



The Federal Redistribution 2009
QUEENSLAND



Objection Number 65

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To: QLD Redistribution
Cc: ppisasale@ipswich.qld.gov.au; bernie.ripoll.mp@aph.gov.au
Subject: Obejction to Proposed Name of Queensland Electoral Redistribution Seat
Attachments: Len Waters.docx

15 August 2009

Officer in Charge
Australian Electoral Office (Queensland)

Dear Sir/Madam

Objection to Proposed Name of New Queensland Electoral Redistribution Seat

I have learned with considerable disappointment that the name for the new electoral redistribution seat is proposed as WRIGHT after the celebrated Queensland poet Judith Wright. I am informed also that alternative submissions were received recommending that the seat be named WATERS after Warrant Officer Len Waters, RAAF. While the proposal of Judith Wright as eponym for the new seat has much to recommend it, I believe sincerely that the name of WATERS is the more appropriate and rightful choice on the basis of our Australian sense of egalitarianism, the necessity for lasting recognition of historic, national achievement, the reconciliation process, and the foregrounding of the name as an inspirational role model for future generations.

Undoubtedly, Judith Wright was a worthy Australian and selection of her name as a well-recognised and honoured Australian poet is yet another corrective to the cultural cringe which has tended to devalue Australian literary achievements. Despite the regressive cultural constraints of the past, however, in her own lifetime Judith Wright enjoyed decades of recognition in the widespread publication and favourable criticism of her work. She received numerous honours including doctorates from prestigious Australian universities and does not need and, I believe, would not want an additional posthumous honour as eponym for a new electoral seat particularly at the expense of the alternative, Len Waters.

Indeed, there is a perhaps unsurprising irony that as a defender of Aboriginal rights and egalitarianism, her name should be chosen in preference to that of an Aborigine. While we pride ourselves on equality as a particularly 'Australian' characteristic, Judith Wright belonged to the dominant white culture and enjoyed the comparative privilege associated with it; Len Waters, on the other hand, was a dirt poor Aborigine surviving the Depression with nothing to sustain him but the dream that one day he could enjoy a freedom of opportunity in the air denied him as a bush labourer on the land.

Len Waters lived in and personified aspects of the unique Australian cultural and geographical landscape that informed Judith Wright's poetry. In the 1940s, however, while Wright was at home composing poetry about the War, Waters was overseas actually fighting in it. Given the prejudicial ignorance of the Australian military authorities regarding the capabilities of the Aboriginal fighting man, any combat service by an Aboriginal person in that era is worthy of our nation's gratitude and awareness. Waters, significantly, did not fight his country's battles with a rifle and a bayonet; his double-edged war for democracy and the dignity of his own race was fought in the air at the controls of one of the most sophisticated fighter aircraft in the RAAF inventory.

Unlike Wright, his efforts contributed little at this time to the reversal of the cultural literary cringe. The only writing Waters did was in his operational flight log recording the heady triumphs and bitter tragedies of 95 operational sorties. While, as a poet, Wright teased out the nature of Australian identity, Waters lived his dream as a pilot in harsh and uncompromising circumstances as he sought out lethally defended Japanese bases and strafed them at repeated and considerable risk to his own life. Unlike Wright, at the end of the war he did not continue a celebrated existence as a noteworthy Australian and to enjoy the rewards of his efforts. With the end of his country's necessity, his dream of flight was finished. Warrant Officer Len Waters returned to the Queensland bush to be rewarded with the right to shut his mouth about what he had aspired to and go back to labouring.

While it is true that after his death Waters received belated recognition from a grateful but still largely ignorant nation, I must point out to you that while I have long been aware of the prominence of Judith Wright, I had no knowledge whatsoever of Len Water's existence or his magnificent achievement as a combat fighter pilot until comparatively recent times and then only through the groundbreaking work of Dr Robert Hall. More pointedly, I received additional biographical information not from an Australian source but from a well known and now retired African-American colonel of the United States Air Force! Accordingly, I believe that naming the new electoral seat after Len Waters will go far in redressing a debt of honour and in educating the Australian public now and for posterity.

As a fighter pilot, one of Australia's elite service personnel, Waters defended democracy and naming the new electorate after him would be an appropriate way of recognising that fact. Furthermore, it would honour the largely unsung heroism of the Australian pilots who fought a nasty, demoralising war mopping up Japanese opposition left in the wake of General Macarthur's well-publicised achievements in the South West Pacific Theatre.

On the home front, it was highly appropriate that the marginalisation and mistreatment of Aboriginal people was to become a topic of Judith Wright's poetry and one of her many social concerns. And it is a sad irony that her name as a member of privileged, middle class white society and not that of the working class Aborigine Len Waters was selected for commemoration as eponym for the new electorate. It is an irony which I believe Wright – a great lady and a champion of reconciliation and Aboriginal land rights – would not look upon with favour, and it is all the more disappointing in the light of the well-deserved celebrity she attracted in her own lifetime while Waters laboured in obscurity under the Queensland sun. The fighter pilot who flew 95

combat missions some of them as flight leader had returned post-war to work as a bush labourer amongst men who knew nothing of his struggle to realise a dream which even now may serve as an inspiration to ordinary Australians if only it be sufficiently publicised, honoured, reinforced and re-told.

As a former and rather inept recreational pilot, I stand in awe of Waters' capacity to rise above his circumstances and qualify to serve his country in time of war in the cockpit of a combat fighter aircraft. In one sense, he stands as an enduring symbol of what the human spirit can achieve in the face of adversity; in another sense, however, his life story symbolises not only the achievement of a dream but also its disintegration and denial, a denial which too many Aboriginal people of his day had to endure because of the colour of their skin and the ignorance of the dominant culture in which they tried to function and succeed.

Happily, circumstances for Aboriginal people have improved since the days when Len Waters self-educated himself into the elite of the Royal Australian Air Force. Today we speak and hear much of reconciliation, and of moving on and looking to the future. I can think of no more magnanimous or healing gesture of reconciliation than to rethink and re-name the new electorate as WATERS. As members of the electorate so named exercise their precious right to vote, they will do so in commemoration of the brave and generally unsung men of the RAAF who fought for democracy on Australia's doorstep over half a century ago. In addition, a man who stands as an abiding symbol of Aboriginal self-motivation, courage and determination would be enduringly honoured and, with him, the Aboriginal race he proudly represented in battle.

While Aboriginal people may now enjoy opportunities that Len Water's could barely have imagined as a young man, the fact remains that in today's Australia too many young Australians (whether of Aboriginal or European descent) lack the direction and sense of purpose that inspired many of their forebears. In this sense, Len Waters stands as a heroic example and inspiration.

As a teacher, it disappoints me that while my students may very quickly acquaint themselves with Judith Wright, none of them have heard of Len Waters or are likely to unless a concerted effort is made to inform them. I have watched the faces of white teenagers change and react with surprise and creditable reflection when they learn of this remarkable man. Time and again, his story and example in the classroom has been used successfully to breakdown negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people, a process which goes some distance to the reconciliation most Australians of good will support. More than this, however, Waters' story transcends racial parameters and stands as an inspiration to young people, white or black, prepared to adopt the ambitious CAN-DO attitude which Waters exemplified in his struggle to realise his dream.

From the race who designed the unique flying wing we call the boomerang, an artefact which endures as one of our proud national symbols, here was a quiet but proud man, the first of the 'First Australians' to take to the air as a combat pilot to defend his nation and the right of his people to be recognised as Australian citizens. Waters lived by and risked his life for the democratic principle of egalitarian fairness we predicate our national identity upon. In the light of his superlative achievements, his marginalisation in the post-war years, and all that he symbolises in terms of the multifaceted Australian story of sacrifice, reconciliation and inspiration for the future, I respectfully urge you to reconsider and select the name of WATERS as the new electoral seat. The

egalitarian principles of the fair go which Judith Wright stood for as a highly respected Australian poet would, thereby, be honoured in the process.

Yours sincerely

David Hanna

English Teacher