

Item 3.1

Vale Elisabeth Kirkby OAM

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I was saddened to recently learn of the death of a former Parliamentary colleague, Elisabeth (Lis) Wilma Burton Kirkby on 20 April 2026 at the age of 105.

I first met Lis, then a Member of the Legislative Council, when I was elected to Parliament in March 1988. We worked closely together over the next 10 years, most significantly on my Anti-Discrimination (Homosexual Vilification) Amendment Bill. This Bill had easily passed the Legislative Assembly on 13 May, 1993, 49 votes to 17, with Labor and my Independent colleagues supporting it and several Liberal MPs abstaining. The then Liberal Government had opposed my Bill, claiming they would introduce their own. It then attempted to prevent it being considered by the Legislative Council. Lis' courage and persistence ensured it was debated, voted on and became law, with the support of former Liberal Minister, the late Ted Pickering AM. The following year, Lis was cheered when she joined me in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade.

Before she was a Member of Parliament, Lis had a distinguished career as an actor radio broadcaster, producer, director and screenwriter.

She was born in Lancashire, UK on 26 January 1921, and grew up during the dark years of the Great Depression. She commenced her theatre career in 1939 as an assistant stage manager and actor working in English repertory theatre. During World War II she spent 3 years working with the women's branch of the British Army as an entertainer, writer and producer.

In the 1950s, she moved to Malaysia with her then husband, Derek Llewellyn-Jones, when he took up a medical posting. Lis moved into broadcasting, eventually becoming head of Radio Malaysia's Talks and Features Unit.

In 1965, Lis, Derek and their 3 children moved to Australia. Derek took a position at the University of Sydney and Lis continued her radio work with the then Australian Broadcasting Commission. This included producing and presenting Fact and Opinion, a series of radio documentaries which focused on social issues. She also supported other women in broadcasting, becoming active in the International Association of Women in Radio & Television, serving on its international board from 1972 and as its President from 1976-1980.

By this time, she had resumed her acting career on stage and in television. In 1972, she was cast in the role for which she was best known, the much-loved Lancashire immigrant Lucy Sutcliffe in the ground-breaking TV series, *Number 96*. She remained with it until shortly before it ended in 1977.

While appearing in *Number 96*, she bought and moved to a farm near Martinsville, a small village south-west of Newcastle. She was already politically active, having marched against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and against the export of uranium, being involved in the Women's Electoral Lobby and serving as Vice-President of Actors Equity.

In 1977, Lis joined the recently formed Australian Democrats and was directly elected to the NSW Legislative Council in 1981. As the sole Democrat member of the NSW Parliament until 1988, Lis contributed to debates on most legislation. She advocated for the most vulnerable and marginalised in our community and for decriminalising homosexuality, improving workers' rights, improving conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and establishing equal rights and opportunities for women. She did much of this by moving amendments to Government legislation, introducing private members bills and through her work on Parliamentary Committees. On her final day in Parliament, she introduced a bill to amend the De Facto Relationships Act to recognise same-sex relationships.

Lis resigned from Parliament on 25 June 1998. In her valedictory speech, she expressed concern about "the emergence in Australian politics of a force that is not only simplistic but totally divisive." She was referring to the then new political party, One Nation. She continued, "regrettably, it is appealing to the frightened and the helpless and those with the least understanding of the political process and of world events".

Her speech was followed by tributes from colleagues from across the political spectrum, who spoke about her cogent, well-researched and original speeches and her enormous energy, commitment and capacity to consult and to express the views of myriad people.

Lis did not retire. She bought a wheat and sheep farm in the Riverina and served on Temora Shire Council from 1999 to 2004. She also began an Arts Degree by distance education at Charles Sturt University, graduating with first class honours in history. Her honours thesis was on the impact of the great depression in Britain as demonstrated through the books, films and popular music of the era, a period she lived through and remembered.

Returning to Sydney, she commenced a Masters degree at Sydney University which soon evolved into a Doctorate of Philosophy. She completed it at the age of 93, the oldest Australian to be ever awarded a PhD. It was entitled "Will we ever learn from history? The impact of Economic Orthodoxy on Unemployment during the Great Depression in Australia" and drew comparisons with the global financial crisis. In speaking about her thesis she explained:

"The importance of linking the 1930s to the GFC is to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated. It is now more important than ever for people to realise that the economy cannot be run to suit the needs of the most privileged at the expense of the least privileged", she says.

"As long as you have a financial system that only looks at how banking interests can make profit without any consideration of how this affects ordinary people, or even other countries, the world is going to get in a worse and worse state."

In 2012, Lis was awarded the national Medal of the Order of Australia, for "...service to the Parliament of New South Wales, to the community of Temora, and to the performing arts."

In one of her last speeches to Parliament, Lis quoted T. E. Lawrence:

"All men dream, but not equally. For the dreamers of the night awaken to find it was merely their vanity. But the dreamers of the day are the dangerous ones, for they dream with their eyes open and they make things happen."

Lis certainly dreamt with her eyes open and made things happen.

Recommendation

It is resolved that all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Elisabeth (Lis) Kirkby and her contribution to social justice, civic life and the communities of New South Wales.

THE RT HON CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor of Sydney