

WILLIAM WIJITY: LIFE CYCLE OF A WITCHETTY GRUB — BOOK LAUNCH

Statement

HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral) [5.21 pm]: I rise today to bring members' attention to a very important publication released last week and launched in my electorate during recent National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee celebrations. I hold in my hand here tonight an extremely valuable cultural artefact—a storybook for kids called *William Wjity: Life Cycle of a Witchetty Grub*. It was published last week. I acknowledge the author, Vattessa Colbung, who is in the President's gallery along with her family—her two daughters, Keesha Coleman and Shonaye Sambo, and her son, Joseph Coleman. Vattessa is a very hardworking, multi-talented woman who has designed and produced fashion, and exhibited that work from Sydney to New York. She runs a successful business that mentors young Aboriginal models, and consistently provides meaningful employment and work opportunities for other Aboriginal artists. I am very proud to have worked with Vattessa several times on different projects. I congratulate Vattessa on writing this book, and acknowledge the work of Cassandra Woods, who translated the book into Ngaanyatjarra language, as well as Tahlia Lynch, who painted all the illustrations. Vattessa's business, Desert Gem, is an important organisation that focuses on the preservation of language and teaching of cultural heritage. *William Wjity* will be one of the very few children's books available in the traditional goldfields Ngaanyatjarra language. This book is a very important cultural artefact as it will provide opportunities for not only young Aboriginal kids to learn language and culture, but also non-Aboriginal families to gain a greater understanding and respect for Ngaanyatjarra culture.

Vattessa and her siblings did not get to learn too much of their family language because their grandmother, who was fluent, was forbidden to speak her language. The preservation of language in any culture is vital, especially for Aboriginal languages as we rapidly lose fluent speakers. In the goldfields alone we have at least 14 major language groups, but the chances of fully preserving every language get slimmer every day as we lose more elders. Our local Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre works very hard on the preservation of local language, and I commend its work, especially that of senior linguist Sue Hanson. Sue provided me with some of the statistics I will later reference in this speech. Discovering this rich area of culture is important work, and often once work on each language starts, a few other dialects pop up. An estimated 40 per cent of Aboriginal people in the goldfields speak an Aboriginal language as their first language, with many of the remaining 7 200 people speaking an Aboriginal language as a second language or as a partial speaker. Cultural heritage and knowledge is passed on through each generation by language. Language is integral in affirming and maintaining wellbeing, self-esteem, and a strong sense of identity. Inherent in languages is a complex understanding of a person's culture and their connection with their land. Now, during modern Kalgoorlie's 125th anniversary of gold being found in the goldfields, it is vitally important to acknowledge that the goldfields was heavily impacted during European settlement, particularly between 1890 to 1910. This population boom of about 20 000 people, following the first gold rushes, decimated a number of Aboriginal populations through disease, starvation, competition for water and food, massacres, and of course the stolen generation of children. At the *William Wjity* book launch in Kalgoorlie during NAIDOC Week, a local elder, Mary Champion, shared an amazing story from her family. It was very powerful, and I would like to share an excerpt from that with members now. According to my notes —

“I call my grandmother ‘the stowaway’. She got put on that ship from Australia to England. She was taken away from a mission, ... just outside of Quairading down the South West. The police came in on horseback and picked **my grandmother up about 8 or 9 years of age**. They took her away to Perth and they put her on a ship to go to England and they gave her to a family over there, where she learnt all the English ways. She grew up not knowing she was Aboriginal. She grew up not knowing any of her family. As she grew older she probably heard someone speaking about ‘she is Aboriginal and from Australia.’ In her heart there was a desire to get home, to get back to Australia. She was only 14 or 15 and she went and checked out the big ships and said ‘I’m going back to Australia. I’m going back to meet my people—my Aboriginal people. I’m going to meet my own mother.’ That was in her heart. And if you’ve got that in your heart, you’ve got the desire, you can do anything. So she got on the ship as a stowaway, and she hid for three days. She didn’t have no money. She was only 14 or 15. How dangerous was that. That ship was full of men, drunken men, sailors. She hid and she used to eat feed from the bins and drink water from the deck. But she had that in her heart that she was going to Australia. The ship took her to Perth where she got off. When she got to Perth she met some Aboriginal people and they said ‘where you come from, I think you come from Badjaling? That’s out of Quairading.’ So she went out there. At this very young age. And when she got there she learned that her mother died a year before she got there. ... And they took her to the gravesite, where her mother was buried. They said that her mother used to cry every night and call her name. But she went to the grave site and when she got there, there was a photo of her mother holding a little baby—it was her.”

A kid's book might not seem like very much on its own, but consider this kid's book in particular. The publication of this book is an act of cultural insurance. This book is the result of many Aboriginal people working together to save their cultures. This book is a celebration of language survival. This book is the result of 60 000 years of culture and includes an English translation as an act of sharing culture. What a special gift to be given. This book looks to the future—aimed at children, our next generation—to teach them what was almost lost. This means something to little Ngaanyatjarra kids.

This year's NAIDOC Week theme was "Because of her, we can." And today I acknowledge the work of Vattessa Colbung. Because of her book, we can share and celebrate this beautiful culture. Thank you very much.

The PRESIDENT: Before I give the call to other members, I hope that we might find a copy of that book in the Parliamentary Library at some point soon.