

Resolution of Council

25 August 2025

Item 13.14

Vale Uncle Paul Coe

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

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) the recent passing of Wiradjuri Elder, lawyer and activist Paul Coe;
- (ii) Uncle Paul devoted his life to the fight for justice. A visionary and leading voice in both the Aboriginal Rights and Land Rights movements, he was instrumental in establishing Redfern's groundbreaking Aboriginal organisations;
- (iii) born in 1949, Uncle Paul grew up on the Erambie Mission at Cowra. The eldest of 5 siblings, he spent time with his grandparents and other Elders, learning about Country, culture, and lore. His grandfather, who he was named after, and his dad and uncles drove livestock and he spent much of his early days travelling stock routes;
- (iv) life on the mission, known as '32 Acres', was harsh. Food was rationed, and authorities held absolute power, making sustained efforts to suppress Aboriginal culture. Child removal was prevalent, and Uncle Paul's parents fought tirelessly to protect their children, ensuring they received an education and held onto their cultural heritage;
- (v) Uncle Paul's parents ensured that he received an education and challenged both the Mission Managers and the school authorities. He became the first Aboriginal student at Cowra High School to be elected a prefect and to complete the Higher School Certificate. A gifted athlete and artist, he moved to Sydney after school, initially to pursue football and enrolling in an arts course at TAFE;

- (vi) he landed in Redfern just after the 1967 referendum. Despite the positive result, racism persisted and many in the community saw little immediate change. An influx of migration led to overcrowding, exacerbating existing problems like poverty and unemployment, and police discrimination and brutality were widespread;
- (vii) Uncle Paul found friends among those who envisioned social and political change. He was part of a core group of activists who started monitoring and recording police actions to deter harassment and unlawful arrests of Aboriginal people. This critical work led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) in 1970;
- (viii) the ALS provided free legal advice and representation to the local Aboriginal community, handling over 550 cases in its first year alone. Uncle Paul was elected to the inaugural governing council and later became its president. Aboriginal founded, governed, and staffed, the ALS became a powerful symbol for self-determination. Uncle Paul later reflected that it was "more than a legal office, it was and is the embodiment of a generation of Aboriginal people's desire to control their own destiny." The ALS also preceded the establishment of government-funded Legal Aid and provided a model for community legal centres across the country;
- (ix) Uncle Paul was also founding member and the inaugural chairperson of the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), which was established in 1971 in response to systemic racism, neglect, and poor health outcomes faced by Aboriginal people in the mainstream healthcare system. Inspired by the ALS, the AMS provided a culturally safe space for care and spurred a nationwide network of similar services;
- (x) in 1972, Uncle Paul helped establish a breakfast program for local Aboriginal children. This initiative, which started with a mobile caravan, evolved into the Murawina Aboriginal Corporation, which expanded to include a childcare centre and other vital services. Uncle Paul was also a founding member of Redfern's Black Theatre in 1972, an Aboriginal-run company that laid the foundation for a wellspring of creative expression within Sydney's Aboriginal community;
- (xi) Uncle Paul's activism extended far beyond Redfern. He played a key role in the ascendant Aboriginal Rights movements, helping to organise the George Street march against the Vestey Company (now known as the Wave Hill Walk-Off) and a broader campaign for Land Rights. Speaking at rallies against apartheid in South Africa and the Vietnam War, he challenged those who were ready to protest racism overseas but were less concerned about racism at home;
- (xii) in 1972, following a Prime Minister's address that refused to acknowledge Land Rights, Uncle Paul joined the group who established the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. While the opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, visited and met with the group, the government of the day did not support them, and police tried to shut it down in a violent attack. Uncle Paul was beaten and hospitalised with broken ribs;
- (xiii) this brutal response was fuelled by excessive fear of an Aboriginal uprising which also led to intense government surveillance, with ASIO monitoring the activities of Uncle Paul and other prominent activists;

- (xiv) in 1976, Paul travelled to the United Kingdom where he rowed across the harbour of Dover Beach to plant the Aboriginal Flag, claiming the land for all Aboriginal people. With an audience of supporters and onlookers, the peaceful invasion demonstrated the absurdity of the terra nullius lie. The site is now marked with a permanent plaque;
 - (xv) encouraged by his peers at the ALS, Uncle Paul had enrolled to study law at UNSW. He was the first Aboriginal person to do so and later was admitted as one of Australia's first Aboriginal barristers. Practicing law allowed Uncle Paul to be an advocate within the colonial structures he sought to change. He became a leading campaigner for Land Rights, organising rallies and meeting with lawmakers to propose inclusions into what became the NSW Land Rights Act;
 - (xvi) in 1979, Uncle Paul launched legal action against the Commonwealth in the High Court, arguing for the recognition of the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Though unsuccessful, the case was the first direct challenge of the doctrine of terra nullius and laid the foundation for the landmark 1992 Mabo judgement;
 - (xvii) Uncle Paul was the founding Treasurer of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, which was established under the Land Rights Act. He later contributed to the work of the Local Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council;
 - (xviii) in 1987, Uncle Paul spoke at the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, contributing to efforts to develop a framework for the rights of Indigenous people. He also used this platform to raise awareness about the ongoing disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians;
 - (xix) in his later years, Uncle Paul continued his advocacy through teaching at EORA TAFE and at Sydney University. He gave his time willingly to all and inspired many students to engage with their culture, to think critically and to be proud of their Aboriginal heritage; and
 - (xx) Uncle Paul balanced his activism with an unwavering love and responsibility for his family and community. He was a warm and supportive father, grandfather, brother, cousin and uncle. He's remembered for his generosity, his wise words, and the lessons he shared, as well as his humour, love, and the courage and determination he showed throughout his life. Culture and honour were at his core. He lived by these values and demonstrated what it is to be a Wiradjuri man. His passing leaves a void that our family and the Aboriginal community feel profoundly. He stoked a fire that continues to burn;
- (B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to Uncle Paul's family expressing Council's condolences; and
- (C) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate Uncle Paul'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 Uncle Paul Coe.