

JOAN MARTIN, HOMESWEST ACCOMMODATION

Grievance

DR K.D. HAMES (Dawesville) [9.22 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Housing and Works and relates to the accommodation requirements for Mrs Joan Martin and her grandchildren. During the four years that I was not in this house, before which time I had held the position of Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, I undertook some employment doing Aboriginal heritage surveys. I was contracted by this government to undertake a survey for an infrastructure corridor that went all the way from Geraldton to Leonora, nearly 700 kilometres away. In preparing and planning for that survey, the anthropologists instructed me that I should consult with Mrs Joan Martin of the so-called Widi mob and her family. I was somewhat disapproving of the need to do that, believing that she had no real association with that area. However, in the course of undertaking that survey I found two things. First, after taking her and her family members to that region near Perenjori and Mullewa, I found that she had more knowledge of the history and the sacred places of that land than anybody else in any other Aboriginal group with whom we were involved. Secondly, after doing some historical research into the Widi group, I found that when Tindale first described the Aboriginal races of Australia in the 1960s, he clearly delineated a group of Aboriginal people called the Widi as being the original inhabitants of the land that stretched all the way from close to Geraldton to Mt Gibson near Lake Moore. Sadly, when I read the history of this area I found that in the early years of settlement of Western Australia, when the land was being explored and farmers moved out there with flocks of sheep, most of the Aboriginal people who resided in that area died. They died because of infections, often suffering conditions such as measles or tuberculosis; or as a result of being killed when their lands were invaded. The white people killed the Aboriginal people's kangaroos, and they thought that killing their sheep in return was a reasonable exchange, but of course the early settlers caught and hanged them. Many of the Aboriginals were transported to Rottne Island and died in captivity there. Sadly, the only Aboriginals who survived in that area in those early days are people like the Widi mob, whose ancestors managed to either become the sexual partners of white people working in that area, often on the sheep stations, or work as maids in the homes of rich white families. Joan Martin can trace her ancestry back through five generations, when her great-great-great-grandmother was an Aboriginal woman living near the Irwin River when settlement first occurred. After those early days, the Martin family transferred to Aboriginal settlements in which they were deprived of their traditions, their history and their language. It is no wonder that today's circumstances, in which so many Aboriginal people still have enormous difficulties mixing with white society, exist. It is the same for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people whose parents are unemployed, are alcoholic or die at a very early age as a result of either illness or their association with alcohol. Those children have no parents, and those issues are faced by both white and Aboriginal families.

As the Minister for Housing, I evicted Joan Martin from her home in Paris Way in 1998 or 1999. I have regrets about that. Although I have since gotten to know her and found her to be a wonderful woman, at that time there were huge issues in the street. She had a son who was an alcoholic, and he and her grandchildren were terrorising the neighbourhood. I have heard the current Minister for Housing and Works spout the words that a person needs to do three things in a Homeswest home: pay the rent, look after the house and get on with the neighbours. I spouted those same words over and over again. There is no doubt that Joan Martin's family did not do that. However, Joan puts the other side of the story: when they move into a street, it feels like the situation in 1950s America, when Afro-American families who moved into a white street were regarded with suspicion. Joan's family could not leave their house without everyone staring at them and talking about them. The families and the kids reacted. Sadly, since that time, Joan's daughter Jenny has also been evicted from her house. Joan now has management of those children but does not have a house of her own, nor can she get one through the private sector because her reputation precedes her. She has four grandchildren living with her: Shannon, aged 11; a cousin Wesley, aged 10; Kassey, aged 8; and a younger child, aged five. I have received calls from their school, Carawatha Primary School in Willagee, to tell me that they are great kids, they are doing well at school, they are great sportspeople and the school wants to give them sports scholarships. Mrs Martin is now living in a car or staying with other members of her family in their Homeswest accommodation, which she is not allowed to do. If she is given a house and her daughter who has gone away comes back, there could be problems with the local community, in which case Homeswest would have to kick them out again. I understand that, but Joan Martin has done nothing wrong. She has paid her rent, she has paid her dues and she deserves another chance.

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn - Minister for Housing and Works) [9.29 am]: I appreciate the member for Dawesville raising this matter with me. He is fully committed to this issue. As members can tell from what he has said in this house today, he has a very strong personal and emotional commitment to overcoming the problems that unfortunately are still associated with the condition of Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Unfortunately, that is still the case today, and this is 2005.

I will go back and talk first of all about how we, as a government, are addressing the issue. The member for Dawesville has previously mentioned how he addressed the problems associated with antisocial behaviour of families - unfortunately, a significant proportion of antisocial behaviour comes from Aboriginal families - when he was Minister for Housing. As the new Minister for Housing and Works, I have been faced with problems similar to those that have been outlined by the member for Dawesville. As the member for Cockburn and as a backbencher previously, I was determined to ensure that we would move as quickly as we possibly could to address the problems of antisocial behaviour, particularly as they affect neighbours in the first instance. Addressing the problems of dysfunctionality in Aboriginal families is a much bigger issue. The member for Dawesville knows exactly what I am talking about when I mention the pressure that he, as the Minister for Housing, would have faced at the time from the neighbours of the Martins in Karrinyup when that particular issue occurred. For that reason, within a week of becoming the Minister for Housing and Works, I asked the department to introduce the Good Neighbour policy. Unfortunately, some people in the Parliament have criticised that Good Neighbour policy.

I will briefly outline again what it attempts to achieve. It must be remembered that the Good Neighbour policy is a written confirmation in the lease itself that a tenant will be a good neighbour. It is a part of the lease, so it becomes part of the contract when people sign up for public housing. It defines antisocial behaviour. That was not done before. I will not lay the blame at the member for Dawesville's feet, or at anybody else's feet. However, it was not done before. It defines antisocial behaviour, and it refers to street drinking, fighting and noisy parties. Most importantly, it refers to the responsibility of those who visit a public housing property. That is where half the problems of antisocial behaviour come from. The antisocial behaviour clause now forms part of the contract, and it addresses the issue that the current Leader of the Opposition, the member for Kalgoorlie, raised in this house on 11 June 2003 when he moved the following motion -

That this House condemns the State Labor Government for failing to ensure that law-abiding Western Australian citizens living in the vicinity of unruly and disruptive public housing tenants are not continually subjected to antisocial behaviour. And further, that the State Labor Government moves to streamline eviction processes relating to antisocial public housing tenants who refuse to respect the rights of their neighbours.

He went on to say that the motion was about streamlining the eviction processes that were in place at that time to remove an unruly Homeswest tenant. In his argument in support of the motion, he explained to the house that it took up to six months for Homeswest to legally evict people. He was wrong. His statements to the house about the processes that were required to ultimately evict somebody from a Homeswest house for antisocial behaviour were factually incorrect. Nevertheless, he used that argument to support his motion. He said that it took too long to get rid of Homeswest tenants who exhibit antisocial behaviour and cause absolute mayhem for their neighbours. He said that the process needed to be streamlined.

As I have pointed out, the Good Neighbour policy achieves that end. It streamlines the process.

Dr K.D. Hames: Minister, you're running out of time. The point is that Joan Martin -

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I am running out of time. I ask that the member for Dawesville listen. The Good Neighbour policy is working, and it is supported by Homeswest. It is even supported by tenants, because it is starting to bring about a cultural change; that is, people recognise that, with the Good Neighbour policy in place, antisocial behaviour will not be tolerated by Homeswest. People are now aware that they must tone things down. It is not a miracle cure. It will not fix all the problems, because the problems that the member for Dawesville highlighted of dispossession and the dislocation of Aboriginal people, in particular, over the past 100 years have led to all the problems that the member for Dawesville highlighted. I will not argue that point with the member for Dawesville. He is absolutely correct about that. Nevertheless, despite that dispossession, other Aboriginal families are getting on with it and leading very good lives.

We will look at Ms Joan Martin's situation. I have taken up the issue. The Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Directorate is canvassing the idea of purchasing an isolated property, as we did for Joan's daughter Jennifer. That was working. We are looking at doing that again for Joan and having the indigenous families program work with her and her grandchildren regarding their housing. However, I stress that we will only look at an isolated property with support from the Noongar Mia Mia foundation to ensure that there is housing for Ms Joan Martin and her grandchildren.