

PIONEER CEMETERY — FITZROY CROSSING

**607. Dr A.D. BUTI to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs:**

I refer to the Pioneer Cemetery project in Fitzroy Crossing and the remains discovered last year. Can the minister update the house on how this government is ensuring that those remains and the broader community are being treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve?

**Mr B.S. WYATT replied:**

I thank the member for Armadale for the question. Members may recall, I previously provided an answer around the fact that on the banks of the Fitzroy River at Fitzroy Crossing Aboriginal human remains had been exposed after a couple of big wet seasons. The banks of the Fitzroy River rose and an old grave was starting to be exposed; indeed, some bones had washed into the river. There was an element of urgency last year, so the government provided a \$700 000 grant to exhume the area to prevent further remains from being washed away, and then to rebury them. They were successfully exhumed last year through work of local elders and rangers. Seventy-five sets of remains were uncovered during the project. Sixteen of those could be identified, and of those 16, 11 have been returned to country across the Kimberley. Just last week, on 16 August, I am pleased to say, that the remaining 64 remains were reburied at a ceremony in Fitzroy Crossing. Approximately 150 people attended that ceremony. It was a very large ceremony. I want to acknowledge the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre heritage officer, Neil Carter, who did a wonderful job coordinating both the exhumation and the burial. I want to acknowledge elders Miss Mary Aitkin and Joe Brown, as well as the president of the Shire of Derby–West Kimberley. At the reception following the ceremony several members of the community including, Ms Merle Carter, who is the co-chair of KALACC, addressed the gathering and provided their stories about why it was such a significant process and significant project for them.

Interestingly, at the request of the community, the National Centre for Indigenous Genomics has collected bone samples from each of the exhumed human remains for DNA testing. They will be kept for ongoing testing to try to identify the remains of those who were uncovered. As a result, those unidentified remains were buried in fairly shallow graves, at about 1.2 metres, with the approval of families and the community so that if we need to, we can do future testing to find out whose remains those were. This has been a wonderful project and I want to thank the elders, rangers and in particular Neil Carter who has done a wonderful job in coordinating a project that I suspect will be of extreme historical significance for the broader history of the Kimberley.