



# Tragedy brings change

## BELATED FORMAL APOLOGY FOR VIOLENT DEMISE

### Susanne Reilly

AT AGE nine, Ben Wyatt did not know the full story or the circumstances surrounding the death of a young John Pat, but understood that a "grave injustice" had occurred.

Mr Pat was 16 when he died from head injuries in a Roebourne police cell - it was a day that sparked public outrage and has since resonated with the Australian community.

Living in Kalgoorlie at the time, Mr Wyatt said he could still remember the death and the public outrage that followed the acquittal of the police officers accused of injuring Mr Pat.

The Victoria Park MLA said it was a very dramatic period in his life.

"My father was very active in Aboriginal politics at the time so it was certainly something that was in my own household and had an impact on my father's and family's life," he said.

"I didn't understand everything but I knew a tragedy had occurred and it was apparent to me it could lead to significant change and ultimately it did."

Mr Pat's death was one of a number of Aboriginal deaths in custody that sparked the Royal Commission from 1987-1991.

"If there is one positive thing from the death, it changed the relationship between Police and Aboriginal people across the country...the police service today is fundamentally different than in 1983," Mr Wyatt said.

Thirty years later and Mr Wyatt has successfully moved a motion for a formal apology from the State Government - a motion that was passed

unanimously in late September.

On behalf of all Western Australians, in the spirit of reconciliation and healing, it apologises to Mrs Mavis Pat and her family for the untimely death of her son.

"It was a very emotional motion and I felt moved that members voted in support," he said.

"Mavis still has a lot of grieving to do, but I hope the motion gives her the comfort of parliament unanimously apologising and acknowledging the tragedy never should have happened."

### THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JOHN PAT

- On September 28, 1983, John Pat died in a Roebourne police cell after an altercation with police at the local bar.
- Witnesses said they saw police officers kick Mr Pat in the head. An autopsy revealed Mr Pat had a fractured skull, haemorrhage and swelling.
- A coroner's inquest began on October 31, 1983. It heard evidence from 70 witnesses over 21 hearing days and a number of inconsistencies emerged.
- On February 6, 1984 the five accused were committed for trial on manslaughter charges, heard in a Supreme Court at Karratha on April 30, 1984.
- The trial concluded on May 24, 1986, after 57 witnesses had given evidence - all of the accused were found not guilty.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology.



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