

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION
CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES

RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT REPORT

from

Heather Berry

Background

My husband is a heritage architect and we have been involved in the conservation of our own heritage properties for 35 years. Besides having years of practical experience my husband has also acted a heritage advisor to both Newcastle and Cessnock councils.

For the past 25 years we have owned and lived in a State listed building, which was originally, part of a 5000 acre rural property. In 1980 we purchased 60 acres of land plus a part of the original homestead group.

Initially we were very happy to be included on the State Heritage List. We were pleased that Anambah was considered to be worthy of a Permanent Conservation Order. However we subsequently became very disillusioned when we realised that the Heritage Act was not designed to assist the owner protect the heritage property but was designed to protect the heritage property from the owner.

Over the last 20 years we have observed the penalties; under the heritage Act becoming increasingly onerous and we have had first hand experience of the lack of support from the Heritage Office and Heritage Council. In fact when asked to provide some moral support the Heritage Office was decidedly reticent about becoming involved in the affairs of our local council.

It is very disappointing to discover that the government bodies that are entrusted with the preservation of our country's heritage are not totally supportive of the private owners who have dedicated their lives to the heritage cause.

I support all the draft recommendations and would like to make the following comments:

Having read the draft report and several of the submissions and transcripts I would like to complement the Commission on its assessment of the current situation as it relates to the private owners of historic heritage places.

I believe that this inquiry is timely in that many heritage buildings will soon be in need of considerable expenditure. (Our own building, which is now over 115 years old, needs a completely new slate roof, much of the external woodwork needs replacing and the verandahs are affected by subsidence. Then there is the stable block, then there are the outside dunnies, then there is the free standing billiard room etc. etc. The cost of these works alone will probably exceed the resale value of the buildings.)

With the recent trend to minimalism and open plan living it is imperative that we look at how we are going to attract the next generation to spend their time, energy and money looking after a heritage building.

I believe this inquiry has set about not only looking at the current position but has proposed a framework that will encourage the conservation of our historic heritage places well into the future.

Lack of Support in this Inquiry

It was disappointing that neither the NSW government nor the NSW Local Government Association had one kind word to say about the private owner.

The NSW National Trust likened private owners to "poachers on the estate".

In fact the general tenor of those representing heritage bodies appeared to be more threatening than supportive.

This attitude and lack of support does not auger well for the future of private owners of Australia's heritage. While there may be the odd owner who rocks the boat I am sure the majority of owners are very happy to do their utmost to conserve their heritage properties.

One Rule Fits All

Australia is a vast country of extremes. The current regulations have failed to acknowledge that there is a huge difference between the leafy heritage conservation areas in large cities where buildings gain support from each other and where real estate values are relatively high compared to those buildings located in less desirable areas, particularly those in rural areas where there are extremes of climate, armies of termites, and difficulty in obtaining skilled tradesmen and restoration materials and often depressed real estate values.

In a rural area the heritage place may not even be visible to the general public.

Regulations are drafted and enforced, in the main, by city dwellers who appear not to comprehend that outside the city is an unforgiving country where a completely different set of circumstances apply.

The draft recommendation would appear to go a long way to address the above problems. Individual heritage agreements would overcome the 'One Rule Fits All' by creating contracts that look at the individual circumstances of each heritage item. It would achieve a much more positive outcome for the long-term preservation of our heritage. It would hopefully eliminate the 'them and us' syndrome.

Funding

Much is made of funding available to private owners.

The evidence tendered to the inquiry shows that the commitment of government to private owners of heritage has significantly decreased over the last 10 years.

Most levels of government and the NFP Organizations stated that funding was inadequate. There are too many heritage bodies chasing too little funding.

It would appear that the administration of the various government heritage offices uses up a considerable amount of the available funding with only a very small amount left to be distributed over a significant number of private owners. At the local level this usually represents only a few hundred dollars per owner.

The draft recommendation would appear to assist in this situation as once a contract has been entered into there is no need to revisit the agreement for a number of years and the owner would gain the full benefit without having to reapply to each year for a part of the available funding.

Local Government

I would urge the commission to be cautious in adopting any proposal to increase the power of local government in heritage matters for the following reasons:

- Local government has limited heritage expertise.
- Local government can be subject to considerable pressure from vested interests.
- The submission from the Local Government Association requested more legal power to force owners of heritage items of local significance to maintain their properties yet it then went on to say that local councils could not afford to maintain their own heritage listed properties.

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