



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

HON KEVIN JOHN LEAHY

Condolence Motion



Legislative Council

Wednesday, 4 November 2020

Reprinted from Hansard

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HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [1.02 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house expresses its deep regret at the death of Hon Kevin Leahy, a former member of the Legislative Council for the Mining and Pastoral Region and a former member of the Legislative Assembly for the electorate of Northern Rivers; and places on record its appreciation for his long public service, and tenders its profound sympathy to members of his family in their bereavement.

I want to start by acknowledging the family of the former member who are with us in the President's gallery today. Hon Kevin Leahy was one of a handful of members to serve in both chambers, and he was predominantly known as the member for Northern Rivers in the Legislative Assembly. His family has just come from listening to a condolence motion in the other place. It serves as a testament to his character that members in both houses are contributing and reflecting today on his contribution.

I want to particularly acknowledge Claire, his former partner, with whom—because we are in Western Australia—I went to school. They were together for over 20 years after they had met in Carnarvon during 1998. I also acknowledge those of his children who are here in the gallery—Georgie, Kevin Jr and Jodie.

By his own admission, well before the time he served in here, he had described this chamber as being a quiet retirement house for old gentlemen. He would go on later in his valedictory remarks, after serving nine months here, to say —

It would be a good training for most members of the other place to have a six-month probationary period in this house to tone them down a little bit on occasions.

Kevin was born in 1949 in East Fremantle to his parents, Kevin and Dorothy, and grew up in Palmyra. He attended Bicton Primary School and then John Curtin School, where he was a bright student and a good sportsman. He was a hard worker, not just as a member of Parliament but in his many pursuits throughout his life. Completing his Diploma in Legal Studies through TAFE, Kevin started his career as a clerk with the then State Housing Department in 1965. As he noted in his valedictory speech, many of those who came from the city as he did went to the regions looking for a promotion —

If people remain there for any time, they do not want to leave.

That is precisely what happened to him when in 1974, at that stage working for the Crown Law Department, he moved to Kalgoorlie. He then rose through the ranks as he moved around the state, to Kalgoorlie, Roebourne and Narrogin, and finally to the place that he would call home, Carnarvon. By the mid-1970s, Kevin was the clerk of courts with the Crown Law Department, a position he held until his election to Parliament.

Kevin also started his family in Carnarvon, marrying Susan and having his first children. Carnarvon became as much a part of his persona as it was his home. He was also seen locally as a true Carnarvon identity. Apart from his business ventures, which I will talk about in a minute, he was a member of several community associations or organisations, including secretary of the Civil Service Association Gascoyne branch, secretary of the Gascoyne branch of the State Electricity Commission unit, and a member of the local P&C, the Yugoslav Unity Club, the Gascoyne Local Enterprise Committee, the Carnarvon Race Club and the Carnarvon Squash Club, and the list goes on. Importantly for us, he was a member of the local Labor branch at a time when the ALP did not hold a single seat in the north west.

Not long after that, Kevin, the “true believer”, found himself running as the Labor candidate for Gascoyne in the 1986 state election, eventuating in a loss, as so many first-time candidates experience. It would take three attempts before he won the seat of Northern Rivers in 1989, completely against the trend for that election. Former Premier Peter Dowding describes Kevin well in the condolence notice that he placed in *The West Australian* —

As Clerk of the Courts in the north of WA he exhibited a respect and care for the Indigenous community.

Determined to become a Labor member of Parliament, he fought and lost and fought again and won. No soft, safe seat entry into office but hard fought community engagement got him there. He loyally served the community of the Carnarvon region in Parliament.

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During Kevin's time in the Legislative Assembly, he served in a range of positions—as opposition Whip, as regional spokesperson for the Gascoyne, as Shadow Minister for Tourism, Racing and Gaming, and as a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation—which would, I am sure, have enthralled him—the Select Committee on Energy and Processing of Resources, the Select Committee on the Water Bill, and the Select Committee on Heavy Transport. He held that seat until 1996, when the electoral tide and a redistribution meant he could no longer hold the new seat of Ningaloo, but he gave it a really red hot go. As we know, that would not be the end of his involvement in politics, but this intermission was significant for him personally because during this period he met Claire, and his family grew once more.

With the resignation of Hon Tom Stephens to contest the federal seat of Kalgoorlie, a casual vacancy in the Mining and Pastoral Region was created, and Kevin was elected to the Legislative Council, in which he served again from September 2004 to May 2005. Madam President, I sat next to him for that period, at about where Hon Darren West sits now. He made many friends who are still serving in this chamber, not the least of which is my colleague Hon Alannah MacTiernan, who I know will make a contribution to this motion today.

Kevin's life after Parliament continued to shape the community that he had grown so much to love. His work in business helped shape the Carnarvon that we know today, whether it was the hotel, the rental car dealership, the local TAB, Kickstarters Roadhouse, the Hubble Street Store, or the "ice truck". He also ventured into the banana plantation industry and was well known there, too. His public service did not end there. He served as the chair of the Gascoyne Development Commission from 2001 to 2008. Kevin was determined to leave his community around him better than he had found it, and he did. Kevin Leahy led a big life, both inside and outside the Parliament.

On behalf of the state Parliamentary Labor Party and the government of Western Australia, I pass on our condolences to his family and friends.

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [1.09 pm]: I stand on behalf of the Liberal Party to support the condolence motion for Hon Kevin Leahy, and in doing so I acknowledge and welcome members of Kevin's family and his friends in the chamber.

Kevin Leahy had a 14-year career as a clerk of courts in regional Western Australia before serving eight years as the first and last member for the Carnarvon and Newman-based Legislative Assembly seat of Northern Rivers. As a Carnarvon plantation and business owner, he was recalled to Parliament in 2004 for a lap of honour in the Legislative Council. Born in East Fremantle in January 1949, Kevin Leahy left John Curtin High School in 1965 at age 16 to work as a clerk with the State Housing Commission, before transferring to the Crown Law Department in 1972. He obtained a diploma in legal studies and commenced work as a clerk of courts in 1975. Having enjoyed six years in Roebourne, he was stationed in Carnarvon from 1983. In Carnarvon he was appointed a justice of the peace and was active in both community and sporting clubs. Later, both during and after his parliamentary term, and at different times, he owned a store, a roadhouse, a hotel and, most notably, after 1999, a plantation that became his home.

As a committed member of the Australian Labor Party, he had two unsuccessful tilts at the seat of Gascoyne, one in 1986 and one in the 1987 by-election, when he narrowed the Liberal Party margin to 246 votes, or 47 per cent in a straight contest. In the 1989 election, with the new and larger district of Northern Rivers replacing Gascoyne, Kevin Leahy was elected in another straight contest with a majority of 108 votes, gaining a seat against the prevailing tide in a close election. Four years later, in 1993, he increased his majority after preferences to 331, or 51.8 per cent, despite the strong overall win by the Liberal–National coalition. In the 1993–1996 Parliament, he served as opposition Whip and as shadow Minister for the Gascoyne; Tourism, Racing and Gaming.

The electorate of Northern Rivers was slightly altered and renamed Ningaloo before the December 1996 election, when Kevin was defeated by 119 votes after a small swing of 1.9 per cent. At the 2001 election, he stood for the third position on the Australian Labor Party ticket for the Mining and Pastoral Region of the Legislative Council, but failed to be elected when there was a major drift of votes to the Greens, Independents and One Nation. Notably, in the absence of his candidacy for Ningaloo, his party suffered an adverse 1.7 per cent swing in this most marginal Liberal seat, notwithstanding the statewide swing that elected the Gallop Labor government.

He was appointed to the Gascoyne Development Commission in 2001 and chaired it from 2004 until 2008. His local and regional community service was interrupted on 28 September 2004, when he was elected to the Legislative Council in a recount caused by the resignation of Hon Tom Stephens to contest the federal seat of Kalgoorlie. He was to serve the remainder of this term, until 21 May 2005. Kevin Leahy's nine months' service as a member of the Legislative Council gave him few opportunities to speak, but coincided with crucial debates on the historic one vote, one value legislation in April and May 2005. In these final months he served as deputy government Whip.

At the close of session on 19 May 2005, the then Leader of the House, the late Hon Kim Chance, referred to Kevin as —

Having served with such distinction in the other place, he went back into business in Carnarvon and then received the call that he was probably dreading for years that he needed to return and be an honourable person.

The then Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council, Hon Norman Moore, described him as having been a very good member for Northern Rivers.

Characteristically, in his final remarks Kevin Leahy expressed his disappointment at the lack of adequate funding for country racing, which he described as the social fabric of a lot of country towns, but spoke with enthusiasm at the revival of the banana industry in Carnarvon and the so-called lunch box bagged bananas that we see in supermarkets today. This speech showed his commitment to his region and community.

It is appropriate to recognise the parliamentary service of Kevin Leahy and other former members of this chamber who have filled casual vacancies caused by resignations to contest lower house elections, and have sought to use their brief membership constructively. He remained in Carnarvon until ill health forced him to leave his plantation and eventually relocate to Perth early this year. We express our condolences to his partner, Claire, and to his five children, Kevin, Ryan, Daniel, Jodie and Georgie and their families, including six grandchildren.

HON JACQUI BOYDELL (Mining and Pastoral) [1.14 pm]: I also rise on behalf the Nationals WA to support the condolence motion for Hon Kevin Leahy, and I welcome his family and friends to the chamber.

Kevin really was very prominent in the Carnarvon community, and I hail from Carnarvon, as does Kevin's family. When we hear people talk about leaders in the community, we wonder how they actually express that leadership. In my experience, Kevin expressed that leadership by being involved in many community organisations. He was chair of the Sweeter Banana Co-operative for quite a long time. He was also chair of the Carnarvon Race Club, which he was very passionate about. He was one of those people that one always saw around the community; he was exceptionally proud of the Carnarvon community.

I was elected to this place after having spoken to him a couple of times about coming from Carnarvon and being able to represent our region as a regional member, and what an honour that was. I know from those conversations that he really felt that and he reflected it to me, and we both had enormous respect for each other. Although we came from different sides of the political spectrum, we both shared the view that we wanted to represent our community as best we could.

I knew Kevin for a long time and first met him as a young person, living in Carnarvon. He actually assisted me in my 20s when I was working for a media outlet in Carnarvon and he was the local member. There was an industrial dispute at the media outlet about the wages it paid to its employees; we had all been underpaid, and the company refused us back pay. At the suggestion of my parents I went to see Kevin, as the local member, not really sure what he would be able to do to assist me and my colleagues, but he actually negotiated a back payment outcome for us. That was some 30-odd years ago, and as a young 20-year-old I was very grateful. I was not very experienced in dealing with major employers at that time, and he certainly assisted me and I never forgot it. My parents were very heavily involved in the Liberal Party at that time, so I was exceptionally grateful to him for opening his door to me and going in to bat on my behalf. That really exemplified what he thought his role was—to represent the people of his electorate—and he certainly did that in my case.

I want to touch on a couple of other personal experiences with Kevin that were very important to me. One was his involvement in Sweeter Bananas, of which I was a member when I was a grower; my parents are still members. Another was his involvement in the Carnarvon Race Club. They are two very important organisations for the people of Carnarvon. Kevin was a founding member of the Sweeter Banana Co-operative, and was chair from 2005 to 2007. During his time as chair, the cooperative negotiated a commission rebate from its market agents, and achieved Freshcare environmental certification—the first banana growers in Australia to do so. That was exceptionally significant for the industry. For those who are not in the industry, I am going to try to explain how important it was to growers that we were able to take that step forward because it really changed the way that growers placed themselves in the market and how they could get return for their product. Although it may not be significant to the general public, that marketing change was exceptionally significant to the growing community as it allowed growers to really reap the benefits of their produce.

With his exceptional negotiating skills, Kevin, as chair of the board, allowed the members of the cooperative to completely reposition and open up the banana growing industry in the Gascoyne, so growers no longer had to rely on market agents. Kevin did that by ensuring that all growers negotiated the Freshcare accreditation, which meant that they were able to deal directly with the big supermarkets to sell their products without having to go through a market agent, which took a 15 per cent share of the produce. This was significant for banana growers, particularly when they were getting \$2 a kilo. That 15 per cent the growers were paying to a market agent was a lot of money, so this totally changed the playing field for growers in the Gascoyne and it actually made our banana growers competitive with Queensland. Under Kevin's leadership, that was negotiated and growers in the Gascoyne community were able to take control of their own destiny. As a grower myself at that time, it was very important that the cooperative was able to continue to operate through that negotiation. Kevin also received some funding from the government that allowed the Sweeter Banana group to reposition itself and market itself. Today, it is a strong growing force in the banana industry, as a result of his actions.

I also indicated Kevin's involvement in the Carnarvon Race Club. It is a significant part of the social calendar of the Carnarvon community. It is enormously supported in the Carnarvon region and the Gascoyne. These words were provided to me by Peter Daly, a long-term trainer in the region, and my dad, Tom Day, who is currently the chair of the Carnarvon Race Club. In their words —

“Kevin Leahy was a passionate advocate for country racing. He was a committee man of the Narrogin Race Club, Roebourne Jockey Club and his beloved Carnarvon Race Club, where 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 the setting up of RWWA 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.

When we all do not have a winner —

His ashes were spread at the winning post of the Carnarvon Race Course, following a well attended memorial service on the 17th July.”

That is how important the race club was to Kevin and his family.

Kevin was a champion and a leader of the Carnarvon community. We thank him for his service. We thank his family for allowing him the time to do that. I wish to express, as I said at the beginning, on behalf of the National Party, our sincere thanks. May he rest in peace.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development) [1.24 pm]:

It is great to have the opportunity to have Kevin's family here today to hear all of these words about this very big country character that was Kevin Leahy. It has been some months now since Kevin has passed and there have been memorials in both Perth and Carnarvon, and many tributes have flowed to Kevin. I want to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of Kevin Jr in his piece describing a day in the life of his father in the latter years of his empire. It was a sort of Bloomsday experience, almost, as Kevin described how his father would start the day in a leisurely way at the plantation and then move to the pub and then to the roadhouse et cetera. It was very well told.

My first encounter with Kevin was when I was elected here in 1993. Labor lost that election, but Kevin held onto the seat of Northern Rivers. I became very friendly with Kevin and his comrade Fred Riebeling. They were complete larrikins and we spent a lot of hours late at night in the courtyard listening to their outrageous deeds from the clerk of court days. There was definitely a story about some very suspect dealings with a dead cat, but Fred Riebeling now denies that story!

One of my other striking memories is of Kevin as a very robust and alternative voice in the caucus. Kevin was definitely someone who helped us in those days in opposition to keep it real, to focus on the concerns of the punters, particularly those in the bush. Together with his other great colleague, the already then “elder statesman” Tom Stephens, they relentlessly advocated for and educated and enthused us about country issues. Like his predecessor Frank Wise, a former member for Gascoyne, Kevin was a great spruiker of Carnarvon and the future of the banana industry. I acknowledge all that Hon Jacqui Boyde has said about the contribution that Kevin made in his role of supporting that development of the Sweeter Banana Co-operative and the advantages of that. I think there are a great many lessons to be learnt by the agricultural and horticultural sector of the value of cooperatives and we now see more people are coming to understand that if farmers get together, they can develop greater value and greater viability of their product.

As Kevin would enthuse about Carnarvon, I had already spent a stint in Carnarvon in the 1980s, so I was an easy convert to his message that Carnarvon was the “Venice of the North”, complete with fascine. Kevin was really enthusiastic about the entire electorate. He also loved the mining aspect and was very enthusiastic about hospitality. I note that one of Kevin's aspirations for Carnarvon from his days in this place and in the development commission was a resort-style hotel for Carnarvon. I will make this pledge to Kevin: we will try to make that happen, because I share his view that that is very important for the town's transformation and the creation of a wide range of economic opportunities for that town. During that period, I met another of his partners in crime, Labor diehard and daredevil pilot, Len Paggi. When we heard those stories, we found it somehow extraordinary that they both survived those aeronautic adventures as they crossed that huge electorate. I am sure many of those stories would make the Civil Aviation Safety Authority blush.

Alas, at the 1996 campaign, which was not our finest, Kevin narrowly lost his seat. He was very vocal in his view that a campaign strategy around an expectation to lose did not cut it in the country. Nevertheless, back home, he was energised to go about and build that empire—the roadhouse, the coolstores, the pubs, the TAB, the hire car venue, the plantation and, of course, the horses, all the time with his public involvement in the Carnarvon Race Club and the Gascoyne Development Commission. Our lives then intercepted in a surprising way around 1997 when my good friend Claire Dwyer decided to leave city life and head up to Carnarvon with ute; dog, Betty; and her guitar. I said, “I can put you in touch with a good friend of mine; he's got the gassy up there; maybe you could get

a job with him.” However, Claire declined; she was just going to go up and make her own way. Anyhow, during my next couple of visits to Carnarvon, the local journo, who I gathered might have had a little more than a professional interest in Kevin, began quizzing me about whether I knew anything about this red-headed guitar player called Claire. It became very clear that Claire had, indeed, made her own connections that had led to Kevin and Claire eventually setting up shop on a plantation and adding the beautiful Georgia to his clan.

Over the next decade, much of my time spent in the Gascoyne involved Kevin and his passion for country racing, as Hon Jacqui Boyde has also set out. That involved a couple of different things—often very freezing nights with Peter and Leanne Daley at the stables on a Friday night. Far more fun would happen the next day, which was socialising with the FBI in the tin shed, which Kevin, as the chair and chief sponsor of the Carnarvon Race Club, passed off as the corporate box.

I told this story at the funeral but it is very amusing. Kevin must have worked out that I had always wanted my name in a race book as a connection, so he was pulling together a syndicate to buy a horse that he told me was called Harmony Alliance. Apparently, it was named after a new Labor faction that he was working on with various ex-members of Parliament. I was very conscious that racehorses are generally money guzzling machines. There is an old saying, “If you’ve got an enemy, buy him a horse.” I had to go to the Belmont races that day and I said, “If you give me the winner of the last race, I’ll be in.” Much to my amazement—I got very excited—that tip paid off. I did not realise at the time it was actually the favourite! I handed over my \$5 000 as my share in this new factional horse, but it had the same fate as the faction. I never got to see my name in the race book. Unfortunately, Harmony Alliance pulled up lame in its first trial. As minister responsible for animal welfare, I would like to think it was put out at a very nice home rather than in some of the alternatives. As has been said here today, Kevin’s love for racing and his view that it was part of the glue of country life was extraordinary. It was a fantastic and very moving moment to be out there with the family and with Peter and Leanne and watch Georgia cast Kevin’s ashes on the finishing line of the Carnarvon racetrack.

To Kevin Jr, Jodie, Ryan, Daniel, Holly, Remo, Ava, Claire, George and Sue, sister, Cheryl, and brother, Garry, Kevin loved you all and he was very, very proud of you.

Kevin, Carnarvon will never be quite the same without you, but we will continue to work to fulfil your vision for that great community. Vale.

HON SIMON O’BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [1.35 pm]: A condolence motion to a late member is a special occasion for all of us in this house as well as for connections to the family, friends and loved ones of our departed member, to whom we want to offer a hand of sincere friendship and condolence. We do that by exhibiting our esteem for your relative, your loved one but also our departed colleague and friend. I think I am the only one on this side of the house, presently, who was here when Kevin served in this place, and I recall him coming here. He came in circumstances that have been described as “filling a casual vacancy”. He was elected; we call it filling a casual vacancy, but the fact of the matter is that a vacancy arose, the votes were recounted and Kevin Leahy got elected because he had the votes to do so. He was elected to many things over the years, and the retelling today of many aspects of his story remind us of what a sound character he was.

I remember him occupying a place just over there on the government benches, me sitting on this side thinking: “I wouldn’t mind swapping places with you one of these days.” We assess and weigh up a member when they arrive, not as part of a group after an election but as an individual. It took a very short time for me to work that out, and say to myself, “Yes, this guy is the real deal.” His maturity, his life experience and his capacity to get things done and to communicate without resorting to overblown rhetoric, with a nature of quiet, purposeful, strong achievement, was readily apparent. I offer that compliment not only to his memory but also for whatever comfort it may offer to those who know only too well what a fine fellow he was.

He was never too old to learn. I was just referring to the *Hansard* record of his final speech to us here, on 19 May 2005, part of which was in response to some chat, I think, from Hon Kim Chance, who we all hold in fond memory. He spoke about a couple of words that Kim Chance had reminded him of that “have come back to haunt me” he said, and I quote —

The words were along the lines of this chamber being a quiet retirement house for old gentlemen. I never thought that at this stage of my career I would be sitting here for nine months of my life. I have learned in that nine months to appreciate this chamber to a far greater extent than I did before. It would be good training for most members of the other place to have a six-month probationary period in this house to tone them down a little bit on occasions.

They are words of maturity, words of respect and words of life experience, said in good humour. What a fine life well lived it was. I join with other speakers today in offering the view that all our lives and the wellbeing of our community is all the richer for his having been such a prominent part in it.

Members: Hear, hear!

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Kate Doust) [1.40 pm]: I would also like to offer my condolences to the family of Hon Kevin Leahy. Like some of my colleagues, I was fortunate to spend time with him in this chamber and always found him to be an exceptionally, thoroughly good bloke. I add to those words of condolence already expressed.

Members, we have been dealing with the condolence motion that was moved by the Leader of the House to acknowledge the recent passing of Hon Kevin Leahy. In putting this motion today, I will ask members to now rise and stand in their places to indicate their support for the motion and to observe one minute's silence in the memory of the late Hon Kevin Leahy, an esteemed former member of this Council.

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

The PRESIDENT: Thank you, members. I advise that in accordance with our custom and practice, a copy of the *Hansard* transcript of this condolence motion will be forwarded to Hon Kevin Leahy's family in due course.
