




Speech By
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

CORONIAL INQUEST, ARNOLD, MS V AND LEAHY, MRS J

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (3.01 am): Last Friday the State Coroner, Michael Barnes, handed down his findings from the third inquest into the deaths of Vicki Arnold and Julie-Anne Leahy. Many people would be aware of the circumstances of this case. In August 1991 the women's bodies were found in bushland at Cherry Tree Creek near Atherton after being missing for two weeks. It was quickly ruled that Vicki killed Julie-Anne and then took her own life.

When I called for a third inquest in 2010, I had hoped for an open finding by the coroner so that it may remove the stigma of a murder-suicide that had been very unfairly applied to Vicki Arnold for almost two decades. What happened was something that surpassed all expectations. It was something that does not happen very often. I think people have a view that what happens in courtrooms is what we see in Hollywood movies. Almost always this is not what happens, but on this occasion it was.

Coroner Michael Barnes made it clear that Vicki Arnold would be exonerated and that finally she, too, would be considered a victim in this awful saga. But he went further. He said there was a prima facie case to lay charges against Alan Leahy and then he ordered that a warrant be issued for his arrest. Today Alan Leahy handed himself in to authorities. It is difficult to describe the emotion that we all felt in the courtroom. We were overjoyed and we were relieved. We are all still shocked at the outcome.

I grew up hearing stories about this case, and I do not think I have ever come across anyone I know in Far North Queensland who thought events transpired the way the original police investigation suggested—backed up by the first two coronial inquests. I have always felt a very personal connection to this case. I made a vow that, if I was ever fortunate enough to have a platform to bring this case to the fore—as allowed by my role as a member of this parliament—I would take that chance.

The result last week was perhaps the most satisfying outcome of anything that I have worked on since becoming an MP. I want to thank former Attorney-General, Cameron Dick, for listening to my calls and Coroner Michael Barnes. He was the right man at the right time for the job. There are so many people who have kept the faith over the years, but I want to pay tribute to author Robert Reid and lawyer Phillip Bovey in particular.

There was a stage where the person in my view who most needed to be present to hear the findings may not have been there. Vicki's mother, Vida Arnold, now in her late 80s, resides in a nursing home on the Atherton Tablelands and requires special transport assistance to come to Cairns. I want to thank Theo Backalakis and St John's Community Care who answered my call and made it possible for Vida to be present when the findings were handed down.

I have said before that the passage of time does not lessen the power of the truth, and the truth in this case, acknowledged in court last week, is that Vicki Arnold did not kill her best friend and then take her own life. I have nothing but the deepest admiration for the families of Vicki and Julie-Anne for their unwavering conviction to the innocence of Vicki and a commitment to seeing a deplorable wrong

being put right. Nobody will know whether the outcome would have been different if the police investigation had been handled better, but I think it may have saved almost 22 years of heartache for many people. After two decades the obvious has been recognised. It now rests with the courts to do their job and bring some genuine closure. It just goes to show you that you should never give up