



## **DAVID MORRIS MP**

**Member for Mornington**

**Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Environment**

**Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government**

### **A New Chapter Starts for Prahran Mechanics Institute**

#### **Legislative Assembly 5<sup>th</sup> May 2010**

**Mr MORRIS** (Mornington) — It is a genuine pleasure to rise to speak on the Prahran Mechanics' Institute Amendment Bill, because just for a change we have the opportunity to talk about something that does not illustrate graphically, as many other pieces of legislation have done in the past few months, the failures of the Brumby government.

We are here this afternoon to deal with the Prahran Mechanics' Institute Amendment Bill, which when passed will allow the institute to sell land that it owns or that is vested in it and to move on and purchase further property that it may require, perhaps in a slightly different vicinity.

While the act has been around for some 111 years, it is interesting that until recently it has remained relatively unscathed. It was amended in 1984, 2006 and 2007. I guess it has had some frequent recent history in this house, but the current version of the act is in fact only version no. 3 from the time it first went through the chamber.

Oddly enough, one of my earliest memories of a particular bill being debated in this house is of an earlier amending bill. I remember sitting here in February 2007; the member for Ferntree Gully was sitting next to me and we were both paying attention and trying to figure out what was going on around us, and I remember saying to him — —

**Mr Mulder** — Have you worked it out?

**Mr MORRIS** — Not yet, no. It might take more than three and a bit years, I think. I said to the member for Ferntree Gully, 'Do you realise that this bill was debated in this room 110 years ago?' — or 106 years ago, whatever it was at the time.

In these days when a week or perhaps even 24 hours is often a long time in politics, the fact that we are now amending an act that was passed in this room over 110 years ago is a reminder that while members come and go and governments come and go, hopefully the institution will endure. It certainly has endured for a considerable period.

The link to this house and to the Parliament goes back even further than that. When the institute was founded back in 1854, one of the trustees was a gentleman named Frederick James Sargood, who was a member of the Legislative Council at the time and subsequently became a member of this house. It was a career that did not exactly endure: it started in October 1853; he served in two houses and resigned in December

1857. But there is that link between this Parliament, the institute and the legislation we are working on today.

Given the timing of it's founding the institute predates the existence of this house by a year. It is a link back to the relatively early colonial years and a reminder of the achievements of this state in a relatively short time. In the intervening 175 years things have moved on quite a bit.

As I said, the institute was founded in 1854. Apart from Mr Sargood, George William Rusden and Dr James Stokes were the original trustees, and Governor Hotham and his wife became patrons. The fact that Governor Hotham was involved reinforces the relatively early point in the life of the colony as it was then.

Interestingly enough the council of the new municipality of Prahran held its early meetings in the institute. Not long after it departed and went to its own premises, the council established a free library, so almost before it had really begun the institute was on limited time. But it endured past that point and some interesting episodes occurred along the way when it became time for the institute to part with the services of the secretary, William John Allen, who refused to leave. Part of the roof of the building was removed under cover of darkness to make it desirable from his point of view to leave. Mr Allen was ultimately awarded damages of £14, and I guess it just goes to prove that perceived unfair dismissal is nothing new; it has been going on for a long time.

Moving along to 1899, I was interested to see in the official history, from which I am picking up points, that after a period of decline which saw the PMI in the custodianship of an elderly and unmotivated secretary and a building run down and in disrepair, action was taken.

It is perhaps not unlike the circumstance in Victoria even as we speak. That provided the impetus for the Act. It provided the impetus for a whole new life and a whole new range of activities as for the institute. The member for Shepparton has commented on many of the activities and some of the history of the institute during the 20th century.

Towards the end of the 20th century another era began as the library began to specialise in the history of Victoria — a specialty that endures to this day. I was also pleased to see that, after a period when there were some differences with Stonnington council, in recent years Stonnington has been a very strong supporter of the organisation. It has provided grants for the restoration of minute books, upgrading of the catalogue and other services. It is pleasing to see the relationship working very well.

Some members have remarked that this is the only mechanics institute which has its own act. That was certainly a feature of the debates in 2006 and 2007. Some may say it is an anachronism. Personally I think it provides an important link to our past. The establishment of facilities to enable the general population to be better informed and better able to play an active part in the civic life of the then new colony is an

important part of the development of our democracy. If nothing else, the existence of this principal act and the connection with the institute is an important link.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a few comments on the bill. The member for Shepparton also referred to some of the difficulties in the commercial negotiations. I do not intend to revisit those, but they are on the record and they are a matter of some concern. I also acknowledge the briefing from the minister's staff. It was probably the briefest bill briefing I have ever been involved in, but it was comprehensive nonetheless.

No doubt the changes that are being made today, which will allow the institute to dispose of 140 High Street, Prahran, and acquire up to three other parcels of land to establish a new library, a separate office, other storage facilities and so on, will herald a new and even more vigorous chapter in the institute's life. It will allow a new chapter to commence in the life of a tremendous and historic organisation.

I wish the institute well upon that journey.

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