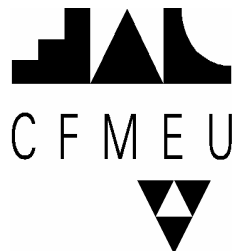


*CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S
HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES*

INQUIRY INTO THE POLICY FRAMEWORK
AND INCENTIVES FOR THE CONSERVATION OF
AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC BUILT HERITAGE PLACES

SUBMISSION OF THE
CONSTRUCTION, FORESTRY, MINING AND ENERGY UNION
CONSTRUCTION AND GENERAL DIVISION



JULY 2005

Interest of the CFMEU

The CFMEU and its constituent unions have a history of active engagement in environmental heritage conservation and of raising community consciousness around this issue. In the 1970's the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) "Green Bans" saved many historic and natural places in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities. In 1971 the NSW Building Workers Industrial Union became possibly the first union anywhere to establish the position of Environmental Officer to deal with requests for assistance from disaffected members of the community. In 1994 the National Trust awarded the NSW BWIU its inaugural Community Heritage Award for environmental protection. The CFMEU continues that strong tradition. Community organizations such as resident action groups frequently turn to the CFMEU for support in their opposition to inappropriate redevelopment of heritage sites.

The union represents the industrial interests of building workers, including those engaged on the restoration and maintenance of historic buildings. In this submission, the CFMEU wishes to draw attention to a chronic shortage of skilled workers, which will inevitably restrict the ability of public and private owners of heritage properties to conserve their assets.

Shortages of skilled tradespersons

The shortage of skilled labour in the Australian building industry is well documented. It is not simply a question of economic cycles in the industry. On current trends, in the next ten years, 40,000 workers will join the building industry - but 150,000 will leave. That is largely the result of an ageing industry workforce and a decline in the rates of apprentices in training.

This has serious implications for the conservation of Australia's historic built heritage places. The trade skills required for the restoration and maintenance

of historic buildings are more specialised than those required for mainstream building work. It takes considerable time and appropriate on-the-job training to attain the necessary level of skill. However, opportunities and incentives to undertake such training are decreasing.

The mainstream sectors of the building industry are competing for a declining number of skilled workers. Many employers are more concerned about productivity than proficiency, and are unwilling to “foot the bill” for the training of “unproductive” apprentices, notwithstanding the low wages prescribed for apprentices. On the other hand, low wages make apprenticeships unattractive to many young people. The problem is exacerbated by the trend towards corporation-specific trades training, with compressed apprenticeships and traineeships producing workers with a limited range of skills.

If more than a token number of Australia’s historic built heritage places are to be conserved, a significant investment must be made in the training of a workforce with the necessary skills. A person skilled in modern methods of building, painting, decorating and plastering, is not necessarily skilled in the restoration and maintenance of historic buildings. Prior to the early 1990s, government departments and instrumentalities were major employers of apprentices, and had the resources and motivation to train building apprentices to the highest skill levels. Unfortunately, that has now changed, to the extent that there has been a reduction of 80-90% in the intake of apprentices by public sector employers over the past decade. The shortfall has not been taken up by the private sector.

It is therefore essential to motivate employers to provide training and employment in the highly specialized field of historic building restoration. Accordingly, this inquiry should consider the provision of government funding to selected public and private employers for the training and development of a

pool of tradespersons with the full range of skills required for the conservation of our historic built heritage places.

Perhaps a special program for such training could be established under the National Heritage Investment Initiative, with an appropriate increase to the amount of funds already committed to that Initiative.

The rationale for conserving historic heritage places

Historic heritage places are a visible reminder of Australia's unique history and character. If they are lost, then part of our history and character is lost. If they are protected, then future generations will enjoy a wonderful gift.

Undoubtedly, there is broad-based community support for government involvement through appropriate legislation, official listings and the provision of funds. The social, historical and spiritual values of heritage conservation are appreciated by the general public, if not always by private commercial interests.

Government involvement

Government involvement in the conservation of historic heritage places has developed with the enactment of heritage laws and the establishment of advisory bodies such as the Australian Heritage Council.

The reasonable costs of government involvement are justified by the benefits which flow to the community. While benefits such as historic and aesthetic appeal may be intangible, a judgment can nevertheless be made as to the value a particular heritage place will have to the community and to future generations of Australians.

There is a strong case for governments to meet the full or partial cost of conserving significant historic heritage places when such conservation would not otherwise occur. Commercial viability should not determine the question of whether or not a government will become financially involved in a particular project. There is a constant danger that private and government owners will see little commercial viability in a conservation project situated on a site that could be more profitably redeveloped.

In conclusion, the CFMEU submits that continued government involvement is essential, and that government funding programs be widened to include the training and ongoing employment of workers with appropriate conservation skills.

John Sutton

NATIONAL SECRETARY

CFMEU CONSTRUCTION & GENERAL DIVISION