

KARRAKATTA CEMETERY — RENEWAL PROCESS

Grievance

MS J.J. SHAW (Swan Hills) [9.24 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Local Government, regarding the cemetery renewal process currently being undertaken by the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board at Karrakatta Cemetery. Karrakatta Cemetery is a unique place to all Western Australians. First opened for burials in 1899, the collective intergenerational history of the people buried there is invaluable. May Holman, the first female Labor woman elected to the WA Parliament, rests in Karrakatta Cemetery, along with prominent Western Australian war heroes, trade unionists, sportspeople, writers, businesspeople and community leaders from all backgrounds and cultures.

Redeveloping the grave sites of prominent Western Australians and local families appears, on the surface, to be a threat to our collective history, and I acknowledge that I am not the only one concerned. On 21 November 2017, the member for Nedlands tabled a petition on this issue, signed by concerned community members, with the following words —

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled.

We, the undersigned, say that the current destruction of memorials at Karrakatta and other Western Australian cemeteries as part of a process the authorities term redevelopment is both unnecessary, shows great disrespect to families whose loved ones are interred therein, and disrupts the association of the people of Western Australia and their history. It is particularly disrespectful of deceased servicemen who have elected to be interred with their loved ones, rather than in the War Cemetery.

Now we ask the Legislative Assembly to move to halt the redevelopment of Western Australian cemeteries, to restrict the further removal and destruction of headstones, markers, plaques and any other type of funerary monuments or memorials at those cemeteries and press the government to take urgent steps to establish new cemeteries to meet the needs for future interments.

Headstone destruction, in particular, is very concerning. I note that in 2013, in the minister's then capacity as shadow Minister for Local Government, he asked during an estimates hearing how many headstones had been destroyed since the commencement of the renewal program at Karrakatta Cemetery; the answer was 3 263. Furthermore, the process of renewal has seen more than 1 000 headstones relocated to other areas in Karrakatta Cemetery. Headstones physically mark a burial site, and by destroying or relocating them, we sever not only that physical association, but also the emotional connection people have with specific burial plots.

Dealing with the deaths of our loved ones takes its toll on even the strongest individuals. We all have a choice in how we wish to be laid to rest after death. Allowing our families and future generations the ability to pay their respects through a physical object or place is very important. I know this only too keenly myself, having this past week set foot on Rottnest Island for the very first time since losing my father there six years ago.

Place is so very important. Where words may sometimes fail us, the ability to physically connect to a place can be a comforting and very beautiful reminder of whom we have loved, who has loved us and what is truly important in this life. I recognise that there is a necessity to ensure that future generations of Western Australians have the same right to be buried at Karrakatta as past generations. Developing new cemeteries in the Perth metropolitan area is also important.

This is a very delicate issue and one that rests not on partisan lines, but on a mutual understanding between us all—that we respect those who have passed on and honour their contribution towards making our great state of Western Australia what it is today. After having a discussion with the Minister for Local Government about this issue, I understand that there is a lot of misinformation in the public domain that needs to be corrected for the record. I look forward to his response.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Minister for Local Government) [9.28 am]: I thank the member for Swan Hills for her grievance. This is a very important issue and I want to take this opportunity to highlight some key facts that are relevant. I concur with the member that the management of our cemeteries is a matter of concern for all Western Australians; there is no doubt about that. I also acknowledge the member's point that, unfortunately, a lot of misinformation has at times been circulated in the community, including on social media, about the cemetery redevelopment process known as "renewal", which has been conducted in Western Australia for some decades.

I first of all want to make clear that there is no government policy that results in disturbance of the remains of any person laid to rest in a metropolitan cemetery, and there never has been. We have a unique situation at Karrakatta Cemetery because space at the cemetery is declining and becoming scarce. The site is more than a century

old and has a total area of 100 hectares. The site is in close proximity to the CBD and has reached capacity. It is important for all Western Australian citizens that we ensure the continued use of Karrakatta as an active cemetery.

The purpose of the cemetery renewal program is to extend the long-term use and sustainability of Karrakatta Cemetery in a sympathetic and sensitive manner. Under the renewal, new graves are located alongside existing graves. Although remains are not disturbed, the surface environment is modified to accommodate new headstones that are compliant with modern construction standards. Renewal is undertaken only in cemetery areas in which most of the 25 or 50-year grants of rights of burial plots have expired. Karrakatta is the only cemetery in the metropolitan area in which the renewal process is being undertaken.

Cemetery renewal was legislated for by the Western Australian Parliament in 1986. People will see from the debate of 16 October 1986 that the issue of cemetery renewal was well debated and comprehensively canvassed by members on both sides of the chamber. The legislation was promulgated in the Cemeteries Act 1986, which essentially received unanimous support.

It is important to note that cemetery renewal is not unique to Western Australia. It occurs in other states, including New South Wales, which allows for redevelopment, and also for the removal of remains, which are rehousing in an ossuary house. We do not do that in this state. Internationally, the Chinese government allows cemeteries to be redeveloped and the remains in those cemeteries to be exhumed. In fact, in July last year, the Chinese government announced that 45 000 Chinese graves and 35 000 Muslim graves would be exhumed to make way for the construction of an air base. In Italy, redevelopment of burial sites is the norm, with headstones removed and destroyed, and the remains either reburied in large collective graves or cremated. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board does not disturb remains during the renewal process, unlike what happens in those jurisdictions that I have mentioned.

We clearly understand the sensitive nature of cemetery renewal. I am advised that the MCB has developed an extensive framework for community consultation and employs a client relations officer to liaise closely with families that are directly affected by the renewal process. At least 12 months prior to work commencing on a burial site, a large sign is erected in the renewal area. Individual signs are erected on individual graves. Notices are placed in *The West Australian*. Letters are sent to the families and any parties that have a registered interest in the specific graves. The MCB seeks at all possible to make contact with family members. If headstones are earmarked for relocation, the families are invited to make a submission outlining the reasons that the headstone should remain in situ. Those submissions are then considered by an independent committee, which assesses the headstones across a wide range of criteria, including, but not limited to, the stonemasonry craft, historical significance of the person buried, and cause of death.

The member for Swan Hills highlighted one of the key concerns, which is the moving of existing headstones to accommodate new graves. That is a very important issue. I am advised that the MCB continues to diligently contact family members about any headstone that is proposed to be moved. However, as members can understand, sometimes it is difficult to find the family connections. Since 1996, and prior to renewal, every headstone has been photographed, with the image and inscription stored permanently within the MCB records, thus ensuring that Western Australia maintains historical information for future generations.

I turn now to significant sites such as war graves. I make it very clear that no official war grave will be affected by the renewal process. The MCB has had a lengthy and positive collaboration with the Office of Australian War Graves on the issue of military graves. We acknowledge the significance of those loved ones who lie in cemeteries like Karrakatta.

It is important to ensure that our cemeteries are as sustainable as possible. The MCB is in constant contact with the Western Australian Planning Commission, because there is no doubt that we need to secure more cemetery sites, particularly in the north-east corridor of Perth. I assure the house that that is being actively pursued. The reality is that as our population grows, we will need to secure more cemetery sites.

I understand that cemetery renewal is a sensitive issue. However, if we were to cease the renewal process, Karrakatta would become a closed cemetery. That would have ramifications for the people who wish to have themselves or their family members buried at Karrakatta, and also for the businesses that rely on Karrakatta. I do not think that is what we want. The renewal program is important. I assure members, as the Minister for Local Government, that I will continue to be sensitive to the concerns raised by the community on this important matter.