruma people).

Let’s turn to the facts of this matter.

In May 2017, the mining company applied to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs for consent to destroy 50 Eastern Guruma heritage sites, an area used by Aboriginal people for culture activities and ceremonies for more than 23,000 years.

In July 2017, the Minister’s advisory body, the Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee (ACMC), met to consider the application. On the same day, the ACMC considered an application by the Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC), the Corporation who represents the Eastern Guruma people, for consent to undertake site works to determine the importance and significance of the area, including the age of the sites.

A recommendation to approve destruction to the sites was granted, in addition to consent for further work to determine their significance, at the one meeting. The Minister granted consent to destroy the sites in November 2017, despite not having the report that will detail the importance and significance of the area.

This means that the consent was issued while the WGAC permit was still in force and before the report on the importance and significance of the sites was finalised.

The subsequent report, informed by independent archaeologists and radiocarbon testing, show that 23,000 years of Aboriginal heritage and culture were excluded by the State Government in its decision-making process.

That is what WGAC has labelled a premature, ill-informed and irresponsible decision.

As a result of the decision made by Minister Wyatt, WGAC has been forced to seek an emergency declaration from the Commonwealth Government to protect this area. We are also about to make an application to the Supreme Court of Western Australia for a judicial review of the decision made by the Minister.

WGAC has engaged fully and properly with the process that exists under the Aboriginal Heritage Act. Through letters and meetings, WGAC has tried to ensure that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Minister were kept fully informed on the matter.

WGAC has engaged with the system and the system has patently failed.

We would like the Minister to explain to us why our efforts to follow proper process and protect our heritage are labelled as “petulant and offensive”. The Minister’s comments are way out of line. A public apology to the Chairman of WGAC is warranted.

**Board Members
Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation**