

Rob Harris, National politics reporter, Herald Sun
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VIC NEWS

Labor submission to rename Gellibrand as Cooper



Labor MP Tim Watts. Picture: Gary Ramage

LABOR wants to dump the name of the inner west Melbourne federal electorate of Gellibrand and rename it after an trailblazing Aboriginal activist.

Local MP Tim Watts has backed in the party's official submission to the redrawing of electoral boundaries to remove the name of Joseph Gellibrand — an early British explorer of the Australian mainland and one of the negotiators of the “Batman Treaty”.

The ALP has written to the Australian Electoral Commission seeking the change in conjunction with any redrawing of the electorate's boundaries as part of its redistribution ahead of the next election.

The treaty is the only documented agreement for the purchase of land from its traditional owners.

Mr Watts said the legacy of the Batman Treaty was “contested at best”.

“Gellibrand was a product of a different time and his interactions with indigenous Australians reflect outdated thinking about our relationship with the traditional owners of our land,” Mr Watts said.

“Few residents of Melbourne's west today would view him as having made an ‘outstanding’ contribution to our nation.”

Mr Watts has put forward the name of “Cooper”, after Aboriginal rights pioneer William Cooper.

Mr Cooper played a role in establishing the Footscray-based Australian Aborigines' League to advocate for a fairer deal for indigenous Australians.

The League's first offices were located in Footscray and Seddon, within the current boundaries of the electorate.

“Cooper also pioneered the establishment of National Aborigines Day, first celebrated in 1940, and now celebrated as nationwide as NAIDOC week,” Mr Watts said.

“He is also famous for leading a protest of the German consulate in Melbourne against Nazi persecution of the Jews during the Kristallnacht — recognised by Yad Vashem as the only protest of its kind to take place anywhere in the world.”

He said his legacy had inspired positive social change for indigenous communities in Melbourne's west and throughout Australia.

“Renaming Gellibrand as Cooper would not only be a powerful symbol but a form of practical recognition that acknowledges the importance of our indigenous past and future.”

The electorate stretches from Yarraville in the east to Sunshine West and Altona Meadows in the west.