

**HON ERNEST FRANCIS BRIDGE**

*Condolence Motion*

**MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier)** [2.01 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house records its sincere regret at the death of Hon Ernest Francis Bridge and tenders its deep sympathy to his family.

In moving that motion, I add that many members of his family are present here today.

Ernie Bridge's remarkable achievements stand as a testament to his vision, determination and charm, and a special ability to work with all people. He was one of the most popular and respected members of this Parliament, and such was his impact that his name is synonymous with the Kimberley region of this state, the region in which he was born and raised, and which he served so admirably.

The first of seven children, Ernie was born on 15 December 1936 in Halls Creek, Western Australia. His father, Ernest Kimberley Bridge, and mother, Sarah Parnell, were both from stations in the Kimberley and were living on their own pastoral lease when he was born. Ernie was educated at Derby Primary School and also by correspondence, with his mother helping to instil skills in reading and writing. Even as a very young boy aged five or six, Ernie was involved heavily in the farm's work on the land, riding a stock horse and mustering cattle. He fondly records this period of growing up and working with his family. Later, he used his skills as a jockey, riding his first winner at the age of 15, and winning the Halls Creek Cup in 1955. At around this time, Ernie's love of music began to shine, with his guitar a regular companion along stock routes.

In 1960, Ernie married Mavis Granger, and in time they became parents to two sons and two daughters. In addition to his pastoralist pursuits, Ernie Bridge's varied career included working as a small business man, with a family-owned shop in Halls Creek, and a service station purchased in partnership with his wife. He was also an airline agent, and operated an open-air picture theatre in Halls Creek.

Following the sudden death of his father in 1962, Ernie took on the management of the family property, Koongie Park. At that point, Ernie also decided to enter public life. His father at the time of his death was on the Halls Creek shire council, and Ernie was persuaded to nominate for his father's vacant seat. Within three short years, in 1965, Ernie was elected as shire president, and he held that position until 1979. Ernie was active in issues surrounding Aboriginal land. He was a foundation member of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in 1972. He was also a foundation commissioner of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission from 1975 to 1980, and, following his election to this Parliament, he was chairman of the Aboriginal land inquiry liaison committee. Between 1975 and 1976, Ernie was appointed a member of the Laverton Royal Commission, which investigated police treatment of Aboriginal people in the Laverton area, including the Skull Creek incident of 1975, in which police clashed with a number of people. These people were later found by the commission to have been arrested without cause.

Ernie's path to the Legislative Assembly was far from easy. The Labor Party invited him to contest the seat of Kimberley, but the election in February 1977 was marred by an uncommon level of rancour and an accusation of underhanded tactics. The sitting member, Alan Ridge, emerged the victor by just 93 votes, but Ernie successfully appealed to the Court of Disputed Returns to have the result overturned. A fresh election was ordered and provided another close result, with Alan Ridge being returned once again by 84 votes.

Ernie waited until the state election in February 1980, when he achieved an absolute majority, to be confirmed as the member for Kimberley. He held the seat comfortably at the next five elections, including running as an Independent Labor candidate in 1996. That he persevered in the face of significant and sometimes ferocious early challenges to his candidacy, often related to issues of race, is a tribute to his courage and determination. He might have become disillusioned, but these events seemed only to make him more focused on prevailing.

As the first Aboriginal member of the Western Australian Parliament, Ernie was immediately noteworthy, but this by no means was the limit to his contribution. His inaugural speech in this house raised many issues in relation to the experience of Indigenous people; it makes sobering reading. The speech was made on 7 August 1980, which is not so long ago, and we can all be thankful that a lot has changed since that time. Through his own example and through his actions, Ernie promoted significant changes towards equality, but we are reminded that so much more can still be done.

In 1986, Ernie became the first Aboriginal person to be a minister in any Australian government. He was first appointed as Minister for Water Resources, the North-West and Aboriginal Affairs. Later he was responsible for small business and agriculture. Ernie strongly advocated the interests of farmers and those in regional areas. He was also an important factor in promoting initiatives to recruit and train Aboriginals to serve in the police force as regular police officers—measures drawn from the recommendations of the Laverton Royal Commission.

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Over time, Ernie was most strongly identified with water issues. As minister, he established the rural water strategy, which helped thousands of farmers access a stable water supply. Most famously, he held an unwavering belief that water should be piped south from the Kimberley to address the water problems faced in this part of the state. He was able to think on a large scale and showed determination to continue presenting ideas, even when there was strong opposition. When he left Parliament, he claimed that he would have needed just six more months as a minister to oversee the commencement of this massive project. It was not to be—sounds familiar.

After Parliament, he established Unity of First People of Australia, a not-for-profit organisation working to promote health awareness, and employment and training for young Aboriginal people. His many political achievements aside, Ernie was a man of wide-ranging talents. He obtained a pilot's licence and purchased a Cessna, which transported his family and helped him meet his commitments throughout the south west. Ernie was also a renowned country and western musician who recorded numerous albums, including while a member of Parliament, and continued to perform with his sons, particularly in the Kimberley, in the years that followed. Memorably, the last time he spoke in this place, he brought a guitar into the chamber and sang one of his songs as part of his valedictory speech.

Ernie's many achievements were acknowledged by numerous awards and honours. In 1984, he was inducted into the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame, which honours pioneers of the Australian outback. He was also awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1993 for service to the Western Australian Parliament and to Aboriginal affairs; the Centenary of Federation Medal in 2003; and the Governor's Award for Regional Development—part of the citizen of Western Australia awards—in 2004. In 2012, Ernie became a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the Indigenous community, particularly through support for health management programs, and to the Parliament of Western Australia.

Members may be aware that Ernie's wife, Mavis, passed away in 2009. They may also be aware of his battle with asbestos-related diseases—malignant mesothelioma and asbestosis—which ultimately claimed his life. Ernie considered that his exposure to asbestos occurred during his time as a minister when he oversaw the winding down of Wittenoom. Before his death, he launched legal action seeking damages for personal injury and loss suffered through exposure to asbestos. The outcome of these proceedings remains to be seen.

Without doubt, Ernie was a pioneer for Indigenous people, but his influence proved to be much more than that. It is a testament to his character that he was liked and respected by all sides of politics. This was no small achievement, given his career coincided with some of the more volatile periods in our state's political history, but it certainly reflects the esteem in which he was held. His death marks the loss of a great man who will be remembered with admiration for his significant contribution to the progress of our state.

In my experience in this Parliament, I have not known any other member who was so popular and well regarded by members on both sides of the house. I think that is a great credit to Ernie. However, I have to say that he was not always easy to track down! He had a walkabout spirit. I can remember many times sitting on the Liberal side of the house when Ernie, as a Labor member and then as a Labor Independent, would come across to me and invariably say, "Colin, you don't need me anymore. Is it all right if I just slip away?" I would say, "Of course, Ernie. Off you go—you're right!" Ernie must have been for the Labor Party the Labor Party Whip's worst nightmare. He was terribly hard to keep contained within this place; obviously he was a man of open spaces.

On behalf of all members of this house, I express my condolences to Ernie Bridge's children, Kim, Noel, Cheryl and Beverly, and their families on the passing of a truly outstanding Western Australian.

**MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition)** [2.10 pm]: I join the Premier in rising to participate in this condolence motion to Hon Ernie Bridge, who was a member of this house for 21 years, and to pass on my regards to his family, friends and supporters across Western Australia.

Ernie Bridge was an amazing man. The more I read the amazing volume of material written about him and the material that he produced via *Hansard*, I realise what an amazing character he was. He had so many friends and so many supporters who were prepared to put on paper his achievements. He was larger than life and a very well respected figure in Western Australia. One could summarise Ernie as follows: he was a devoted husband, father and grandfather; a successful small business man with a range of businesses; an elected councillor and shire president; a member of Parliament and the first Aboriginal minister in Australia; a royal commissioner; a pilot; a country music singer who was world renowned; a jockey; and a fitness fanatic—as I learnt at his state funeral. He was a visionary and a big-picture thinker and, on top of this, someone who set a great example for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike in Australia. When all of us think about how we got to this place and the things we had to overcome to become a member of the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia or, for those who are or have been ministers, to become a minister in this place—I refer to all of the obstacles and things we had to go through in life to get here and to rise up through this place—imagine how much tougher it would have been to

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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achieve all of those things that I just mentioned in a lifetime had we been born on a Kimberley station in the mid-1930s.

Ernie Bridge was born in 1936. He was the first of seven children. He was a natural horseman and apparently was in the saddle as a three or four-year-old working on pastoral stations around the Kimberley, many of which were his family interests. I am told he did a bit of schooling in Derby but most of his learning was self-taught. He worked with large groups of workers in the pastoral industry. He learnt how to drive trucks at a young age, he drove stock to Wyndham and he built stockyards. He did all sorts of things throughout the Kimberley in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

In 1962, upon the death of his father—who was the shire president of Halls Creek—Ernie took his spot on the council and was elected shire president in 1965. His enemies, comprising the squattocracy or some of the pastoralists of the region, made all sorts of awful and disparaging claims against him in order to prevent Ernie rising through the ranks in local government, including that he was illegitimate and also claiming that he was Aboriginal and therefore unable to be elected to the office that he held in Halls Creek. As was the case throughout his political life, Ernie defeated these attempts to defeat him and rose, as I said, in 1965 to be the shire president of Halls Creek. In his time as shire president of Halls Creek, he desegregated Halls Creek cemetery, which had had until that point in time an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal section, and provided quality drinking water for the shire; indeed, in his time as a minister, he provided the same for many communities across Western Australia. Over this period he took up small business, and the range of businesses he established or ran in Halls Creek with his wife, Mavis, was quite extraordinary; he built a wide and diverse range of successful businesses in Halls Creek.

In 1977, he first ran as the Labor candidate for the Kimberley. He was unsuccessful against his Liberal opponent, but due to some of the irregularities in that election campaign, such as the seizure of some of the campaign materials and the harassment of some of his supporters—some of the harassment that went on against him and his supporters was quite extraordinary—a by-election was called by the Court of Disputed Returns. He, unfortunately, lost the by-election as well, although I note he picked up seven more votes in the period from the original election to the by-election held subsequent to that Court of Disputed Returns finding.

During the lead-up to his election in 1980, he fought again for office, and his supporters—who were numerous and included some very recognisable names like Tom Stephens and Steve Hawke—had all sorts of efforts made to prevent them from assisting him; famously, Tom Stephens was jailed in Wyndham for his efforts to support Ernie in that election campaign. Some other disgraceful tactics were engaged in against the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley to prevent his election.

In any event, he was first elected in 1980, and was re-elected in every election up to 2001—six or seven general elections. During the period between 1980 and 1986, he rose to become a minister in the government, holding portfolios in a wide range of areas—water; Aboriginal affairs; agriculture; the north west; and small business. As members can see, his ministerial portfolios were very much focused on country and regional communities. I have a copy of his first speech, which he delivered on 7 August 1980, and I read it this morning to see the sorts of things he said. Members have to remember that 33 years ago, although it was not a long time ago, times were, in many ways, different. I am going to quote from his first speech, which was made in an era before Aboriginal people had a right to their land. He said —

Many people say the Aborigines want land rights and Europeans are thereby threatened. That is true, but if we look at the matter objectively and do not see it as a concession beyond some form of equity, where is the danger in it? The whole purpose of our planning structure should be to give people the opportunity to achieve equity, not to keep some as disadvantaged people. The Aboriginal people in the main have been disadvantaged, and I am sure no member here would dispute that.

He made a plea back then, as we can see, for Aboriginal land rights.

He also came into the house as a newly elected member for Kimberley, having run three times to get there, and no doubt he had a strong focus on ensuring that he was re-elected, which was natural; anyone from the Kimberley loves that region. He said this about the Kimberley in his first speech —

I enter this House recognising that I have a responsibility to all members of the electorate; in other words, I guess it is fair to say that I enter this House clearly wearing two hats. The Aboriginal people of the Kimberley are looking to me to project into this House an understanding of their problems and an understanding of their needs; they are looking to me to try to get the House to recognise their problems. However, just as I am committed to doing that, I fully appreciate that the Caucasian people of the Kimberley similarly expect from me that kind of representation.

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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I make it clear to the House that I will do the best I can in the days to come to satisfy the people who have elected me to this position.

As we know, over all those elections in which he was successful in the Kimberley, he represented people from all walks of life and all races across the Kimberley without fear or favour.

He held a range of portfolios, including Aboriginal affairs; as we see, he had a passion especially to provide Aboriginal people with their land. He represented the north west portfolio, and, as we have learnt, there is a very strong argument that that was responsible for the illness that eventually took his life.

He also held the agriculture portfolio. He is well known for underwriting the wheat crop with the then Premier Carmen Lawrence in 1992–93 and ensuring the future of our wheat farms in the wheatbelt of Western Australia. As Minister for Small Business, he had great empathy for people in small business, having run a range of small businesses himself. He was also Minister for Water Resources. His vision for water is well known and well documented; he pursued that for virtually his entire public life. He also, of course, had an amazing capacity to open public buildings across Western Australia. I learned at his state funeral that he has more than 180 separate plaques with his name on them the length and breadth of Western Australia, which is perhaps a record. I well remember as Minister for Education and Training going from room to room at Wyndham District High School and eventually arriving at a final room, a little classroom, and there on the wall was a plaque with Ernie Bridge's name on it. I think, although I am not quite sure, that all it did was commemorate that he had been to that classroom! He has a documentary record of his achievements across the length and breadth of Western Australia. In his final speech to this house at one of the final sittings of the year 2000, he made quite a famous speech, perhaps his most famous. He said —

I have always stood for ordinary Australians; in other words, the battlers. Whenever I have had half a chance in Parliament, I have made reference to the binding obligations placed upon us as politicians to remain strong. As I leave and other members enter the Parliament, I hope that members will remember these words: Never let go of the obligations we have to look after the interests of ordinary Australians because they make up Australia; they are Australians. Not only are they Australians, but also we are all Australians together.

Ernie always seemed to have in his heart the desire to assist ordinary people, particularly those without much money or means, in particular those in his electorate of Kimberley and the regional areas of Western Australia. It was a famous speech. Sitting in the corner over there he made the famous speech. I have never seen it repeated and I doubt it had ever been done before in a Westminster democracy; he brought in a guitar and sang a song to the house, an extensive song, which I will not quote. It was a very impressive performance late in the evening, I remember, for those of us who were here then. It was probably the funniest moment I have enjoyed as a member of Parliament in this place.

After he left the house, he established a range of organisations, including the Watering Australia Foundation and the Unity of First People of Australia, which was designed to assist Aboriginal people with employment and, I note, also to deal with health issues, in particular diabetes amongst Aboriginal people. He was awarded numerous medals and honours from the commonwealth and other organisations. He also spent a great deal of time looking after and helping his grandchildren, whom he loved dearly.

My memories of Ernie are of an easygoing and relaxed fellow; he was always ready with a joke and quite easy to get along with. I was here for his final four years as a member of Parliament. I do not think that he knew exactly what my name was because whenever he saw me, he always called me “young fella”. I used to sit in the corner over here as deputy opposition Whip. As deputy opposition Whip, I can attest it was not an easy task with Ernie back in those years. However, at that point Ernie was an Independent Labor member, so in some ways he was not my responsibility, although he would often come up to me and ask what was going on and whether I would allow him to be on his way. I would say, “It's up to you what you want to do. You can go on your way if you would like to.” He was a very fit man and the only man I have ever seen come into the chamber wearing a tracksuit. He used to wander around the building in his tracksuit because he did a lot of exercise. Sometimes when the house was not as full as it is now—I remember occasions back in those days when it was very empty for long periods and there would be only the person on their feet and the deputy opposition Whip in the house—he would come into the chamber in his tracksuit. Perhaps standards were not the same in those days, Mr Speaker, in that members could come into Parliament with a tracksuit on; maybe we should move back to that era once again.

The last time I saw Ernie was when he was unwell and I was invited by his very, very good friend Hon Tom Stephens to go and visit him in hospital in Nedlands or Claremont a couple of weeks before the recent state election. We had a good talk and he was in great spirits. He said things to the effect of: “How are we going? Wishing you all the best.” He was obviously expressing his support for me and my colleagues, and I very much

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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appreciated that. Even in his time of great illness, he was still focused on and worrying about the state and the Labor side of Parliament.

I close by acknowledging Ernie's family and friends who are here today, including Noel, who has come from Adelaide. I acknowledge Kim, Noel, Beverly, Cheryl and their families. I acknowledge Ernie's siblings who have survived him, and I also acknowledge all his many friends from around Western Australia who hold him dear. He was a great Western Australian who achieved great things and who set a fine example for us all.

**MR B.J. GRYLLES (Pilbara — Leader of the National Party)** [2.25 pm]: I, too, rise to support the condolence motion for Hon Ernie Bridge. I wish to do that by sharing with the house an extract from a speech by Susan Bradley, a leader herself from the Kimberley and a close friend of Ernie Bridge. This testimonial is the one that Susan Bradley presented at the state funeral. I wanted Susan to continue all day with her anecdotes and stories about Ernie Bridge, and I thought it would be valuable to share this with the chamber today. I therefore quote from Susan Bradley's testimonial at Ernie Bridge's state funeral —

Some of the times with Ernie, the man I knew, I am going to share with you today—to give you an insight into the man who really put his beloved Kimberley on the state and national stage and made the Legislative Assembly seat of the Kimberley—not Liberal, not Labour but the Ernie Bridge seat.

The Kimberley was, up until the seventies, safe Liberal and Ernie knew he had a fight on his hands when he went for labor pre-selection to contest the seat. However he was up to it—after all when he had the audacity to stand for the Presidency of Halls Creek Shire he had been challenged by the ruling pastoralists as ineligible on the grounds he was not only aboriginal but illegitimate. Eventually the Local Government Department found his parents' marriage certificate, and established Ernie had been born in wedlock after all, and was therefore able to continue his Halls Creek Shire President's role which he did with gusto for 16 years entering the State record books as the youngest ever Shire President, the first Aboriginal Shire President and the one who among many other ground breaking firsts, changed the cemetery by-laws to allow aboriginals to be buried along side non-aboriginal people.

That is a great achievement in its own right. It continues —

Ernie became a well known and much liked local by the time he decided to stand for state parliament. He got to, and organised a wide and successful campaign to enrol Kimberley aboriginals for the first time. It was 1976 and aboriginals (over half the population) were not enrolled and never had been. Ernie set out to change this.

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There was no doubt in Ernie's mind he wouldn't be successful. Which of course he was ... (after a very divisive and unsettling Court of Disputed Returns).

That has been well covered in the house today. It continues —

It wasn't long after Ernie's maiden speech in Parliament that he was back in Kununurra and came to visit me to ask about specific issues that farmers were having on the Ord. It was then I realised that Ernie transcended party politics—he was genuinely out for the best for the Kimberley. It did not matter whether one was aboriginal, non-aboriginal, public sector, private sector, old, young, liberal or labor. Ernie represented everybody and he was taking the Kimberley to Perth. He was going to get those in the south to listen to him.

He became a firm friend. (and I might add the local Liberal party branches in Kununurra, Derby and Broome disappeared for over 12 years).

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There would be a direct pathway to him—the Minister—and the public servants in the departmental juggernauts in Perth, would be circumvented. He wanted the public servants to find ways things could be done, and not reasons why they couldn't. But this proved difficult.

As Minister for Regional Development and the North West he was determined to decentralise decision making and formed the first Regional Development Councils to help the regions make their own decisions and overcome the perceived lack of understanding of Perth based government departments. These Development Councils still function today.

It was in the late eighties that my husband and I were pioneering the live shipment of feeder steers to Indonesia. We had signed an agreement with the largest Indonesian co-operative to build a small abattoir near Surabaya and to supply cattle to them. We had modified an old Dutch blockhouse which we had turned into a small abattoir. We needed however to train local slaughtermen and butchers so that

**Extract from *Hansard***

[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 7 May 2013]

p207c-218a

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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when the local Indonesian farmers brought their fattened beast to the abattoir, it could be killed hallal ... by the local newly skilled slaughtermen. Ernie as Minister for Agriculture, pulled out all stops. Through his Department he established a meatworks training group which flew to Surabaya to start teaching the agrarian locals the basic skills they needed to establish their own vertically integrated cattle industry. This aid built bridges of friendship and mutual benefit to both Indonesian farmers and Kimberley pastoralists. Ernie was bent on forging good relations between East Java and Western Australia. He did this Ernie way!

There were many formalities including a Memorandum of Understanding between the Governor's office of East Java, the Western Australian Government and ourselves, Carlton Hill Pty Ltd.

An impressive ceremony was organised in the Governor's palace to mark the important occasion. When we arrived with Ernie at the Surabaya Airport, long black, Australian and Indonesian flag flying limousines met us to convey us to the awaiting red carpet and uniformed soldiers in front of the Governor's residence. I was loving it—I think Ernie was also. The band played the Australian anthem followed by the Indonesian anthem. After speeches from the Governor and Ernie, and the local President, there was a flourish of signings at the official table with flash bulbs going off from the many photographers. Then Ernie and ourselves were presented with gifts of teak and gold inlaid boxes with red and gold ribbon by beautiful Indonesian girls with garlands of orchids. Ernie turned to Andy Munro and asked for his rather old and tattered black briefcase. Out of the briefcase he brought 3 ... carved boab nuts and his Kimberley Country Band cassette tapes which he duly presented to a surprised Governor and the Municipal President and his Deputy. Ernie then asked for his guitar and he broke into a loud rendition of —

The great song —

Helicopter Ringer. The dignitaries were gob-smacked—soon they were all clapping and tapping their feet along with Ernie who followed with the Great Australian Dream and some Slim Dusty favourites. Everybody joined in. I don't think anybody there had ever heard Australian country played live—not only live, but by a politician. They were delighted and we were invited to the Governor's place for dinner that night where Ernie continued to entertain.

Next day we went to the large supermarket complex to launch Carlton Hill beef. Nobody seemed interested in the speeches, they were just calling for more songs from Ernie. It looked so strange to see hundreds of Indonesian shoppers eating Western Australian barbequed beef satays while listening to Time for Tucker and Helicopter Ringer being belted out by Ernie on his guitar.

Even many years later when Indonesian cattle buyers came to the Kimberley, they would ask where Ernie was and whether he was still singing.

One of Ernie's passions, I could even call it an obsession, was Water. Ernie would say Water is more precious than gold and in a country that is so short of water, we in Northern Australia had enough in our huge rivers, to supply the whole Nation. Not only that but a natural resource that is renewed annually with the Wet season. At present this abundant liquid gold runs out to sea. Whilst cities like Perth and Adelaide are on water restrictions and Governments are working out way to overcome these water problems nobody seems to have the vision that Ernie had.

Ernie was made Minister for Water Resources. He immediately formed the Kimberley Water Resources Development Commission — and was determined to find a way to pipe ... water through the parched Pilbara to Perth with a tap off to Alice Springs and Adelaide. He firmly believed, particularly after visiting Israel, Libya and California that technology would enable his Kimberley pipe dream to become a reality and that inland Australia and southern capital cities would benefit. However Treasury and bureaucracy did not share his vision or enthusiasm. Ernie became increasingly frustrated — as Chair of the Feasibility Study I did also and we experienced first hand the manacles of three year electoral cycles, Treasury and bureaucratic short sightedness.

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Despite having big dreams to solve Australia's water problems, Ernie never took his eye off his beloved Kimberley. I remember when Colin Barnett announced his Kimberley canal concept and Ernie told me that Barnett was the only big thinking bloke in the Liberal Party and what a shame the other[s] ... didn't get behind him.

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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Whether I was organising Concerts at Carlton Hill to raise money for the Stockmen's Hall of Fame, or the Carlton Hill Centenary for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Kimberley Country Band of Ernie, Noel and Kim, were the first to say they would come and entertain. To see Ernie on the stage ... —

Which was a cattle trailer —

with Dame Edna Everage and Slim Dusty, and the Mirriwung Gadgerong dancers, performing for hundreds under a Kimberley moon was what northern folk lore was all about

Ernie sitting under a boab yarning with Mary Durack about the early days — being hugged by Ruby Doobalong who Ernie had helped get specialist shoes for her leprosy deformed feet, explaining to Princess Anne the cattle industry, fighting for dialysis machines for remote communities, supporting the Walkabout shop girls for better road access to isolated stations, helping small business in Fitzroy Crossing get a better mail service, singing and strumming his guitar at the Boab Festival, supporting the Shinzu Matsuri in Broome, or just being Ernie — a friend and much admired local personality and local member — these are just a very few of the treasured memories he has left us with.

Ernie Bridge was a one-off.

Australia, Western Australia and the Kimberley in particular are richer for his life.

Mr Speaker, he was the youngest ever shire president in Western Australia; the first Aboriginal shire president; the first Aboriginal state member of Parliament in Western Australia; and the first Aboriginal cabinet minister in any Australian government. Rest in peace Ernie Bridge and thank you from a grateful state.

**MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland)** [2.35 pm]: I, too, wish to speak to this condolence motion for Ernie Bridge. As we have heard so far, Ernie was certainly someone of vision. He was a leader amongst men, a leader in the Kimberley, a leader amongst Aboriginal people and a leader in this Parliament. He is someone whose life made a significant difference to our community, the Kimberley community and the state of Western Australia.

I was fortunate to be in the Labor caucus as a new member of caucus during Ernie's last period in the Labor caucus. He was a former minister at that point and someone of standing within our caucus. Apart from all those firsts and all those achievements, Ernie was a genuine, good bloke. He loved to tell a story, he loved to have a laugh and he loved to share his wisdom with all of us. Sometimes his wisdom was not fully embraced by our caucus. I remember fairly early on when I first joined the caucus Ernie giving us a little story about how things came in cycles and that, "Whilst we were in opposition we may as well just get used to that for a little while; it's a bit like the seasons, we would have our turn in opposition and then our turn in government, and it would go around and around and perhaps we shouldn't get ourselves in too much of a lather or stress ourselves too much about it; we should take a more relaxed approach to caucus and the Parliament." That was not a view embraced by a lot of people but it was about Ernie thinking things through and asking, "Why hit your head against a brick wall? If it's not our time, it's not our time."

Ernie was certainly a thinker; he thought through issues and how to get results. That is why I think he achieved so many things. He did not take just the standard approach; he thought a bit outside the box and he knew how to talk to people. He was incredibly persuasive. When Ernie entered a room and smiled he lit up the whole room. He had one of those contagious smiles. When Ernie asked, "How are you?" it was not just a cursory question or a matter of politeness or civility from which he just moved on and did not listen to the answer. If Ernie asked how you were he wanted to know how you were. He was interested in the answer. He was a great people person in that respect. He was genuinely interested in other people—us in his caucus and no doubt people in his community. I think that is what made him successful not only as a member of Parliament and a politician but also as a leader in the community. Ernie was someone who genuinely listened to people and thought things through and worked out a solution. He was not content to just leave things as they were.

I had the privilege also of talking to Ernie about issues when I was a minister. He came and saw me and the Commissioner of Police on a number of occasions about his Unity of First People of Australia and about getting more Indigenous people into the police service. Ernie started a preliminary course to get Aboriginal people ready to pass the entrance requirements to the Western Australia Police Academy. That involved numerous requirements, including the academic and physical requirements. A lot of Aboriginal people had no experience of that. Too many Aboriginal people would apply to join the police service and fail the admission process. Ernie did not just jump up and down about it, he set in place a practical and positive program to make sure Aboriginal people who applied to join the police service stood the best possible chance of being accepted, and a program that supported Aboriginal people. Likewise, when I was Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Ernie knocked on not only my door, but also others in his usual persuasive way and talked to me and them about diabetes and what could be done in those communities to get better outcomes for Indigenous people. Post-politics, Ernie never gave up on working and getting results for the community, despite the fact that he had spent such a long time in local

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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government and then in this house. He worked through the issues, he worked out which doors he needed to knock on and how he could get an outcome to get more Aboriginal police officers or how he could actually reduce the amount of diabetes or glaucoma or whatever issue he was taking up on behalf of the Aboriginal people in that community. People certainly recognise his big vision for watering Australia, building the canal and those types of bold visions, but perhaps not as many people in the community are fully aware of the huge range of smaller individual issues that Ernie took up. He was enormously successful at really making a difference to the lives of his fellow Aboriginal people.

As members have reflected, Ernie sang country and western songs and he gave some of the more entertaining speeches that I have heard in this house. He also spoke in this house with great passion on the abortion debate. He spoke very much from the heart on a number of occasions during that debate. His speeches were certainly well worth listening to. They were well thought out and came from the heart. Likewise, I was here when he sang during his final speech to this house when he brought in his guitar. Even when he did not have a guitar, Ernie told a good story. I think the stories were enhanced by the guitar playing but he certainly was entertaining.

In conclusion, Ernie definitely made a difference. He was not only a leader amongst men, but also a very warm, genuine good bloke. He was someone whose company you could enjoy, and he was a thoroughly decent person whom I know will be missed by many people. I would like to add my condolences to his children, Kim, Noel, Bev and Cheryl, and to the very many loyal staff members in his electorate office and ministerial office. I know that he remained friends with those people well past his life in politics. I express my condolences to them all and commend the life of Ernie Bridge as one that really made a difference to our community in Western Australia.

**DR K.D. HAMES (Dawesville — Deputy Premier)** [2.43 pm]: I start by acknowledging all Ernie's family and friends in the gallery. It is good also to see Tom Stephens here. Tom was a good mate of Ernie's and was quoted extensively at the funeral, including by the Governor. Well done for that, Tom. Ernie was obviously a very good friend of yours.

I was here for the last four years of Ernie's time in Parliament and had the great opportunity to be here when he played the guitar. It was an amazing event. I used to go out of my way to make sure that I came into the chamber whenever Ernie was on his feet. As members have said, he was greatly entertaining, but also there was a lot of wisdom in his words. It was well worth listening to Ernie and what he had to say. I always felt a strong affinity to Ernie because we both came from the Kimberley. My family had been there at the same time as his and my father was a stockman about the same time that Ernie was a stockman. I never knew that until recently and I wish I had asked him whether he knew my family when he was there. My grandfather, who lived in Derby, was asked by the Labor Party to run for the seat of Kimberley two or three elections before Ernie actually won it. I am told my grandfather used to be secretary of the police union in Fremantle, so they thought he was a strong Labor supporter. They did not know that my grandmother wore the pants, and if she said they were Liberal supporters, then they were Liberal! Who knows, things might have been different if he had agreed to run, but I do not think he would have won in those days as he was not known in the same way that Ernie was in the north west—but we might have been involved.

We also shared other similarities, including our portfolios. I managed two portfolios for which Ernie had also been minister; that is, Aboriginal affairs and water. In particular, as Minister for Water Resources I had a fair bit to do with what Ernie had done, and I got to run the farm water grants scheme. I actually spent a lot more money than Ernie did, but he was the minister who was famous, mainly because he pioneered that program. He had taken something that was a tiny program in the Water Corporation and turned it into something of his own by significantly increasing funding and going out and working with the farmers to make sure they had a water supply—and, of course, there were the plaques! At the funeral we talked about the plaques. I thought that Ernie's name was on something like 120 plaques, but there were more like 180! The story in the Water Corp was that Ernie would go to any opening. If a toilet was to be commissioned, Ernie would be ready to go to its opening, because he was responsible for supplying the water to that toilet! At each of those openings, Ernie would take along his guitar and sing a song and make it a much more informal opening than I was ever able to do. Ernie looked at bringing water from the north, but as he found from the bureaucrats, cost was the major issue. I do not know whether the figures were accurate or not, but the Water Corporation said that the cost of getting that water to Perth was about \$3.60 a kilolitre, and at the same time it cost about 50c a kilolitre to get it from the dams. When we came to government, the numbers just did not stack up—it is not to say that the figures we were given by the Water Corp were necessarily accurate; anyway, history shows that it did not go ahead.

One area in which I hope I do not follow in Ernie's footsteps concerns Wittenoom. Ernie was involved in the study of Wittenoom as the Minister for the North-West, and with starting the process of closure. When we were in opposition, Larry Graham was the chair of the Select Committee on Wittenoom, which I think was initiated by

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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a Labor government to look at the closure of Wittenoom. I was up there with Larry Graham walking over those tailings in Wittenoom. As we know, Ernie suffered from asbestos-related diseases, including mesothelioma, which was a terrible sadness.

It was amazing to hear people speak at the funeral, which was a fantastic event at which I was very pleased to represent the Premier, who was attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. There was an amazing turnout with a vast number and variety of people from all walks of life. Members from both sides of this house were very proud that we were able to provide a state funeral for Ernie, which he absolutely deserved as a wonderful Australian.

I am sorry, Kim, I forgot to mention another similarity with Ernie: we each have a Kim in our family!

It was with great sadness to hear that Ernie had departed and certainly in the way that he did, because I am sure he had a lot more to offer. I worked with him through the Water Corporation, and also, as the member for Midland mentioned, on Ernie's proposal for diabetes management. We in government and me as Minister for Health funded the program that saw him provide advice in remote communities on not only diabetes but a range of health issues. Ernie used to stress that diabetes was one of the consequences of the lifestyle that people were leading and it was no good managing diabetes, it was a matter of managing all those other aspects of wellness within a community to make sure that people do not get the end result, which is diabetes. Ernie was passionate about that, as he was in so many other areas of his life.

I would like to pass on my condolences to the family and friends of Ernie Bridge. Members on both sides of this house thought a great deal of him and we wish all of you fond memories of your dad and your mate. Ernie deserves the greatest admiration of all of us.

**MR B.S. WYATT (Victoria Park)** [2.49 pm]: I also begin by acknowledging the family of Ernie, who are here today: his children, Noel, Kim, Beverly and Cheryl, and all the grandchildren, who represented the family incredibly well at his state funeral just a few short weeks ago. I also acknowledge Ernie's wife, Mavis, who predeceased Ernie in 2009.

Ernie's life has been well documented in the media and in the speeches that have been made today, particularly those made by the Leader of the Opposition and the Premier, so I will not repeat the extensive and proud history of Ernie's life and career. What I would like to do is to reflect upon Ernie as an Aboriginal man who developed a public profile when he did. It is the fact that he was an Aboriginal man born in the 1930s that made his career so extraordinary; the Premier has already made the point that despite the fact that 1980 was not that long ago, so much has indeed changed since that time.

Ernie's public life began when Ernie's father died suddenly in 1962, leaving a large hole in the local community, including on the Halls Creek shire council. Unsurprisingly, Ernie was persuaded to nominate for the vacancy. Looking back on our history, we all understand that in 1962 Ernie's decision was always going to cause some local consternation. The station establishment at the time objected strongly to Ernie's candidature, arguing that he could not take up the presidency of the council because he was an Aboriginal and, they claimed, illegitimate. Facing these racist objections, Ernie pushed on and, thanks to the records kept at the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, was able to prove that he was indeed born in wedlock and, despite the objections of the establishment, was able to take up the shire presidency.

And so Ernie's life as a trailblazer began, becoming the first Aboriginal person to serve on a local council in Western Australia, and the youngest ever shire president when elected to that role in 1965—a position he held until his resignation in 1979. The issues Ernie faced as shire president also reflect the extraordinary barriers that Aboriginal people faced as Ernie's public profile was increasing. His fight to de-segregate the local cemetery has been referred to today and is just one case in point.

Clearly, Ernie's talents and skills were recognised by other tiers of government very early on. Ernie was a foundation member of the WA Aboriginal Lands Trust, served as the inaugural member of the commonwealth Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, and served as a royal commissioner, inquiring into the events at Skull Creek, which highlighted problems with the relationship between Aboriginal people and the police. It was this royal commission that led to the appointment of Aboriginal people as Aboriginal police liaison officers, and the history of that has been referred to previously by the member for Midland.

With hindsight, it was almost inevitable that Ernie would eventually challenge that last bastion of Aboriginal exclusion, the state Parliament, and in 1976 Ernie accepted endorsement as the Australian Labor Party candidate for the state seat of Kimberley. In his account of the life of the late Rob Riley, the author Quentin Beresford outlined the challenges faced by Ernie in his quest to enter Parliament. I quote from Beresford's *Rob Riley: An Aboriginal Leader's Quest for Justice*. It states —

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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The Court government's push to marginalise Aboriginal people from the democratic process originated in the fallout from the 1977 state election and the bitter contest for the seat of Kimberley. At the time it was not compulsory for Aborigines to enrol to vote, and for some years the state Labor Party had been mobilising Aborigines to enrol in key seats. The Liberal Party watched this development with increasing concern, fearing the electoral repercussions of the growing number of Labor-leaning Aboriginal voters. Following the poll in the seat of Kimberley, the unsuccessful ALP candidate, widely respected local Aborigine Ernie Bridge, contested the result in the Court of Disputed Returns, alleging foul play by the Liberal Party. Mr Bridge's allegations were later raised in State Parliament. The Liberals were accused of —

As described in *The West Australian* —

'stand-over tactics deliberately designed to intimidate illiterate people to deprive them of their right to vote'. The allegations caused a furore. Subsequently, the Court of Disputed Returns declared the Kimberley poll void due to malpractice.

However, the behaviour of the conservative establishment only galvanised an already determined Aboriginal voting population, who delighted in Ernie's belated election to state Parliament in February 1980. The establishment's reaction to Ernie's election was, however, quite vicious, leading to charges being laid and the arrest of some of the key people who had supported Ernie, an Aboriginal person, in securing and exercising their franchise—Steve Hawke, Jennifer Gardiner, Les Verdon and Tom Stephens. These charges, for alleged breaches of the Electoral Act—most for the offence of “persuading and inducing voters to apply for a postal vote”—were all eventually either dismissed by the courts or withdrawn by the prosecutors. However, those charged had been variously hauled off to local police station lockups across the Kimberley in Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra. The eventual long-serving ALP parliamentarian Tom Stephens had the pleasure of seeing the inside of Wyndham Work Camp for his troubles. Thus, Ernie achieved things with respect to Tom that many of us were not able to achieve.

At the same election of February 1980, people associated with and supported by Ernie's political opponents had, on election eve, taken a 45-gallon drum of port wine and delivered it to the Warmun community in Turkey Creek in an attempt to get the voters too drunk to vote at the election. The perpetrators were caught in the act of distributing the wine around what were then just rudimentary camp sites at Turkey Creek. So the scurrilous plan was foiled and every eligible voter in the Warmun community proudly voted at that election that day and their votes were part of a large winning majority that elected Ernie Bridge to Parliament. Of course, nobody was charged for this behaviour. As Susan Bradley said during her wonderful tribute to Ernie at his state funeral, this was not the Liberal Party's finest hour.

In Ernie's first speech to Parliament on 7 August 1980, he recounted some of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people in the Kimberley attempting to vote. He stated —

My first example is of an aged man who walked into one of the polling centres in the Kimberley for the purpose of exercising what he considered to be a vote in that election. Having arrived there, he was confronted with a barrage of questions, one being. “How old are you?” Not understanding the terminology in the Statute book which states affirmative or otherwise, he said he was an old man rather than answering the question. He was immediately ejected from the polling centre and told to go home.

Further in Ernie's first speech, referring to debate that had taken place earlier in Parliament that day prior to his first speech, he stated —

We have heard today a number of comments about the irresponsibility and illiteracy of many of these people.

Again, referring to his Aboriginal constituents in the Kimberley. He continued —

Despite all these problems, these people want their true thoughts known. These people faced two elections and had to go before a Court of Disputed Returns and give evidence. They were subjected to a considerable amount of harassment by way of cross-examination. However, they pursued the whole process with bravery and considerable dignity to the point where at the end, at the last election, they went to the polling booths on their own to cast a valid vote.

Members would have read about those people who chose not to go to the polling centre and applied for a postal vote, only to find they were carted away in a paddy wagon to explain the reason for their application. Perhaps that matter is something we can debate on some future occasion.

Ernie had good reason to frequently recall to mind that he had been warned, specifically during a phone call from none other than the then state Premier, Sir Charles Court, after Ernie told the then Premier that he was

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

---

going to accept Labor endorsement and the then Premier advised that politics can be very tough. As Ernie often said later, he had no idea how tough they were going to make it for him and his family, his friends and supporters.

Ernie's long parliamentary career has been well documented. His dedication to the people of the Kimberley was legendary. As was shown by his constant advocacy of the Kimberley pipeline plan, he clearly had an eye on the future challenges that our state would face.

Something should also be said of the fact that Ernie left the Labor Party. Ernie was a man who challenged himself and never accepted the current orthodoxy. I have no doubt that it was this streak that propelled him towards his declaration of independence from the Labor Party. Without any rancour or angry scenes, with no dust-up or any great axe to grind, after he had worked the majority of his parliamentary years with the Australian Labor Party, Ernie decided he wanted to spend his final term as a Labor Independent. Basically, he had just had enough of caucus meetings and party discipline. Not many people leave the Labor Party well. However, Ernie did it as well as it could possibly be done. The absence of rancour was highlighted by the fact that the ALP did not preselect a candidate to run in the Kimberley against Ernie in 1996. Again, I will quote briefly from Ernie's final speech, this time to Parliament in 2000. He stated —

I also thank the Labor Party because without it I would not have had the privilege of serving as a member of Parliament. I would not have achieved some of those magnificent goals and outcomes that I now reflect upon with great pride and purpose. It is often the case that people come into a political environment through the agency of a major party and then, for reasons that emerge in subsequent years, find time to contemplate criticism of that party. I feel that is wrong. We must always remember that despite the circumstances that might have evolved in recent times, the grassroots of our position must always be factored into the position of the party. The party gave us the opportunity to enter into politics. I put on the record my appreciation of the Labor Party and my thanks to it.

Ernie's two successors in the seat of Kimberley have both been Aboriginal women. Carol Martin was the first Aboriginal woman elected to an Australian Parliament in 2001. The second, Josie Farrer, is also, like Ernie, from Halls Creek, where she, too, served on the Halls Creek council and was the shire president for seven years, following the footsteps of Ernie Bridge on a pathway to the state Parliament and passing through gateways and doors which he was the first Aboriginal person to successfully open and which they, as strong Aboriginal women, have successfully kept open.

To me, it was the battles that Ernie fought and the doors that he opened that brought me to the Labor Party. We all have our own stories that bring us to our various political parties and to the adoption of a particular ideology. The experiences of my father as a member of the stolen generation and as a senior public servant, the experiences that Ernie went through to get into Parliament and the professional time that both men spent together in Aboriginal affairs crystallised my belief in the importance of the Parliament and the importance of government. Certainly, I cannot fathom how difficult it must be as children of Ernie to travel around Western Australia and forge your own identity. I certainly know that as soon as I get north of about Yanchep, I am simply known as Cedric's boy, not Ben Wyatt. No doubt, you are all known simply as Ernie's boys and girls—and I share the pain that that can sometimes bring!

There is a strong case for more permanently memorialising Ernie's life and legacy. The state funeral was a fine and fitting, well-deserved tribute to his life. The eulogies, the condolence motion in the Parliament and the various obituaries have all helped paint the picture of Ernie. However, it is worth noting that there are just a small number of statues around Western Australia that secure, in the form of public art, the lasting memory to public legacy and community service. We have the statue of Russian Jack at Halls Creek and the statues in Broome that record the pioneers of the pearling industry. Down on Heirisson Island we have had the statue of early Aboriginal leader Yagan, in Kings Park we have a statue of Sir John Forrest and on the Terrace we have a statue of Sir Charles Court. It would be good for the state government to commission the production of, and erect somewhere either in Perth or in the Kimberley, a statue of Ernie Bridge that captures some of the many larger-than-life and colourful and charismatic features of this man and his life. This would be a good investment in reminding us all and future generations that a life lived in dedicated service of the people of WA is a life worth remembering and emulating. It may indeed be something that the Western Australia Day committee can pursue.

To Ernie's family, I offer you my sincere condolences on behalf of the Wyatt family and in particular on behalf of my father, Cedric. Ernie was a great man whose contribution was felt far beyond the pastoral lease on which he was born. Be proud of his contribution and be proud of the legacy that he has left us all.

**MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys)** [3.02 pm]: I would like to add a few words to the condolence motion for Ernie Bridge. I would like to offer my condolences to his family. Unfortunately, I did not get to know many of

Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Dr Kim Hames; Mr Ben Wyatt; Mr Rob Johnson; Ms Josie Farrer

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his family members, but I did have, together with, I think, three colleagues on this side of the house, the great privilege of working with Ernie during his last eight years in Parliament. I found Ernie to be one of the most decent human beings I have ever met. I never, ever heard Ernie say a bad word about anybody. We had many conversations in the tearoom in the afternoon—that was one of Ernie's favourites. Ernie did not particularly like spending a lot of time in the chamber listening to boring speeches that were made by many members at the time; he preferred to do other things in the building. But he did come into the chamber when there was an important speech to be heard or to be made, and he certainly made a contribution.

Something that Ernie and I had in common, which we spoke about often, was the fact that we were both musicians. I am sure that Ernie was a much better musician than I. He was certainly a much better singer than I could ever be. Ernie had a good voice and he projected his voice very well indeed. He certainly entertained many people.

On behalf of all the former members who left when Ernie left or who left afterwards, I pass on their condolences. Ernie was one of the favourites. Although Ernie was on the other side of the house from where I and my colleagues stood, he was one of the most favoured Labor members of the Liberals and, I would suggest, even the Nationals. I think the Nationals had a big heart in relation to Ernie, because Ernie was one of those people who engendered this wonderful wellbeing and good feeling towards his fellow human beings. Ernie will be very sadly missed by his family obviously, but also by his friends in the Kimberley in particular. Ernie will be missed by the many people who met him throughout his life. Meeting Ernie certainly has made my life better. I think that everybody who met Ernie would say that he made their lives better. As I have said, Ernie never, ever had a nasty word to say about anybody. That is extremely unusual in politics—very, very unusual, I would suggest—but that is the type of person that Ernie was. He was a wonderful human being and a wonderful member of Parliament, and he will be sadly missed.

**MS J. FARRER (Kimberley)** [3.05 pm]: I would like to pay my condolences to the Bridge family. A lot of things have been said today about Mr Bridge and his life in politics, and where he started from. It is a custom in Indigenous culture that we do not use the names of people who have passed on. So I will refer to him as Kuminjay Bridge. I have known Kuminjay Bridge for most of my life. His mother was also from the Gidja language group that I come from, and his dad was non-Indigenous. There was a big separation in how children of that sort of union were looked at. So it was not an easy road for him; I can understand that.

What I remember most about Kuminjay Bridge is that in everything that he did, he always strived very hard to make Indigenous people recognised. At the same time, he was also working for everybody else in the community of Halls Creek, which he loved so much, and where he came from. He was elected to the Halls Creek Shire Council and served as a councillor from 1962 to 1979. During that time, when the referendum was held, Kuminjay Bridge walked and talked with people and made sure that people were registered on the electoral roll. That was one of his biggest achievements for Indigenous people. I would like to thank his family for the time that he took to work with a lot of our people. As I have said, Kuminjay Bridge was elected to the Halls Creek Shire Council and served there for a long time. Later, he ran for Parliament and moved to Perth to become the first Indigenous politician anywhere in Australia to serve in a ministerial portfolio.

I would like to thank his children, Beverly, Kimberley, Noel and Cheryl, for the time that they spent with a lot of our kids in Halls Creek. Beverly spent a lot of time with my daughter. They were very good friends. So we got to know a lot of the family pretty well.

I would also like to thank Kuminjay Bridge, and his family, for giving his time to address a lot of the issues and barriers that we as Indigenous people found too hard to face. When he ran for Parliament and became the first Aboriginal member of Parliament, and of cabinet as a minister, that was one of the most touching times for us as Indigenous people, because he was able to shatter stereotypes and perspectives about Indigenous people in Western Australia. I think that was one of the biggest barriers that anybody could have overcome, but he did it, and he did it with dignity, and I must say that I admired what he did. We as Indigenous people have found it very hard and we have struggled over the years to get to where we are and to do what we have done.

Thank you, Kuminjay Bridge, for what you did and for the services that you gave to Western Australia through Parliament.

Question passed, members standing.