

Resolution of Council

17 March 2025

Item 13.3

Vale John Butcher - Peaceful Radical Who Helped Save the Cooks River

Moved by Councillor Ellsmore, seconded by the Chair (the Lord Mayor) –

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) the recent passing of John Joseph Butcher, on Invasion Day 2025, a lifelong community activist who made a significant contribution to the inner city and the Cooks River;
- (ii) John was born on 9 March 1943 to William and Mary Butcher – Bill and Molly. He grew up with his brother Peter and his sister Marie in the eastern suburbs, where his father ran a local corner store;
- (iii) John was an activist Catholic priest in Redfern in the late 1960s and 1970s. His first parish was in Waterloo, before he joined the Redfern parish in 1972 with Ted Kennedy and Fergus Breslan. The three priests established Australia's first 'Team Ministry', a progressive ministry dedicated to social justice which operated without hierarchy. They were inspired by the radical Catholic Worker Movement, and actively supported Aboriginal rights and the peace movement, including Vietnam war draft resisters;
- (iv) Redfern and Waterloo were at the centre of the struggle for Aboriginal and civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s. When the South Sydney Council moved to evict and arrest Aboriginal squatters living at 'the Block' near Redfern Station, the priests set up temporary housing in the church, and supported activists in their campaigns to protect the housing on the Block, form the Aboriginal Housing Company, and have the land handed back;

- (v) John was involved in or supported the establishment of a number of the community-led organisations that grew out of the inner city at that time, supporting community organising and mutual aid. This included South Sydney Community Aid, which was located on Regent Street with the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Addison Road Community Centre, the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (of which John was the first coordinator), Inner Sydney Voice and the 'tenants' rights project'. which was the forerunner to the Tenants Union;
- (vi) after leaving the church, John married Julie Spies, and had a son, Ben. As it was not possible to have both parents' names on your birth certificate if you were born in 1978, John and Julie petitioned the NSW Government and refused to register Ben until the rules changed;
- (vii) John ran for South Sydney Council twice as a community independent, the first time while he was still a priest. John described the council at the time as a "closed, mono-cultural, all-male and one-party" council, with all positions held by the ALP. Campaigning for a more open and inclusive council, John was arrested and sentenced to three days "hard labour" at Long Bay gaol, for refusing to leave a council meeting when requested;
- (viii) John was later part of the Rainbow Alliance, and joined the Greens in the 1990s, a party in which he worked actively until the end of his life. He supported Sydney's first successful effort to elect a Green – Bruce Welsh on Marrickville Council in 1991 – and many elections and campaigns after this;
- (ix) John had many roles after leaving the priesthood, including as a gardener. At the University of Sydney he was an active National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) member, including appearing at the commission to successfully advocate that all staff had the right to be represented by one union representing all, whether they be academic, professional or worked the grounds;
- (x) John and his family moved to Marrickville in 1980s, near the heavily polluted Cooks River. He was involved in the successful campaign to save Wolli Creek from the proposed M5 East, and took a leading role in working to protect, re-naturalise and build understanding of the importance of the Cooks River and the water catchment;
- (xi) John joined the Cooks River Valley Association soon after it was formed in 2008 and was President from 2012 to 2018. Initiatives under John's leadership included the container deposit scheme campaign, significant native revegetation, Marrickville's first rainwater garden, the Riverworks Environmental Sculpture competition, the water testing program, and first signage recognising Aboriginal Country and Pemulwuy as a leader of the resistance movement. His catchcry - "we are all Cooks River people" - has been adopted as the logo for the Mud Crabs bushcare group, of which John was an active member;
- (xii) on 8 March 2025, family and friends joined the Lord Mayor, fellow Councillors and the community at the reopening of the Douglas Street Playground in Redfern. Julie and John had helped lead a direct action in 1975 to create the park, pulling down the fences and claiming the disused land for the local kids. Local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children helped design and build an adventure playground, and called it "Douglas Street People's Park". A plaque now commemorates the park's activist history; and

- (xiii) John is remembered as a loving father, partner and friend. He was a peaceful radical with a principled and utopian view of the world, and will be greatly missed by many;
- (B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to John's family expressing Council's condolences; and
- (C) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate John's life.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to John Butcher.