



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

HON KEVIN JOHN LEAHY

Condolence Motion



Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 4 November 2020

Reprinted from Hansard

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Condolence Motion

THE SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson): I give the call to the Premier on the condolence motion —

That this house records its sincere regret at the death of Hon Kevin John Leahy and tenders its deep sympathy to his family.

MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham — Premier) [12.02 pm]: I rise today to pass on the house's condolences to the family and friends of Hon Kevin John Leahy Sr, who has passed away. I note that many of his family and friends are here today—Cheryl Groves, Kevin's sister; Trevor Groves, his brother-in-law; Garry Leahy, his brother; Claire Dwyer, Kevin's former partner; his daughters Georgie and Jodie Leahy; Holly Sulenta, his granddaughter; Remo Sulenta, his grandson; Ava Leahy, his granddaughter; and Kevin Leahy Jr, his son.

Kevin was one of a handful of members to serve in both chambers of the state Parliament. Just as an aside, he was quite rare in that he served here first before being later elected to the Council, or as Kevin put it in his valedictory speech, he was blooded in the Assembly. He was rarer still in that he had nicer things to say about the Council than he did about the Assembly. He said that a six-month trial period in the Council would serve members here better, and get them to understand the processes of the Parliament better. I think all members would agree, however, that Kevin Leahy led a very big life both inside and outside of Parliament. He was passionate about his patch and strove to leave his community around him better than he found it, whether through business, Parliament or the public service.

Kevin was born in 1949 in East Fremantle to parents Kevin and Dorothy. His father worked in transport as well as on the waterfront. Kevin grew up in Palmyra, attending Bicton Primary School and John Curtin Senior High School. He was reportedly a bright student and an adept sportsperson in his youth. He played football, golf and, one of my favourites, squash. To plagiarise a little from Tom Stephens' eulogy for Kevin Leahy, mirroring his reputation as a "smart but lazy student", he was "apparently an extremely good but surprisingly lazy footballer". Tom told the story that because of Kevin's talent, he was highly sought after as a recruit by South Fremantle. The story goes that they chased him relentlessly for a tryout. Ultimately, they had to send a taxi for him to get him to rock up for the tryout. However, after running from Fremantle to Bruce Lee Oval, he was violently ill all the way back, and subsequently vowed never to return.

Although Kevin was born and raised in the broader Fremantle area, it would not remain his home. Like so many Western Australians in the public service, then and now, Kevin's career would take him to the regions. Despite starting in the State Housing Commission, by the end of the 1960s he had joined the Crown Law Department and began his path through regional Western Australia as a clerk of the courts. He would then rise through the ranks as he moved around the state to Kalgoorlie, Roebourne, Narrogin and, finally, Carnarvon. It was over this period of time that Kevin started his family, marrying Susanne and having children. Out in the regions he found his home—Carnarvon. It is telling that the first line in the story of his passing in the *Midwest Times* identified him as "a Carnarvon identity" before saying he was a former member of Parliament. He was deeply passionate about Carnarvon. By all reports, he would never hear a bad word said about Carnarvon. If something was good, Carnarvon or the Gascoyne had it better. Naturally, within a few years, this translated into a desire to represent the area, then known as the seat of Northern Rivers, in Parliament for the Australian Labor Party. On his third attempt, he won the electorate in 1989, completely against the trend for the election. As his campaign manager, Tom Stephens, was quite proud to mention, this went against the expectations and advice of the party office at the time, which reportedly wanted to give up on the seat in the campaign, but then the then Premier Peter Dowding insisted on campaigning there in the final week.

I spoke to Kevin a number of times over the years. He had a passion for supporting the less well-off and ensuring that people were paid properly. He had an egalitarian streak. He wanted to see everyone succeed, which complemented rather than contrasted his knack for business. He held the electorate until 1996, when the electoral tide and the redistribution meant he could no longer hold the new seat of Ningaloo. My recollection of that election is that he only just lost. However, as I mentioned earlier, that would not be the end of his involvement in electoral politics. Kevin would hold spots on Council tickets in the years ahead in unwinnable positions, but then the resignation of Tom Stephens to contest the federal seat of Kalgoorlie created a casual vacancy in the Mining and Pastoral Region. On a countback, Kevin was elected to the Legislative Council, where he served from September 2004 until May 2005.

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Looking back on Kevin's life, it is not defined by what he did inside the walls of this building, although he represented his electorate incredibly well; it is defined by what he did outside this building. In between his stints in Parliament, he met his partner Claire, and his family grew once again. His work in business helped shape Carnarvon, whether it was the hotel, rental car dealership, local TAB, Kickstarters roadhouse, Hubble Street Store or frozen ice truck. One of his most notable ventures was into the banana industry in 1999. This is interesting, in that Kevin apparently said he had never had much luck with gardening nor much prowess at driving heavy vehicles, but he must have done something correct because he was eventually made chair of the Sweeter Banana Co-operative. I should note his public service had not ended either, as he served as chair of the Gascoyne Development Commission from 2001 to 2008.

Kevin loved many things in life. He loved sport. I can attest that he loved racing. He loved golf. He loved travel. He loved the banana industry. He loved hard workers and he loved the party. He loved his family. But the love I am most struck by was his love of the place that was his home until the very end of his life—Carnarvon. In Kevin's final valedictory speech in the Legislative Council, he said that people often asked him, "When are you moving back to Perth?" He told them, no, he is home now in Carnarvon.

On behalf of the state Parliamentary Labor Party and the government of Western Australia and I am sure all members of Parliament, I pass on our condolences to Kevin's family and friends. Vale Kevin Leahy.

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Leader of the Opposition) [12.09 pm]: I rise on behalf of the Liberal opposition to pass my condolences to the family of Kevin Leahy and put on the record some comments about his service to the state.

Kevin Leahy served communities in the north west for a decade as clerk of courts, and then for eight years as the first and only member for the highly marginal district of Northern Rivers. His margins of victory were due to his popularity and hard work. He was born in January 1949 in East Fremantle, where his father was a transport driver and waterside worker, and he was educated at Bicton Primary School and John Curtin Senior High School. In 1965, at the age of 16, he entered the workforce as a clerk with the State Housing Commission. He transferred to the crown law department in 1972. Having obtained a diploma in legal studies at TAFE, he served 14 years as clerk of courts from 1975 until 1989. Kevin Leahy first worked in the country when he was an assistant clerk of courts in Kalgoorlie for two years and later served for six years as clerk of courts in Roebourne. He was later to state that this was considered an unusual length of time in what others had considered an unpopular posting, but that he was glad to consider Roebourne his home. After 1983, he was stationed in Carnarvon, where he became active in a range of community and sporting associations and was appointed as a justice of the peace. He was a successful secretary and president of the Carnarvon branch of the Australian Labor Party, contesting the district of Gascoyne at the 1986 state election and polling 39.5 per cent of the 4 300 valid votes in a straight contest with Ian Laurance, the incumbent member and senior Liberal frontbencher. Kevin Leahy recontested Gascoyne at the by-election of October 1987, which was caused by the resignation of Ian Laurance. It was another straight contest against Liberal candidate Dudley Maslen, who held the seat by 246 votes, or 53 per cent. This represented a swing of seven per cent gained by Kevin Leahy on a day when two other by-elections in the Perth hills and the south west registered equally strong swings against the Burke Labor government. Kevin Leahy was clearly a hardworking and credible local candidate.

The 1988 redistribution replaced Gascoyne with the new, larger district of Northern Rivers and extended eastward to Newman, Meekatharra, Mt Magnet and Wiluna. At the 1989 state election, in his third two-candidate contest, Kevin Leahy polled just under 4 400 votes, gaining a majority of 108, or 50.6 per cent. In a close election in which the opposition had gained seats, Kevin Leahy's victory was a significant contribution to the re-election of the Dowding Labor government.

On 29 March 1989, in his first speech, Kevin Leahy summarised the agricultural, mining, pastoral, fishing and tourism industries of his electorate and spoke generously of his defeated opponent. He said —

Dudley Maslen, who was a member on the other side of politics from me and who is a personal friend of mine, did a marvellous job in the electorate and I take this opportunity to pass on my commiserations to him.

The 1993 state election saw Kevin Leahy defending the narrowest majority of any government member and with the political tide running strongly against Labor. However, with six candidates contesting Northern Rivers, he won a majority of 331 votes, 51.8 per cent over Dudley Maslen, achieving a small but notable swing when all other marginal seats moved in the opposite direction. He served as opposition Whip from 1993 until 1996 and as a shadow minister from 1994, covering the Gascoyne and later tourism, racing and gaming. The redistribution of 1994 meant that Wiluna and Jigalong were removed, Onslow was added and the district was renamed Ningaloo.

At the December 1996 election, Kevin Leahy was defeated in a swing of 1.9 per cent by a margin of just 119 votes in his third close contest. He remained in Carnarvon, at different times owning a store, a roadhouse, a hotel from 1996, and a plantation after 1999, where he lived and worked. He chaired the Carnarvon Sweeter Banana Co-operative

and served on the committee of the Carnarvon Racing Club, at which he was awarded life membership for his service. At the 2001 state election, Kevin Leahy was endorsed as the third candidate on the Australian Labor Party ticket for the Mining and Pastoral Region in the Legislative Council. He failed to be elected when the drift of votes to minor parties resulted in the loss of the third Labor seat to the Greens. Although the Liberal Party lost 13 seats in 2001, Rod Sweetman, MLA, gained a swing of 1.7 per cent in Ningaloo to win by 376 votes against a new Labor candidate. This illustrates the importance of Kevin Leahy's strong personal vote in the Gascoyne region.

From 2001, Kevin Leahy continued his community involvement with the Gascoyne Development Commission and served as chair from 2004 until 2008. He was unexpectedly recalled to Parliament when Hon Tom Stephens resigned to contest the 2004 federal election. Kevin Leahy was elected on a recount in September 2004 and served for eight months in the Legislative Council until May 2005. Ill health eventually forced Kevin Leahy to leave his plantation and return to Perth early this year.

We extend our sincere condolences to his sons, Kevin, Ryan and Daniel; his daughters, Jodie and Georgie; their partners; his six grandchildren; his extended family; and no doubt a broad constituency that mourns his loss. Vale Kevin Leahy.

MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central) [12.15 pm]: I rise on behalf of the Nationals WA to speak about Kevin John Leahy. Kevin Leahy was born on 17 January 1949 and was the member for the seat of Northern Rivers from 1989 to 1996. Carnarvon was the major town in that seat, as it is now in the seat of North West Central. Kevin also had a stint in the Legislative Council in the Mining and Pastoral Region. I also had a stint in the same place, taking over his office in 2005. He unsuccessfully contested the seat of Gascoyne in 1986 against Ian Laurance, and continued on to contest the by-election in 1987 against Dudley Maslen, also unsuccessfully, until the 1989 election, when the seat changed to Northern Rivers, including Labor's stronghold of Newman, defeating my father-in-law, Dudley Maslen, and entering Parliament at the same time as my father, Nick Catania, member for Balcatta under the Dowding government. As a former Premier said, if it were not for Kevin, Labor would not have won the 1989 election.

Kevin went on to hold many positions in Parliament for the Labor Party, but it is in his community and electorate that he made a difference. He always held the respect of his opponents but, more importantly, he held the respect of his constituents. Kevin Leahy was known as a politician, helping everyone out; a publican, sitting at the bar and showing that he can fill out the form, race off and make sure he can place those bets; and a grower, which makes us all look like growers at some point in time; but it was his passionate advocacy for country racing that made Kevin Leahy. He was a committee member of the Narrogin Racing club, the Roebourne jockey club and his beloved Carnarvon Race Club, for which he served as vice chairman and chairman for many years. Whilst vice chairman of the Country Racing Association, he was responsible for developing a new, fair and equitable funding system for all country clubs and was heavily involved in setting up Racing and Wagering Western Australia whilst a member of the then Labor government. Kevin raced many horses on all country tracks, from Broome to Perth, loving the atmosphere of these meetings, whilst taking the good days with the bad—let us say today more good days than bad.

Memorial services were held in Fremantle and at the Dalmacija Club in Carnarvon. The service was meant to be held at the Carnarvon racetrack but, for some reason, it rained that day and the road to the track was closed. In true Carnarvon fashion, the love for Kevin gave rise to making for a memorable memorial service at the Dalmacija Club. It was fitting that his ashes were spread at the winning post of the Carnarvon Race Club, which now has a race named after him—the Kevin Leahy memorial trophy.

I mention his children, who are not children anymore; my good friend Kevin Leahy Jr and his brother Ryan. Over a few quiet ones at the wake, we reminisced over having fathers in Parliament and what it meant for us kids. We had to fold in those days, because there were no folding machines; we had to lick every envelope, because there were no self-closing envelopes.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: There were folding machines, it's just your dad wouldn't buy one!

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is very true! They came in in the last election!

Of course, there was our much-loved profession of letterboxing around the electorate. To Jodie, Daniel, Georgie and the rest of the family, my sincere condolences. To Susanne and Claire, my condolences. From the National Party and, more importantly, the community of the Gascoyne and Carnarvon, all the best.

MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland — Minister for Police) [12.20 pm]: It is my privilege to stand and pay my respects to Kevin John Leahy and to pass on my condolences to his family. Having served with Kevin in this house, I can say unequivocally that he was one of the nicest people I ever served with. That was a very different era. Kevin was my first Whip when I entered Parliament at the by-election in 1994, Kevin having had more experience. Although I had not been in Parliament earlier when Kevin was first elected, a couple of my friends worked on Kevin's first campaign in 1989, and they worked again for him in 1993. He was the kind of person you could really enjoy working with. I enjoyed serving with him in the Parliament. He was a fantastic Whip and a really likeable person.

As members might imagine, it was very, very different era. Back in that day, there was quite a strong group of friends who all had different interests from what we have now. In those days, the Parliamentarians Cup at the trots used to be an incredibly well attended event because so many of my colleagues were interested in horseracing. That has certainly changed over the last 20 years or so. Kevin often had a few betting tickets, and in company with Ted Cunningham and some of the others who liked to bet on the races, they were often comparing notes. To take people back to that era, serving with us at that time were Norm Marlborough, Julian Grill, Ted Cunningham, Ernie Bridge, Fred Riebeling, John Kobelke and Nick Catania—I think people get the message there. There were not so many women in the Parliament at that time, and the interests of those people certainly varied.

Kevin helped with my first election in the by-election for Glendalough back in March 1994. He was a fantastic help and put in a huge effort, as a lot of people did—the whole parliamentary Labor team put in a huge effort. Upon election that year, we then contested another by-election, which was the Helena by-election, in, I think, September 1994. It was Kevin's role as Whip to assist us to help on the campaigns. Kevin had a proposal that three or four of us would head out to doorknock in Helena, which was not a fabulous task on sitting afternoons! It was pretty routinely Kevin driving us, and there would be Fred Riebeling, myself, Johnny Kobelke and a couple of others. A carload of us would go out and knock on those doors in Helena for two or three hours sometime after question time. Kevin was always good humoured. He was pretty much always our driver for whatever reason. I suspect one or two of the others might not always have held a driver's licence, so at least Kevin was consistent there! It was a really different era.

As Kevin was a former clerk of courts, we often turned to him when we wanted any advice or wanted someone to speak on a bill that basically had anything to do with the law. We said, "Kevin, you're our man." We had longer speaking times then, and Kevin would often be called upon to fill in with an hour-long speech. That is because we had longer speaking times and they were not for just the lead speaker, as they are now.

We had a lot of fun in those days. We all got along really well. Many members shared an interest in things such as horseracing. Kevin would often talk to us about the roadhouse and the pub.

The election he lost in December 1996 was a really tough election. It is a testament to Kevin that he came so close to holding the seat again. He had won twice against the odds. People might recall with that December 1996 election that we were expecting an election in February or March 1997, but Richard Court called the election early. There was generally a prevailing view that had he waited until February or March, it might have saved us a few seats, and I suspect Kevin would have been re-elected if the election had been in February or March. I think it was on 14 December 1996 and we lost seats that we held by greater percentages than Kevin's at that election. That was the election in which the Labor Party put out a letter in the last week of the campaign that said, "Don't give the Liberals a blank cheque." I thought it was a pretty defeatist letter at the time and said so. I certainly did not put it out in my electorate. That was the first time I contested Midland. It was a tough time. It is a credit to Kevin that if he had not been such a popular local member, he would not have come as close as he did to holding that seat in that election.

Kevin was an outstanding representative of his community. There were many times after politics when some of us called in to the pub in Carnarvon and caught up with Kevin to have a meal or a drink. He was always a really sociable fellow, a decent fellow. He was always prepared to do the right thing by someone and to give a helping hand where it was needed. He was a person who was very, very generous of spirit. It was certainly a privilege for me to serve with him in this Parliament. His family can be very, very proud of not just the contribution he made to this Parliament, but that he made to whatever community he was living in at the time. For most of the more recent years Kevin lived in Carnarvon and was a larger-than-life identity in that community mainly because of the good works and camaraderie that he always offered. I pay a very strong tribute to Kevin. He was one of the nicest people I have ever served with in this Parliament.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Leader of the House) [12.26 pm]: I rise very briefly as Leader of the House to speak to the family of Mr Kevin Leahy. Members enter this place and some stay for a long time and some do not stay as long. We must acknowledge that these condolence motions are very important. We acknowledge those people who have served the Parliament and the way in which they served the Parliament. Today, we have heard from various speakers about the contribution of Hon Kevin Leahy as a parliamentarian, as a member of his constituency in Carnarvon and the Gascoyne area, and also, of course, as a family man and a member of the Labor Party. I certainly acknowledge him on behalf of the Labor Party. He is indeed a cherished former member. We particularly pay tribute to him for his dedication and loyalty to the Australian Labor Party. That was a significant contribution.

For members in this place, both past and present, who have contested elections and not been successful or have had a number of contests before they have been successful, it is a very strong commitment to any cause. It is important that the family knows that the Labor Party acknowledges Kevin's tremendous service to the party and to its values. We pay tribute to you, his family members, for that remarkable service. For those of us who visited Carnarvon, particularly in the early times when I was a member of this place, the hospitality of Mr Leahy was always on tap and always very much appreciated.

To all of his family who are here this afternoon as we mark the passing of your loved one, Hon Kevin Leahy, we thank you for allowing him to be part of the story that is the Parliament of Western Australia and the broader story that is the story of Western Australia.

Members: Hear, hear!

The SPEAKER: I request all members to rise for one minute's silence in order to carry the motion.

Question passed; members and officers standing as a mark of respect.
