

Pilbara Aboriginal people together in a united voice for change

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Photo: Pilbara Aboriginal Voice (Kakurrka Muri) Co-Chairs, Mr Danny Brown and Ms Linda Doogiebee-Dridi, at the 2019 Annual On-Country Bush Meeting at Yule River.

On Thursday, 25 July 2019, Western Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ben Wyatt, attended the second and final day of the Annual On-Country Bush Meeting at Yule River. The Minister is a regular participant in this unique event, where people from different language groups across the Pilbara come together to discuss critical issues affecting their communities.

Coordinated by Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) the event once again created a vital opportunity for government to hear from Pilbara Aboriginal people on collectively identified issues affecting them, along with proposals on how these could be addressed in meaningful, culturally appropriate ways.

On Day One of the meeting, those present again endorsed the continuation of the PAV, which was formed in 2017, and reaffirmed their intent and commitment to work as a united voice, leading the way for change across the region.

Danny Brown and Linda Doogiebee-Dridi, Co-Chairs of the Pilbara Aboriginal Voice (*Kakurrka Muri*) (PAV), led this year's meeting with passion, sharing their aspirations to work in unity.

PAV Co-Chair, Danny Brown, told over 460 attendees, "We want to connect and work in partnership with existing local leadership groups, advocate and promote respect for our Cultural Authority, and own our problems and solve them with realistic solutions. I am very excited by what we have achieved so far, and I look forward to working with the relevant Ministers and other government representatives over the coming months to create genuine, meaningful change."

In addressing the meeting, PAV Co-Chair, Linda Doogiebee-Dridi said, “It is wonderful that we have our people embracing this new role of the PAV and the direction we are heading: consolidating as Pilbara Aboriginal people, with one voice. We want to demonstrate to all levels of government that we are united. I am very proud to be here, representing my people to deliver these important messages.”

Beyond its community-level endorsement, the PAV was also once again recognised by both state and federal political leaders and government departments as a unique and important local voice.

As event organiser, Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) wholeheartedly welcomed the developing leadership of the PAV at this year’s meeting.

YMAC Chief Executive Officer, Simon Hawkins, said “It’s great to see that, after five consecutive meetings at Yule River, the PAV is now taking responsibility and leading the way on policy discussions about issues affecting Aboriginal communities in the region. I’m proud that YMAC can use its expertise in logistics and administration to support this important, pioneering leadership.”

Key issues highlighted and presented to government representatives included:

- Demands for improved, more culturally appropriate health services throughout the Pilbara. including more Aboriginal Liaison Officers, enhanced access to interpretive services, and increased access to dialysis in communities.
- In this United Nations’ “International Year of Indigenous Languages”, attendees called on government to provide adequate resources to Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre. It was stated that the role and significance of the language centre must be recognised, and that it be provided both the funding and mechanisms to enable necessary provisions of local language and interpretive services.
- The need for a review of existing government procurement policies in the Pilbara, with attendees requesting relevant agencies identify the amounts and values of their contracts awarded to Aboriginal-owned businesses, and that they ensure suitable representation on tender selection panels.
- The need for analysis, evaluation and review of government spending in relation to Aboriginal services delivered through Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) member organisations in the Pilbara over the past 12-months.
- The need to develop effective strategies to address alcohol misuse issues in partnership with communities.
- The need to address issues relating to the current child protection and family support system, including how to keep families together and in the region.
- Training and Employment – the return of the Commonwealth CDEP program in remote communities to create employment and training opportunities and development of skills.
- Aboriginal Education – The PAV requests Education statistics of the Pilbara. PAV would like to consult with the State Government in co-designing educational programs tailored for the Pilbara.
- The PAV proposes that State Government develops a Pilbara Reconciliation Plan.

In his speech Minister Wyatt provided an update on the progress of reforms being considered regarding the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*, as well as work surrounding the proposed office for advocacy and accountability in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia.

Other politicians and senior government representatives joining the discussions during Day Two of the proceedings included: National Party Spokesperson for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon. Terry Redman; Policy and Media Advisor, Clare Davidson and Senior Advisor, Fiona Bennett, representing Senator Sue Lines; Richard Aspinall Regional Manager, Greater Western Australia from the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) (who read an address from Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians the Hon Ken Wyatt); Michelle Andrews, Director General, Department of Communities; Colin Petit, Commissioner for Children and Young People; and Margi Faulkner, Regional Director, WA Country Health Service Department of Health.

All YMAC quotes to be attributed to Mr Simon Hawkins, CEO, Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation.

All PAV quotes to be attributed to Mr Danny Brown and Ms Linda Doogiebee-Dridi, Co-Chairs, Pilbara Aboriginal Voice (Kakurrka Muri).

Images available upon request.

About Yule River Bush Meetings

Meetings held at Yule River are historic, having been organised by Aboriginal people in the vast Pilbara region for decades. The dry river bed off the North West Coastal Highway, just south of Port Hedland, is seen as a place where people from different language groups can come together to discuss common issues affecting Aboriginal communities across the region.

The meetings stemmed from the actions taken in the lead up to the 1946 Pilbara Strike, when Aboriginal people held secret meetings in remote bush locations to plan an ambitious three-year walk off by Aboriginal pastoral workers who were living on cattle stations in conditions of virtual slavery. Pilbara Aboriginal people continued in their efforts to advocate for improved conditions and outcomes by organising bush meetings.

During the land rights era, from the late-1970s, Yule River became the focal point for such gatherings which were often attended by up to 2,000 Aboriginal people from all over the Pilbara. At this time, “Old Man Parker” (born Herbert), was the Pilbara representative for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, the first national body elected by Aboriginal people, and introduced by the Whitlam Government.

Mr Parker presided over these meetings on the river’s sandy banks as Aboriginal people from all over the Pilbara region gathered to talk about lands trust business, housing complaints, and land rights.

Many important initiatives have been borne from Yule River meetings, with both concerns and solutions coming directly from Pilbara Aboriginal people; and with government expected to attend to hear and address their concerns.

Through the efforts of then YMAC Co-Chairperson, Mrs Doris Eaton (whose father was a key player in the 1946 Pilbara Strike), and the YMAC Pilbara Regional Committee, the Yule River meetings recommenced in 2014.

All language groups from across the region are invited to attend these meetings and share their concerns. Much like they were decades ago, gatherings at Yule River are an important opportunity for a diverse range of Aboriginal voices to be heard.

About Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Proudly celebrating its 25th Anniversary in 2019, Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the native title representative body for the Pilbara, Murchison, Mid West and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. YMAC has a representative area of over one-third of WA and represents over 20 Traditional Owner groups - all with their own language, culture and traditions. YMAC is a not-for-profit organisation run by an Aboriginal Board of Directors and provides a range of services to its members including claim and future-act representation, heritage protection services, community and economic development and natural resource management.

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