

NSW Legislative Council Hansard



Tuesday, 2 May 2006

KOKODA COMMEMORATION DAY

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN [6.50 p.m.]: Last week, on the occasion of my forty-first crossing of the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, I was privileged to present the Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, with a strategic plan for the proclamation of the Kokoda Trail as a national memorial park. The objective of the plan is to develop a sustainable eco-trekking industry for the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along it. These people are custodians of land sacred to our Australian heritage and they will protect and care for the various battle sites if we provide them with an incentive to do so.

The plan came about when the former Minister for Veterans Affairs, Bruce Scott, advised me that the Government had no master plan for the development of the Kokoda Track. His successor, Danna Vale, advised me that if I were to devise such a plan she would present it to the Government for implementation. We then established a Kokoda Track Foundation, which raised the finances to complete the plan. We worked in partnership with the Worldwide Fund for Nature, the University of Technology, Sydney and Templeton Galt.

We engaged Colonel David Knaggs to facilitate the process. That involved workshops in Sydney, Efogi Village, Kokoda Village and Port Moresby, and included Koiari and Orokaiva clan leaders and landowners, local, provincial and national government bodies, and other stakeholders such as the RSL, Rotary, the Kokoda Track Authority and the Papua New Guinea National Cultural Commission. Sir Michael was generous in his response to the plan and we hope to work in partnership with his Government in its implementation. We intend to present the plan to the current Minister for Veterans Affairs, the Hon. Bruce Billson, in Canberra on 15 June.

Kokoda, like Gallipoli, has had a slow awakening. While the story of Anzac was well known to all Australians as a result of our annual commemoration of Anzac Day, it was

not until Peter Weir's epic film *Gallipoli* around 30 years ago that the peninsular developed into a pilgrimage for young Australians. This led to an increasing interest in other Australian battles on the Western Front, where our Anzacs, under the inspiring and visionary leadership of General Sir John Monash—arguably the greatest Australian of all time—were instrumental in the defeat of Germany. So it is with Kokoda.

Recent documentaries and books on the Kokoda campaign have led to an awakening of the importance of the battles along the track during the period from 8 August to 16 November 1942. This interest is also evident in the increasing number of Australians trekking across the track. Last month some 600 Australians aged between 10 and 70 trekked across it. The impact of the experience on those who trekked it is profound. They feel betrayed that they were never taught anything about it; They feel ashamed that we have ignored our Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels by never issuing them with a medal, and are disappointed at the neglect of significant battle sites.

Notwithstanding these disappointments, they feel proud that they have walked in the footsteps of the brave and have conquered some of their own adversities along the way. They also feel proud that they have shared the experience with their fellow Australians and have re-established a strong relationship with our PNG cousins. There is no doubt that Kokoda is stirring the emotions of our current generation just as Gallipoli did to a previous generation.

Therefore I believe we should take the next step and consider the proclamation of a Kokoda Day of Commemoration on our national calendar. It should not be a holiday but a day when services are held in our schools and communities. I believe 3 November should be proclaimed as Kokoda Day. I acknowledge that the Kokoda campaign began with the first contact between 39 Militia Battalion and the Japanese forces forward of Kokoda on 24 July 1942 and ended with the crossing of the Kumusi River in pursuit of the retreating Japanese on 16 November 1942.

The battle across the track began with the Japanese attack on the Kokoda Plateau on 27 July 1942 and ended when the Australians re-entered Kokoda on 2 November and raised the Australian flag in the village on 3 November. I believe that the raising of the flag symbolised our victory against all the odds, a victory attributed to the success of our naval forces in the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway and our airforce in its continual bombing sorties against Rabaul and Japanese naval and amphibious forces. Kokoda is symbolic of all these victories.

In 2002 I supported a proposal for a Battle of Australia Day and argued that Kokoda was too narrowly focused. Since then I have completed many more crossings of the track and have had access to much more research material, which has caused me to change the view I expressed at that time. Kokoda is the only time in our history where Australian territory was invaded by a fanatical and powerful enemy force. Our diggers were outnumbered, outgunned and out-trained but they contested every inch of the track back to the last line of defence, where they rallied and forced the invading Japanese forces back, and re-entered the village of Kokoda on 2 November. No Kiwis, British or Yanks were involved—it was purely an Australian operation.

Kokoda is symbolic of the fighting qualities evident among our soldiers, sailors, airmen and servicewomen in all of our campaigns in the south-west Pacific area. The anniversary of the raising of the Australian flag at Kokoda on 3 November 1942 would, I believe, be the most appropriate day to commemorate Kokoda Day. Therefore I call on the Federal Government to proclaim 3 November as Kokoda Day and include it as a national day of commemoration.