

“CHINAMAN” PLACENAMES

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.19 pm]: Last week, I talked about placenames in Western Australia that bore the word “Chinaman” and the history of Western Australia. I seek to continue my remarks today. In the 1870s and 1880s, the public discourse concerning Chinese people was gradually shifting from generally mixed to quite hostile.

The West Australian newspaper published an opinion piece in March 1880 that said —

Unprejudiced people will readily admit that a moderate number of Chinese Coolies would be of great assistance to our community at the present juncture ...

That was in reference to the labour shortage that Western Australia was experiencing at the time.

Another writer said —

... everybody knows that the agitation in Melbourne and Sydney against the Chinese was purely artificial, by most people was considered most discreditable, and was strongly animadverted upon by the respectable portion of the Press.

...

We have tried them by this time and know what they are worth. Steady, industrious, sober, kindly and docile in disposition, it is a positive comfort to an employer to get hold of Chinese servants, and I strongly advise my fellow settlers to take advantage of the arrangements which the Government is making to procure them.

By the mid-1880s, the sentiment was changing and a contributor to the newspaper wrote —

I do not fancy that Chinese labor is much appreciated in this neighbourhood.

An article reported —

The Chinamen here and farther North are commencing to be very troublesome ... It appears that the contract which our sapient Government and Legislature —

Referring to this Legislative Council —

required should be signed ... cannot be enforced ... The Imported Labor Registry Act is utterly powerless to deal with the evil. ... Chinamen are now coming to the colonies in considerable numbers, being brought here by people who little know the troubles before them. ... and with the dogged sullenness characteristic of their race prefer to undergo any amount of imprisonment to returning to their employment.

The discovery of gold in the Kimberley prompted calls to ban Chinese immigration altogether. As reported in *The West Australian* newspaper, again, during the election for a Legislative Council seat in April 1886, a candidate known as John Horgan answered a question at a town hall meeting between him and another candidate. He was asked whether he was in favour of a poll tax on Chinese. Mr Horgan exclaimed that —

... they are the most objectionable class of colonists. They are utterly selfish—they are vampires. ... They suck the blood out of the colony and send it to China. Those people are not desirable colonists. I am decidedly opposed to the introduction of the Chinese and in favour of the imposition of a poleaxe.

A fellow candidate Dr Scott also publicly stated —

... he thought it would be very desirable to place a poll tax upon Chinese, or, at all events, to legislate in some direction to prevent their having the same rights and privileges as the whites have.

In the 1880s, anti-Chinese campaign policies were good campaign policies and had widespread support in the community. The colonial government and the colonial Parliament adhered to that sentiment from the community and enacted a series of legislation that are literally discriminatory. The Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1886 imposed a poll tax of £10 a head on all Chinamen who may hereafter arrive in the colony, whether by land or by sea. The act also prescribed a tonnage limitation of one Chinese passenger for every 50 tonnes of any vessel coming to any port in Western Australia. The Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1889, which replaced the 1886 act, removed the poll tax but increased the tonnage limitation to one Chinese passenger for every 500 tonnes of any vessels coming to WA. As for the goldfields, a number of acts were passed aimed at excluding people of Chinese cultural heritage from engaging in mining activity. The Goldfields Act 1886 stipulated —

NO miner’s right, or any lease, license, or permit on any goldfield shall be issued or granted under this Act ... to any Asiatic or African alien before the expiration of five years from the date of the first proclamation of such goldfield.

The five-year period was renewed a number of times by the government and the Parliament. The Goldfields Act 1895 stated that miners' rights —

... shall be granted to any person (not being an Asiatic or African alien) ...

People of Chinese, Asian or African backgrounds not only could not be involved in mining activities, but also were excluded from engaging in businesses and occupations peripheral to mining. It is undeniable that there was a strong anti-Chinese sentiment in the community in the nineteenth century, which was shared by many members of Parliament. This is the historic context behind many places in Western Australia bearing the word “Chinaman”. As I mentioned during my last member's statement, there are 26 of them.

It is fair to say that as a person of Chinese cultural heritage, I feel extremely fortunate to live in twenty-first century multicultural Australia and not in the late nineteenth century. Life would have been extraordinarily hard then. We have come a very long way as a community and a country. We abolished the White Australia policy, implemented a non-discriminatory migration scheme and enacted the Racial Discrimination Act. We respect equality and fairness and despise racial discrimination or discrimination of any form. We can be justly proud of what we have achieved in the last 150 or so years. At the same time, that does not mean that we can pat ourselves on the back and high-five each other and say that we have done it all and there is nothing to worry about.

I want to give a shout-out to Ms Sarah Mallard, who wrote an article back in January 2023 entitled “Is it time to rename Chinaman's Beach?”, which appeared in *Kalbarri Town Talk*, a very worthwhile and valuable magazine for the local community. In this article, Sarah, who is an emergent elder from the proud Nhandu people, posed the question of whether the name Chinaman's Beach should be replaced with its traditional name, Bula Guda. She wrote —

To name a beach after someone who died there, —

That is apparently the story behind the name of Chinaman's Beach —

could be seen as a sign of respect. In many cultures around the world, to name a place after the dead is to honour them. But then I think, why don't we know his real name? Who died there? ... No one can say, except that he was a Chinaman.

That was a very pertinent question that Sarah asked; I thank her for penning that article.

The purpose of my statements over the past few months has not been to point fingers or criticise any community; it has been to address this very important issue. It is about having a dialogue—having a chat—to see whether these names are still appropriate for multicultural Western Australia. We cherish and can be very proud of our multiculturalism. I think it is time to have that dialogue.