



House of Assembly

Extract from Hansard
10 February 2016
Page 4177

FREEBAIRN, MR J.S.

**The Hon. A. PICCOLO (Light)
(14:08):**

John Sydney Freebairn was elected to state parliament on 3 March 1962 for the electorate of Light at the age of 30. He won the LCL, or Liberal and Country League (the precursor to the Liberal Party) preselection when the sitting member, Mr Leslie Nicholson, did not seek re-election. John was re-elected to state parliament at the March 1965 and 1968 elections.

He did not contest the 1970 state elections, when he lost preselection to Dr Bruce Eastick, who was to win the seat and was later to become, in 1972, the leader of the opposition and speaker of this place in 1979 under the Tonkin government. John lost preselection partly as a result of changes to the boundaries of the electorate, which had to change—in those days, they

probably reflected more closely Frome than today's Light—but also because of the internal difference within the LCL at the time, as he had aligned himself with the Liberal Movement, which represented the progressive faction within the party.

He did not take the loss sitting down, and in 1973 gained LCL preselection for the upper house seat of Midlands, where the Liberal Movement candidate overwhelmingly outpolled the other candidates. Dr Bruce Eastick was the leader of the party at this time as mentioned, John was a personal friend of Steele Hall, the then leader of the Liberal Movement. Speaking after the preselection ballot John said, and I quote:

A clear-cut win for a Liberal Movement-aligned candidate for Midlands preselection shows there is a spirit of change amongst LCL members.

I am not sure that he was quite right on that occasion. The LCL was not to win any seats in the Midlands district and John said, and I quote again:

The poor showing of the LCL candidates at the state election was due to the conservative image displayed by the LCL councillors.

Perhaps he had the late Ren DeGaris in mind when he said that. At the declaration of the poll John said:

The conservative attitude of the state executive of the LCL and the LCL members of the Legislative Council did not reflect the thinking of the rank and file members of the party and that the present four member electoral district was completely obsolete.

He said that it should either be turned into single member districts or that proportional representation should be introduced. If my memory serves me correctly, proportional representation was introduced at the 1975 election.

Born on 31 July 1930, John was the eldest of three children of parents Thomas and Annie Freebairn. As mentioned, he passed away on 5 January this year. With his brother David, who is in the gallery today, and sister Claire he was brought up at Alma and made strong connections and enormous contributions throughout this community.

He began his schooling at the Alma South Primary School in 1937. The school was about 5½ kilometres from the family farm, and John (and his brother David three years later and sister Claire six years later) cycled the 5½ kilometres to and from the school, except when it was wet, when Dad took them to the school.

On leaving Alma South, John spent one term at Balaklava High School, travelling by train from Owen and each day boarding with a family in Owen.

He then spent four years at Scotch College, where he made many lifetime friends. He rowed in the Scotch Head of the River for two years. After Scotch he returned to the family farm. He played cricket for the Alma team until it was disbanded. He was, more importantly, also a member of the Gawler Apex Club.

He did a course in welding at the School of Mines in Adelaide and began improving the farm buildings, welding the frames and erecting numerous sheds. John was the president of the Hamley Bridge hospital board for many years and president of the Alma Agricultural Bureau, as well as chairman and secretary of the Owen Branch Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association. As mentioned, he was also a director of the Red Comb Cooperative and a member of the South Australian Egg Board.

In the 1980s and 1990s he was a state director of South Australian Cooperative Bulk Handling Limited. John was awarded a life membership of the Alma Country Fire Service and a national medal for his work in this area. More recently, though, he had been a member of the board of the Laura and Alfred West Cottage Homes, which provides housing to older people of low income; and I was privileged as the minister for social housing to officially open one of their homes in the northern suburbs.

During his youth he completed training in real estate, welding, accounting and valuation. He always described himself first and foremost as a farmer. His farming activities included tree planting around the property, and he was a supporter of the Coolibah Club which promoted tree planting across the state.

He also kept bees, as well as working in the farm enterprises of grain, sheep and poultry. He was a member of the Royal Geographic Society of South Australia, the Historical Society and the Caledonian Society and a Fellow of the Institute of Company Directors. He had been a justice of the peace for many years.

John first met his wife Susan when he dropped in to visit her and her then husband, David, at their Rosedale farm in February 1972. John was looking for support as a candidate for election to the Egg Board, and also hoping to try some of their homemade wine, I understand.

At the time Susan was teaching microbiology to the oenology class at Roseworthy, and at the time her cousin Andrew Pulford of Concordia Fruit Wines fame was developing his winemaking skills, so between them they created some very interesting and at times drinkable wines.

Susan spent the years from 1964 to 1970 in the UK so missed John's period in parliament. However, John took great pleasure in driving her

around what was then his electorate of Light and telling her about all the wonderful people he had known over the years. He made a point of visiting every house and business in the electorate, and as their member had endeavoured to represent their concerns and assist in resolving their problems.

John and Susan's late husband, David Vigor, became close friends with common interests in farming, education and electoral reform. Political policy discussions became an institution around the dinner table, later becoming and being formalised into Liberal Movement party policy groups.

Susan's late husband, David Vigor, was a founding member of the Australian Democrats and became a Senator for South Australia in 1984. Losing his seat at the double dissolution in 1987, he worked to establish the Association of Former Members and Senators, as the life expectancy of former members was only five years at the time. John became the founding secretary of the Association of Former Members of the South Australian Parliament at the same time, and he and David travelled together to conferences in Australia and overseas to promote such associations.

John married Susan Jane Vigor on 3 December 2005, and Susan says that she and John enjoyed an enormously pleasurable time together. They

spent winters travelling with their camper around Australia or overseas, where they met up with many friends and relatives and pursued their many interests. John was particularly interested in history and art, and they shared common interests in farming, wines and developing economies. For the last two years, unfortunately, John suffered from kidney failure, and dialysis occupied a large part of his time, but they continued to spend as much time at the farm as possible. The thousands of trees he planted there remain a beautiful memorial to his work.

John was modest and kind, engaging with people near and far, whom he met through his involvement in church, politics, community, commercial and social organisations, and through his travels and contacts with farming communities across the world. I only met John in recent times, when he visited the parliament building on a number of occasions, as the Leader of the Opposition spoke. I can attest to his modest and quiet demeanour, and his good judgement—he did actually at the time remark that I was doing a good job as the member for Light.

John will be sorely missed by Susan, his stepchildren and other family members and their many wonderful friends who are in the Speaker's gallery today. With Mrs Freebairn today are David and Margaret Freebairn (John's brother and sister-in-

law) and Mrs Freebairn's sons Andre, Henri, Philippe and Geoffrey. Vale John.