Item 3.1

Vale Robert Bernard French AM

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Australia's LGBTIQA+ community is mourning the loss of one of its most significant figures with the death of the gay activist, archivist and historian, Robert Bernard French AM on 22 October 2026.

One of 4 children, Robert was born on 27 April 1947 to Pat and Barney French. After leaving school, he prepared to become a Catholic priest as a member of the Order of the Passionist Fathers. It was while living in the seminary he began to come to terms with being gay. It was "theological difficulties" he had with "Holy Mother Church", rather than being gay that led to his leaving, coincidentally in the week before the Stonewall riots in New York, regarded as the catalyst for the gay liberation movement.

Robert became involved in the LGBTIQA+ community while studying history and political science at the University of NSW in the early 1970s. In his second year, he began attending meetings of Campus CAMP, a gay student's group at the University of NSW. It was his introduction to the emerging gay movement.

After graduating in 1974, he moved to Canberra to work at the Australian Archives. While in Canberra, he became involved with a gay radio program on the Canberra community station 2XX. One his highlights was taking over the radio station for the whole day to mark the 10th anniversary of Stonewall. Robert wrote 2 one-hour documentaries for the broadcast. Later that year, he attended the Fourth National Homosexual Conference at Paddington Town Hall, held soon after the first Mardi Gras.

In 1980, he returned to Sydney, working in the NSW Office of the Australian Archives, eventually becoming NSW Director. He quickly became involved in the recently established Gay Rights Lobby, becoming its treasurer and later co-convenor and secretary.

The early 1980s were heady years of gay activism. In early 1983, police raided Club 80, a gay men's club in Oxford Street Paddington. The raid not only led to an Ombudsman's inquiry with adverse findings against the Police but energised the campaign for homosexual law reform. As part of this campaign, 28 men signed statutory declarations stating they had engaged in consensual sex with other men, challenging the enforcement of laws that criminalised their lives. Robert and fellow activist Lex Watson (the co-founder of Gay Rights Lobby) were the first 2 to present their declarations to the NSW Vice Squad. Neither were arrested.

Robert became a leading organiser and spokesperson for the campaign, writing letters, arranging delegations, lobbying MPs and engaging with the media. His media appearances ranged from short interviews on TV news and current affairs programs to a long chat on the rather blokey John Singleton radio show. He mastered the art of the 30 second grab and made much of the Australian tradition of the fair go.

In April 1984, following the NSW election, Premier Neville Wran announced he would introduce a private members bill to decriminalise homosexuality. A flurry of meetings followed, with Wran successfully introducing his bill, but with a discriminatory age of consent, the following month. It received assent in June 1984.

By this time however, the gay community was facing a new threat – the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The community responded, establishing advocacy and support groups. In 1985, several of these were formalised as the AIDS Council of NSW (now ACON). Robert joined the new organisation, serving on its Board, including 2 years as its vice-president.

Robert's activism was paralleled by his strong commitment to understanding, documenting and promoting queer history. He identified and collected newspaper articles, which led to his book, *Gays between the Broadsheets: Australian Media References on Homosexuality 1948-1980*. This was followed by *Mossies could spread AIDS: Australian Media References on AIDS 1981-1985*, co-authored with fellow AIDS Council Board member, Ross Duffin.

Robert also worked to make queer history accessible to a wider audience. In 1990, together with fellow historians, Bob Hay and Garry Wotherspoon, Robert began leading Gay and Lesbian, later Pride History Walks, an activity of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. He continued to lead these walks for 35 years, introducing participants to queer historical associations with locations in Oxford Street, Kings Cross and Sydney's CBD. The following year, he began writing a history column for Sydney Star Observer, later syndicated in other gay media. These columns were collected in his 1993 book *Camping by a billabong: gay and lesbian stories from Australian history* published by BlackWattle Press. He was also an early member of the Pride History Group and served as its secretary, vice-president and president.

Robert's contribution was recognised at the ACON Honour Awards in 2019. In 2024, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for significant service to the LGBTIQA+ community and to history preservation.

In an interview with the Star Observer in 2015, Robert observed that getting involved in community work is "behove on all of us".

> "I think everybody as a human being should be involved in some sort of community work at some stage, at some level… particularly for persecuted minorities like us. I can't conceive of not being involved to some level… I can't ever not see myself being active in some way."

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

(A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Robert Bernard French AM and his significant contribution to the LGBTIQA+ community as an activist, advocate, archivist and historian and his role in documenting and promoting queer history

(B) Council express its condolences to Robert's friends and colleagues in the LGBTIQA+ community and to his brothers Stephen and Greg, and his sister Annette

(C) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to Robert's brothers Stephen and Greg, and his sister Annette expressing Council's condolences.

THE RT. HON. CLOVER MOORE AO HON. FRAIA

Lord Mayor of Sydney