



Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Tuesday, 5 October 2010

DEATHS OF VICKI ARNOLD AND JULIE-ANNE LEAHY

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (11.40 am): In August 1991 the bodies of best friends Vicki Arnold and Julie-Anne Leahy were found in bushland at Cherry Tree Creek near Atherton. They had gone missing two weeks earlier in strange circumstances. Police were confronted with a chilling scene. Julie-Anne Leahy was in the driver's seat of her Nissan Patrol, propped up by a tightly-wrapped seatbelt around her neck. She had been bashed with a large rock, shot twice in the head and her throat slashed. Beside her, Vicki Arnold was sprawled across the passenger side floor, her hand resting on a sawn-off .22. She had been shot in the thigh, upwards through her chin and fatally behind her right ear.

Despite the convoluted and bizarre scene they faced and with only an obligatory examination of the vehicle and bodies, senior police declared the deaths a murder-suicide. The vehicle was moved within hours and left in the open for almost three days before it was again examined. Scientific officers found no fingerprints. The first police officers to arrive at the scene believed they were seeing the result of a double murder and that experienced homicide detectives from Brisbane should be called in. It is contended that they were overruled by a senior officer and told in no uncertain terms to 'keep their mouths shut'. Nineteen years later, people in Far North Queensland and indeed the whole nation—this is a widely-known case—still talk about these events and most are still convinced that both women were murdered.

During that time, media and public disquiet have led to seven separate investigations into the case. The most recent, by the Brisbane homicide group, concluded late last year and is now before the Attorney-General for his consideration. In January 1998 Carl Mengler and Frank O'Gorman were commissioned to independently reinvestigate the case. In their report they said—

There remain features surrounding these two deaths that are almost impossible to comprehend or explain. Significant evidence available in 1998 was not available to the Coroner in 1992 and, in the view of the Ministerial Investigators, should these inquests be reopened an 'open finding' might well result concerning each death.

A second inquest followed but, despite revealing evidence from witnesses, the result was the same as the first. Respected Cairns lawyer Philip Bovey, who spoke out after the inquest, said—

For a myriad of reasons it could not be safely concluded that it was a murder-suicide. In fact the preponderance of the evidence supported a third party's involvement.

This view is shared by at least one of the officers first on the scene—my uncle Bill Hendrikse, who famously made his concerns public on *60 Minutes* in September 2005. Like many locals, I am acutely aware of the emotion and frustration evident whenever this case is being discussed. Certainly, I am yet to hear from a single person who believes Vicki Arnold committed a murder. The families of both women have been steadfast in their belief that the two friends were murdered. They have never wavered in their defence of Vicki's innocence. They are as committed today as they were 19 years ago. This is a case that simply will not go away. Vicki Arnold has been written off as a murderer with no opportunity to defend herself. Her mother, Vida, now 85 years old and frail, has never given up hope that one day her daughter's name will be cleared. Another family member, Vicki's cousin Sandra Chariton, is adamant Vicki was not capable of such brutality. Sandra's late mother, Janice, was the first to raise concerns about this case soon after the two women were found.

This crime remains unsolved due to an unwillingness to acknowledge that it was virtually impossible for Vicki Arnold to have killed her friend in such strange circumstances and then take her own life. That this case has attracted so much attention is due to one simple factor: there was no initial murder investigation. Vital evidence was contaminated, lost or, at worst, possibly ignored. There is a strong chance that the family may refer this matter to the Crime and Misconduct Commission in the very near future to pursue their concerns regarding the initial police investigation, which they continue to argue was incompetent. As I indicated earlier, the outcomes of the most recent investigation are with the Attorney-General for his consideration. I believe that a third inquest into this matter is warranted to make sense out of long-time confusion and to seek answers for a family still grieving. A third inquest would have matters to consider that the previous two did not address—complex and diverse issues that need to be brought into the open.

Given the initial investigation and the evidence available, it may not be possible to ever conclusively prove that a double murder took place. This would be for the coroner to determine. However, it is my view that an open finding by the coroner would at least remove the stigma of murder-suicide—a label that I believe has been unfairly applied to Vicki Arnold for almost two decades. The passage of time does not lessen the power of the truth, and the truth in this case is surely that Vicki Arnold did not kill her best friend and then take her own life.