

SWAN VALLEY NYUNGAH COMMUNITY

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [5.05 pm]: It has been a very interesting week for a number of different reasons and I am sure we all have our own opinions about some of the happenings this week. I want to draw attention to two particular things that have caused me considerable concern. The first is that I noted with great sadness that the Swan Valley Nyungah Community was finally closed down. The remaining buildings were demolished. As many honourable members would know, there have been years of debate about the future of that site. I am very well aware, as most members of this house would be, of the very real grounds for concern that originally led to the Swan Valley Nyungah Community being closed, which was of course done by the Gallop Labor government, and there has been some ongoing debate about the future of that community. That closure was, of course, the subject of a select committee inquiry carried out by members of this place, and as many honourable members will remember, there was a majority report and a minority report, because obviously the government of the day did not carry the numbers on that committee. It is remarkable to revisit that committee's report and see how many of the committee's deliberations were unanimous. The reason I think this is very sad is the fact that we do not seem to be able to move beyond a point at which we are happy to punish all Aboriginal people for the criminality of a few. I think there is very little doubt that there was indeed criminal activity going on in the old Swan Valley Nyungah Community. I re-read the select committee report today just to refresh my memory about those events. It was certainly a very, very tragic period in the history of that area in that community. However, it was a long time ago and we can move on from the sadness of the past; we can move on and make something good come out of something evil. Sadly, it seems that with the demolition of the community this week, we have shown that once again we are not willing or able to do that. A great deal of good should be able to come out of using that land where the Swan Valley Nyungah Community was situated—using that land as the traditional owners wish it to be used. Of course, that is at the heart and the core of the unhappiness about what has taken place this week.

My view, and I am sure it is the view of many on this side of the house and hopefully that of members of the government as well, is that it is always a tragedy when somebody loses their home. We have enough literature being presented to us day after day to show that it is one of the chief contributory factors to the extreme disadvantage that young homeless people, particularly young homeless Aboriginal people, face. The critical moment of the decline in their standard of living and expectations of growing up and playing a productive part as healthy adults in the future comes about when they lose their housing. Young people need homes. I put it to honourable members that it is always a tragedy when homes are demolished. In this case we have heard no talk about alternative housing being made available to the people who lost their houses this week. As I said before, there are lots of good uses for this land. There are cultural uses. Why can we not build a cultural centre, an arts centre or a community centre? There are lots of practical uses for that land and I think that it is a sad indictment of our processes of government when we get to a stage at which we show that we are still punishing all Aboriginal people for the crimes of a few.

I refer briefly to the select committee report on the Reserves (Reserve 43131) Bill 2003, because two paragraphs that were endorsed unanimously by every member of the committee show why we should have expected a better outcome this week. Paragraphs 17.68 and 17.69, the two concluding paragraphs of the report, state —

It can be argued that SVNC residents were more fortunate than many fringe-dwellers in our society. They had housing of a significantly better standard than most. The majority of their children had a good record of school attendance, they had other facilities that were better than generally available, they had sound financial management and they had better access to many government services such as transport and medical care. These they have lost. Their children have lost their school attendance record, they no longer have a place to go when they fail in the wider society and as a group they have been scattered. No matter that there were dysfunctional aspects to their community, they remain dysfunctional, but now are separated from a very important element —

Several members interjected.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Members on the other side should just listen; I have very limited time —
of Aboriginal culture—communal living and its associated support structures.

It continues at paragraph 17.69 —

They have also been dispossessed of their land and it is historically obvious that much of the dysfunction in Aboriginal society has occurred through this displacement and the dispatch of Aboriginal people to the margins of our society.

I put to honourable members tonight that we saw one more piece of evidence in that tragic mosaic this week when we saw the remaining elements of the Swan Valley Nyungah Community demolished against the wishes of the people who were still there.

The second incident this week that I draw the attention of honourable members to is the extraordinary scene in the other place this morning when a petition was tabled that used blatantly racist language and cast blatantly racist assertions about people gathering around park areas in East Perth. I am not going to read the contents of the petition because, frankly, I find it absolutely offensive. I am horrified that a member of the Western Australian Parliament would think it was okay to walk into the Parliament of Western Australia and move such a motion, with no explanation and no consultation before that petition was tabled.

I know that this is a very sensitive issue. I know that I am not the only member of Parliament who has been asked to present petitions that either are critical of decisions that I would wish to defend or, more seriously, contradict some of the basic tenets of my belief system. In the case that happened this morning, something quite different was going on. Firstly, I point out that it was a nonconforming petition, so the member who tabled it, the member for Perth, had clearly given some thought to whether it was necessary to table that document. Secondly, the petition was not, I assume, taken up by the member who presented it because it was not in that person's name. Given that a large number of members in the other place have a very great interest in these things—I mention by name the member for Kimberley, Josie Farrer, and the member for Victoria Park, Ben Wyatt, who is also the shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs—some discussion should have been had with them about how this matter of extreme sensitivity, with the racist language used in that petition, should have been handled. Sadly, that did not happen.

The member for Kimberley has been extremely vocal about the issue of homelessness, and she has named it as I believe it has to be named. She has named the homeless rates amongst Aboriginal people as institutionalised discrimination. It is nothing short of that and it is incumbent on every member of Parliament in this state, and indeed in this country, to be sensitive to those issues. If honourable members want to have a say on these things, they ought to talk about providing housing for Aboriginal people. It is a fact that in large areas of our state the majority of homeless people are Aboriginal people. Indeed, the member for Kimberley has been vocal in talking about this and bringing to the attention of metropolitan politicians that many homeless people living in the parks and sleeping on benches around the metropolitan area are in Perth because they have to come to visit members of their families who are either sick or in hospital or receiving some kind of treatment they cannot receive in remote areas. I am very embarrassed to be a member of a Parliament in which that petition was tabled today. It is not acceptable and I ask every honourable member to examine their heart about the appropriate way to deal with this institutionalised racism.

The PRESIDENT: Order! In respect of the last comments, I ask members to have a look at standing order 42. I am not saying that the member breached standing order 42, because a petition tabled anywhere becomes a public document and people are entitled to have an opinion on it, but we have a standing order that prevents us from alluding to any debate that takes place in the other place. That is just for members' information.