



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

HON MIKE BARNETT, AM

Condolence Motion



Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Reprinted from Hansard

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MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Premier) [12.01 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house expresses its deep regret at the death of Hon Mike Barnett, AM, a former member of the Legislative Assembly for the electorate of Rockingham. It places on record its appreciation for his long public service and extends deep condolences to his friends and family in their bereavement.

I begin by paying my respects and acknowledging Mike Barnett's family and friends, some of whom have joined us today. However, my thoughts are with Ros and their family at this time and I know they will read the comments that we make today when they are in a position to do so.

Hon Mike Barnett, AM, was an archetypal local member. He was a man of diverse experiences, including hardships. He was deeply connected and dedicated to his community. He was a businessman with business acumen, transferred here from a career outside of politics, but, most importantly, he was a good man who was deeply respected in his electorate.

Mike Barnett was born in 1946 in Derbyshire, England. He came to Australia as a child migrant when he was 12 years old, and went to Fairbridge Farm Primary School. He did not speak a lot publicly about his experiences as a child migrant, nor his time at Fairbridge Farm. However, in his final year as a parliamentarian, he chaired the Select Committee into Child Migration. His latter school years were spent at Pinjarra Senior High School, and in 1967 when he was aged only 21 years, he became the proprietor of a caravan park in Rockingham.

After joining the Labor Party in 1970, Mike was elected as the inaugural member for Rockingham in 1974 at the age of 27. He is one of only three members to serve the Rockingham electorate in its 54-year existence. He went on to serve the Rockingham electorate for 23 years, until 1996. In that time, he served under six Premiers and contested seven elections. He was appointed shadow Minister for Lands and Forests; Conservation and Environment following the 1977 state election. He later added fisheries and wildlife from 1980 to 1983. Mike was elected Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 1986, serving until 1993 when he retired from that role.

Mike Barnett was a strong advocate for public education. He campaigned for funding for Rockingham Senior High School from early in his term, and used his first speech—usually a time to hold back from contentious issues—to call out the then Liberal government for backing out of a commitment from the previous Labor government to fund upgrades. In 2006, Mike was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the Parliament of Western Australia and to the community of Rockingham. In recognition of Mike's contribution to Rockingham, the Mike Barnett Sports Complex was named in his honour—an important resource for the local community and one of the most used sports centres in the state.

He battled dementia for many years. However, he still managed to get out and vote in the Rockingham by-election last year and lent his support to current member, Magenta Marshall. His dedication to the Labor Party was absolute. Mike passed away peacefully, too soon, in December. He was aged only 77. He is survived by his wife, Ros, and his children and step-children, Sue, Rob, Julie and Tony.

Mike was a much-loved member of the Rockingham Labor family and of the wider Rockingham community. I met Mike on only a handful of occasions, but I heard very quickly of his passing and people's sadness about it, because the Rockingham family moved swiftly to acknowledge and grieve his passing and pay their respects. Our thoughts are with Ros and the family, who miss him deeply and are still very much grieving the loss of such a great man. Mike Barnett was a champion for Rockingham—and that he truly was. He will be missed.

Vale, Mike Barnett.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [12.06 pm]: I rise on behalf of the Parliamentary National Party to pay my respects and reflect on the contribution that Hon Michael Barnett, AM, made to this Parliament and public life. I note the presence in the chamber today of family and friends.

Mike was born on 24 January 1946 in Belper, Derbyshire, England, and arrived in Western Australia 12 years later in 1958. He was educated in Falmouth, England, but also in Western Australia at Fairbridge Farm Primary School, Pinjarra, and Pinjarra High School. He went on to become a Caravan park proprietor and the director of the Palm Beach Caravan Park.

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He was first elected to the electorate of Rockingham in 1974, shortly after joining the Australian Labor Party in 1970. While in Parliament, he served as the Chair of Committees and was an active member of the Joint House Committee, Parliamentary Standards Committee and Standing Orders Committee. He went on to serve as a shadow minister, and his portfolios were largely focused on lands and forests; conservation and environment; and fisheries and wildlife. Mike's service was recognised and extended when he was elected as Speaker on 10 January 1986. He went on to serve for seven years before retiring. Mike was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia on Australia Day 2006 for service to this Parliament and to the community of Rockingham. He was awarded the Centenary of Federation Medal in 2003 and the Jubilee Medal from Her Majesty the late Queen in 1977.

In his 1996 valedictory speech, after 23 years in Parliament, he mentioned a man by the name of Mark McGowan who was the Labor Party's candidate selected to replace him for the seat of Rockingham. As a matter of fact, he said, "I hope he will go on to provide a service to this state from a high office. In fact, I am sure he will." Mike was quite correct in his prediction.

Vale, Hon Michael Barnett, AM.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Leader of the House) [12.08 pm]: Although many of us do not always know a lot about the person who may have served in this place and who we are acknowledging through a condolence motion, condolence motions are very important. They are reflections on stories of this place.

In 1974, when Mike Barnett was elected to the seat of Rockingham, Rockingham was a very different place from what it is now. It had a population of around 9 000 people, many of whom had come to Rockingham from the United Kingdom as migrants and had settled there. That part of the Perth metropolitan area abounded with stories. When Mike Barnett decided to put himself forward in 1974 to represent the people of that area, it was a remarkable thing to do. He entered Parliament in 1974 and served until 1996. During his time in this place, his electorate, like Western Australia, changed. As the member for Rockingham, he contributed to the enduring story of the place where he lived and represented people. Of course, he brought the issues of the day to this place on their behalf.

When acknowledging people who served in this place and have passed away, it is important for all of us to recognise that, although we possibly did not know them—many of us might not have known Mike Barnett personally—the contribution they made as members of Parliament and of this place is significant. Reading his inaugural and valedictory speeches, the thing that comes through very strongly is his great warmth and his great love for the place and people he represented and the place where he lived.

I met Mike Barnett on a number of occasions. He came to my electorate office in the early 2000s. He had developed a love of photography, and I am very proud to have a framed photograph he took of an osprey. Mike loved the natural environment. He loved the beauty of Western Australia. He loved the fact that this place had provided him with a joyous livelihood. As the Premier highlighted, he came here as a child migrant and his initial years were spent living in Pinjarra, attending Fairbridge Farm School and then Pinjarra High School. He later moved to Rockingham and was a successful businessman and proprietor of a caravan park.

He was an interesting fellow. I remember him, as the member for the adjoining electorate, coming to Mandurah on a couple of occasions. I was not a member of Parliament then, but he came to Mandurah on a number of occasions. If we read his speeches, we see that he had interesting thoughts about Mandurah; he thought that Mandurah was being pork barrelled by the Liberal Party at the time, and he thought it was unfair that his electorate was being overlooked by the pork barrelling. Of interest here—this is one reason I was such a strong supporter of one vote, one value—is that Mandurah at that time was protected by the lack of one vote, one value, and I can see why he felt that his people were unfairly looked on.

I spoke to Ros, his wife, last week. I send our sincerest condolences to Ros. I know that she loved Mike with all the beauty of her heart. I also send condolences to Mike's stepchildren and family—Sue, Rob, Julie and Tony—and to his many admirers. I know that people who served in this place while he was a member held him in great regard and respect as a local member and character and for the positions he held, including as Speaker of this place. I really hope that people like Mike Barnett are remembered for the contribution they make to the story of this place. They are people, and they bring personal stories to a place like this, and this place is all the richer for it.

I send our sincerest condolences to Ros. Most importantly, may we remember Hon Mike Barnett, AM.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [12.14 pm]: I rise on behalf of the Parliamentary Liberal Party to acknowledge the distinguished service of Mike Barnett.

Mike Barnett earned the distinction of serving as the inaugural member for the electorate of Rockingham. He also served as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly for seven years and as a consistent community leader within the City of Rockingham.

Born in Derbyshire in the United Kingdom in 1946, Mike Barnett attended school in Falmouth, Cornwall, before migrating with his family to Pinjarra in 1958. He completed his education at Fairbridge Farm School and at Pinjarra High School. He went into business and, at the age of 21, was a caravan park proprietor in Rockingham.

He joined the Australian Labor Party in 1970. The electoral district of Rockingham was first created in a redistribution in 1972, and then comprised the Shire of Rockingham and Shire of Serpentine–Jarrahdale. Officially, it was a country electorate. Mike Barnett was endorsed as the Labor candidate in a notionally Liberal seat, but at the March 1974 general election, he polled 46.8 per cent in Rockingham, with a final majority of 137 votes or 50.9 per cent.

In his inaugural speech in August 1974, he dedicated himself to his electorate and quoted a colleague in saying that although “There have been many great people in this Parliament, and some small ones too,” no-one had been so big “that his feet did not touch the ground”. He went on to express his concern at possible delays in expanding Rockingham High School and the need to protect what was then a pristine foreshore at Warnbro. At the 1977 election, when a further redistribution had contracted his electorate to the boundaries of the Shire of Rockingham, he was re-elected by a margin of 718 votes or 54 per cent, despite being opposed by a popular local general practitioner and contending with an overall swing to the Court government. Subsequently, in the next three elections, he polled between 63 per cent and 69.7 per cent of the vote.

Notwithstanding demographic change in Rockingham after 1974, Mike Barnett was clearly a popular and effective local member. Between 1977 and 1983, Mike Barnett served as an opposition shadow minister in the portfolios of lands and forests, conservation and environment, and fisheries and wildlife. After the election of the Burke government, he served as Chairman of Committees until 1986, when he was nominated as Speaker, and he served as Speaker until the 1993 election. In more difficult political climates in 1989 and 1993, he retained Rockingham with final margins of 54.4 per cent and 55.5 per cent. He retired in December 1996, after nearly 23 years of parliamentary service.

Maintaining his extensive community involvement, Mike Barnett served as chair of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority between 2004 and 2008. In 2006, he was awarded a membership of the Order of Australia for his contribution to the Parliament of Western Australia and the Rockingham community. At the opening last year of the Mike Barnett Sports Complex in Rockingham, his dedicated service to the area was widely acknowledged and celebrated.

Our condolences go his partner, Ros, and to his children and stepchildren, Sue, Rob, Julie and Tony.

Vale, Mike Barnett.

MRS M.R. MARSHALL (Rockingham) [12.18 pm]: Today I rise to contribute to the condolence motion on the passing of the former member for Rockingham, Hon Mike Barnett, AM. As we reflect on Mike’s life and remarkable journey, I extend my deepest condolences to his family and loved ones on behalf of the Rockingham community.

Mike joined the Labor Party in 1970 and remained a valued member of the labour movement since then. In 1974, he became the first member for Rockingham at the state election held that year, and he continued to serve our community for the next 22 years. Mike was more than a politician; he was a tireless advocate for the people he served, and he shared a deep love for the community he represented. This was evident from day one with his inaugural speech to Parliament. Mike used his speech to advocate for the needs and views of the community he represented, especially to push for upgrades to Rockingham Senior High School, highlight the financial pressure facing recently migrated home owners as a result of interest rate rises, and advocate for strong protection of our magnificent beaches along the Warnbro Sound.

In Mike’s inaugural speech, he said —

I can assure my constituents that they have a member of Parliament who is at all times available to give his undivided attention for the benefit of the electorate.

Until his retirement from politics, Mike remained the accessible member of Parliament that he promised his constituents he would be. Following his retirement, he continued to be a passionate advocate for our community. As other members have highlighted, Mike served our electorate during a period of significant growth for Rockingham. When he was elected, Rockingham was constituted as a local shire, and there were no traffic lights within the electorate. However, during his time in office, Mike transformed our community. He developed our second public high school at Safety Bay and opened many local primary schools. He advocated for the extension of the Kwinana Freeway to Safety Bay Road and the train line to Rockingham. He improved the local road network and bus connectivity, and he opened the Rockingham Kwinana District Hospital. He was also the first patient in the hospital’s operating theatre after he was injured playing rugby that very same weekend.

Over my time as a candidate and now as a member, I have had countless Rockingham locals share stories and memories with me that are a testament to Mike’s character and speak to how valued he was. I had the privilege of first meeting Mike on the first election campaign I ever worked on, which was Hon Madeleine King’s campaign for Brand in 2016. I was a young phone banker and booth captain during that election, and I cannot recall ever going to the campaign office without seeing Mike there, working hard putting together booth kits, building yard signs, stuffing envelopes, or just providing sage campaign advice and guidance to the newbies like me.

Since his passing, long-time local Labor Party members like Ester Grogan and Andrew and Margaret Mitchell have recounted Mike's gentle manner and that he was a man who genuinely cared for the community. He always put the needs of others first. He always listened, he was always available, and he was always up for a chat.

Many Rockingham locals would know of Mike's favourite bench on Warnbro Beach Road, where he loved to sit and watch the sun go down over the Warnbro dunes, and he never turned down the opportunity to have a chat with anyone passing by. As we mourn the loss of Mike, may we also celebrate his life and the profound impact he has had on our community. His legacy will live on in the hearts and minds of all who knew him, and his contributions will continue to inspire us for years to come. Of course, his legacy as a champion of local sport will live on, with the Mike Barnett Sports Complex, our local basketball and netball indoor sport stadium, named in his honour.

Mike leaves a legacy that all of us here in this place aspire to achieve—to be an accessible, effective and approachable advocate for the communities that we represent. May Mike Barnett rest in peace, and may Ros and his family find solace in knowing that his work and contributions to Rockingham will be remembered and are appreciated by the community that he built. On behalf of Rockingham, thank you, Mike.

Members: Hear, hear!

MR T.J. HEALY (Southern River — Parliamentary Secretary) [12.22 pm]: I also rise to honour the service of Mike Barnett to his community, Western Australia and this Parliament. I thank Ros, his wife, for sharing him with us, and we thank his family for all that they did.

As many have said, I was not able to share this chamber with him; he was serving here before I was born. However, many of his former colleagues—Ian Taylor, Norm Marlborough and more—speak of a caring and respectful man, respected by all sides of Parliament and all sides of the local community. His journey in life and to this Parliament was not easy. Mike arrived in this Parliament having carried many experiences that others have not, but I understand that this made him a better advocate and a better member of the Legislative Assembly for others who had also endured and overcome adversity. I commend Mike for his role as the Chair of the Select Committee on Child Migration in 1996. I will not say that I believe that gave him great closure, but it was a great contribution to make to this place.

I will share two standards of public infrastructure that we can thank Mike Barnett for—the Rockingham railway and what we now know as the Kwinana Freeway. Not too long ago, there was no rail line to Rockingham, and the freeway still ended at South Street. I can still remember that. As I understand it, in the 1980s and 1990s, the then director general of Main Roads stated publicly that the freeway would never be extended beyond South Street in his lifetime. Enter Mike Barnett, and Norm Marlborough and Bill Thomas, the members for Peel and Cockburn in the Legislative Assembly. They fought for the freeway to be extended and widened and they fought for the railway. I found in *Hansard* about a week after Mike's first speech a reference to his first push for the freeway to be extended. Then, it was only in South Perth, and he was pushing to get it to South Street and beyond. We know that that now connects all the way to Bunbury. In 1979, there was the first mention in *Hansard* of a Rockingham railway. As I have said, that freeway now extends not only past Rockingham in my electorate, but all the way to Bunbury, and the railway extends through Rockingham into Mandurah. It is the living, breathing, daily artery of public freeway infrastructure for the entire southern suburbs and makes housing and jobs possible south of the river.

I understand that Mike Barnett, Norm Marlborough and their families had many adventures that we all benefit from today, but I will quote two reflections from Mike's former colleagues. They said that Mike Barnett was a "good-looking sporting hero", which was very useful at the polls, and that "you didn't argue with Mike Barnett."

The Premier has already mentioned in the first speech Mike's push for Rockingham Senior High School to have an extension. Back then, it only went to year 10, and they needed more classrooms. I know that he would be very proud that Mark McGowan has funded and Magenta Marshall will build that Rockingham extension and rebuild of the school that he fought for.

My main experiences with Mike were not actually as an MP but as a marriage celebrant. In his post-MLA life he became a marriage celebrant; he and I were both civil marriage celebrants. I was working for Norm when I wanted to become a celebrant, and he suggested that I meet with Mike and learn from him. Mike and Ros invited me into their beautiful home and Mike convinced me to become a marriage celebrant. He also showed me, as only an MLA with a bedside manner who cared genuinely for his constituents could, how I could support families through the legal, cultural and sometimes political family hurdles and logistics for significant family events. After his MLA life, I understand that he worked with hundreds of families as their marriage celebrant and for other life events, and I was honoured to be one of his celebrant students. Speaker, if you were happy when I was a civil marriage celebrant for your daughter, it is because I learnt from Mike Barnett. Being a celebrant also allowed me to help marry Hon Stephen Dawson and Dennis Liddelow at the Canberra Parliament and here in Perth. I reconnected with my wife when she was a bridesmaid at a wedding that I was performing, so I also give Mike some credit and thank him for helping me reconnect with my wife.

I have worked on campaigns in Warnbro, Kwinana and federal Brand, and it was wonderful to be back in Rockingham for Magenta Marshall's by-election. I have to say that I concur with what Magenta said. The respect for, and memories of, Mike Barnett and his service amongst the community and Labor branch members remains strong.

I will read some of Mike's final words from his valedictory speech. He said about Ros and his family —

The most important person in my life is actually in the Public Gallery tonight and I want members to know who it is. So that members can pick her out ... I point to the young lady who is on my left.

...

Members know that without a particularly good partner they could not properly serve their electorates.

I feel that Mike was also a very humble man. He said —

I have been the most fortunate person with all the people around me and all the opportunities that have been afforded to me.

...

I have contested seven elections, and my constituents have treated me extraordinarily well. I do not believe a member of Parliament has been treated any better in any electorate than I have been treated.

We say thank you to Mike and we all hope to make you proud, Mike, as we all now carry on the work that you began and showed us how to follow. Thank you.

Members: Hear, hear!

THE SPEAKER (Mrs M.H. Roberts) [12.28 pm]: Members, it will not surprise you to know that I knew Mike Barnett rather well, having been elected to this house in 1994, and Mike served with us through to the December 1996 election. I knew Mike before that in his role as Speaker, and many times sat in the Speaker's gallery when I worked for the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, so I had the opportunity to see Mike preside over this chamber—something that he did in a very accomplished way. There were a couple of people who said he was not so good in the first year or so, but I think he really came into his own to be one of the most accomplished Speakers this Parliament has had.

What I want to say about Michael is that he was a genuinely fantastic person. He was so sincere; he was so popular. He was loved in his community. He was the ideal member of Parliament. At the time of my election, I had a three-year-old and a five-year-old daughter. When they would come up here, Mike would sit them down and tell them about his dog, TJ, what he was up to, and he would play games with them. He was just the kind of knockabout likeable person who really related so well one-on-one with people of all ages.

When I reflect on Michael's life—I talked to him on a number of occasions about his life events, particularly when he decided to put forward to have the select committee on child migrants—Mike, like a lot of child migrants, was very reluctant to talk about his past. If you reflect on that era, it is almost incomprehensible to us now that Britain sent thousands and thousands of children on their own to migrate here to Australia and put them in institutions here. Mike came from the most difficult of circumstances. He effectively started life in an orphanage in the UK. It was a tough experience there. A lot of child migrants do not like to talk about their treatment in those institutions. I can certainly assure members that the treatment of Michael and other children in the institution that he was in in the UK was not a good one. They were treated very badly. When he was about 11 years old, a kind of inspector or someone in authority came to that orphanage to talk to them about their treatment because there had been some reports of concern. As part of that, that person of authority said to all the children there, "Would any of you like to go to Australia? Who would like to go to Australia?" Mike said, "He may as well have said to us, 'Who wants to go to the zoo?', because we had no idea what Australia was." Mike said he said, "Yes! I'll go to Australia!" He said, "And then we went on a boat. It was fantastic!" And after a day or two or three, he thought, "When will this all end?" It was a very long trip on the boat, and when they got here to the promised land of Australia and the great opportunities that they thought they were about to have, he was taken to Fairbridge. His treatment at Fairbridge was not particularly much better than it had been in the institution that he came from. It was very much more of the same. I also note people who shared that time at Fairbridge with Michael, including Hon Cheryl Davenport, who was a member of our upper house. I cannot remember Cheryl's maiden name, but, from memory, it was a very difficult one to pronounce. Those people who were at Fairbridge with Michael all commented on his strength as a leader and the fact that he would stand up to authority and was the one who showed some leadership and protected those children who he felt were being especially picked on or victimised.

Now to the little bit of the story in between Pinjarra High School and suddenly having a caravan park in Rockingham. From my recollections of what Michael told me, I understand that he went to Kalgoorlie, where he needed to be 18 years old to go into underground mining. Michael was about 16 years old. He was a fit, strong and tall person,

and, as such, he was sent down into the mines and worked in incredibly bad conditions in underground mining where safety procedures are nothing like they are today, and he lived in pretty poor circumstances as well. But he worked hard, saved some money and eventually made his way to Rockingham and had that further future. Like a lot of people, he drew a line under those experiences and tried to get on with life, to work hard and move along. It was not until many years later that he reflected on what had happened to the child migrants and the people who came here, and he started to be a lot more open about those horrific experiences that so many of them had. I would describe Michael Barnett's life as a truly remarkable life. He came from circumstances of such incredible adversity, both in the UK and then here, and found himself being considered by the Labor Party as a candidate. As the member for Southern River commented, without doubt, those experiences and hardships that Michael suffered made him so much more empathetic with his constituents and the people he engaged with.

I may have said earlier that Michael had a great sense of humour and he liked a practical joke. I can see Norm Marlborough sitting at the back. Seeing the two of them at afternoon teatime in my early years here was quite amusing. Someone asked me yesterday, "Why didn't we have vanilla slices on the menu? Why couldn't we bring back the vanilla slice". Well, I have to tell you, they were Norm's favourite. As the member for Southern River has described, Michael was a very handsome, very good looking and incredibly fit person. He went swimming every day in the ocean. He took his personal appearance and his fitness very, very seriously. He thought he could help Norm, which most of us found fairly amusing. He would counsel Norm about not eating the vanilla slices—

Mr R.H. Cook: Clearly that didn't work!

The SPEAKER: Well, you would see Norm walking out of the dining room holding a vanilla slice above his mouth and just dropping it in and then looking across at Michael—"Cop that". You cannot help those people who do not want to be helped. It did not help Mike from trying though.

As the current member for Rockingham has said, her constituents could recount hundreds and hundreds of entertaining stories about Michael. Most members who served with Michael could recount hundreds and hundreds of stories as well. He was one of the most collegiate and entertaining members you could hope to serve with. I think starting that inquiry into child migrants opened up more than what he thought it would at the time. I think that set in train within Western Australia, and more broadly in Australia, the thought that lots more inquiry and exposure of what occurred there could happen. Ultimately, there were calls for compensation. Michael did a number of really worthwhile things as a member, some of which have been alluded to. It was actually me, as the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, who appointed him back in 2004 to chair the Fire and Emergency Services Authority board, which the Leader of the Liberal Party has referred to. He continued in that role under the subsequent minister for emergency services. I thought it would be a role that he would be really suited to because it is a role in which you need to engage with volunteers, and his experience as a member of Parliament, from a community sense, his knowledge of legislation and the requirements of a board chair stood him in good stead for that. He served with distinction in that role as well.

I would like to also wish Ros and all of his family and his close friends all the very best, and I express my sympathy for them. They were touched by someone truly remarkable. I too want to add my condolences to the condolences that have been given here today. I note that those condolences are definitely also on behalf of every member of Parliament who ever served with Michael Barnett.

I would ask members to observe a minute's silence.

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