

Push to rename electorate after trailblazer for Indigenous Australian rights

Benjamin Millar ~ Published: November 20 2017 - 11:43PM

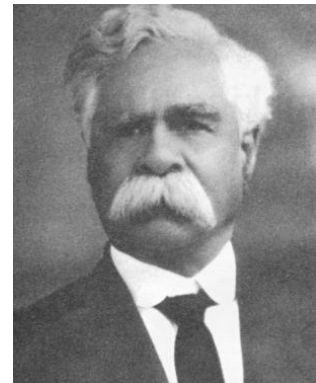
A trailblazing activist for Aboriginal rights could be recognised with the renaming of the federal electorate of Gellibrand in his honour.

A push is under way for Gellibrand to be renamed Cooper, after Indigenous rights pioneer William Cooper, who helped to establish the Footscray-based Australian Aborigines' League in 1934 to advocate for a fairer deal for Indigenous Australians, according to *The Star Weekly*.

Labor 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 before the next election.



Gellibrand Labor MP Tim Watts wants to change the electorate's name. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen



Aboriginal activist William Cooper.

Gellibrand MP Tim Watts said the legacy of early European lawyer and explorer Joseph Tice Gellibrand and the 'Batman Treaty' he helped formulate was "contested at best".

"The 'treaty' seems to have involved the purported exchange of 600,000 acres of land in what is now Melbourne, for a collection of trade goods," he said.

"Gellibrand was a product a different time and his interactions with Indigenous Australians reflect outdated thinking about our relationship with the traditional owners of our land."

The proposal to change the name was part of a 47-page submission by Labor to the AEC that was publicly released on Monday.

The submission also calls for a replacement of the name Batman to Wonga and McMillan to Monash.

William Cooper's activism was a precursor to many of the actions for recognition and rights being continued in the present day.

He held an 'Aboriginal Day of Mourning' on January 26, 1938, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet.

The day evolved into a National Aborigines Day and later became NAIDOC Week.

In 1934 he launched a petition rallying King George V for a representative for indigenous people in Federal Parliament, to help address injustices.

Then prime minister Joseph Lyons failed to pass it on and the petition never reached the king.

Mr Cooper's legacy lives on locally in the naming of the William Cooper Bridge at Footscray Station and the William Cooper Cup, an annual footy match between Victoria Police and an Indigenous team at Footscray's Whitten Oval during NAIDOC Week.

"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," Mr Watts said.

Williamstown High School Year 11 student Aretha Stewart-Brown, who earlier this year became the first female elected youth prime minister for the National Indigenous Youth Parliament and has a picture of William Cooper on her wall, echoed the call for change.

"As a proud Indigenous woman who lives in this electorate I think changing its name to Cooper in honour of the great William Cooper is a wonderful idea," she said.

"Everyone should know about this remarkable civil rights campaigner who was amongst the first in the world to protest against the Nazis treatment of the Jews in the 1930s.

"It's initiatives like this which show Aboriginal people are slowly getting the recognition they deserve."

Comments on the suggestion are able to be made until December 1. The AEC will release its proposed redistribution report next April and announce the final electoral divisions in June for determination and tabling in Parliament in July.

A petition has been created to support the name change.

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