

Response to
Productivity Commission Draft Report
Conservation of Australia's Historical Heritage Places
By Hornsby Shire Historical Society Inc.

Hornsby

The members of Hornsby Shire Historical Society Inc. (HSHS) thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to respond to their Draft Report on the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places.

The overall impression on reading this report is that the report concentrates on the supposed 'rights' of property owners to maximize the profit from their ownership of land, ignoring communities' rights to leave a heritage legacy for the next generation. As a volunteer community organization, which had and continues to have a large input to the development and maintenance of our Council's Heritage List, we find this very disappointing.

Whilst recognizing the system is not perfect, the Society had hoped the report would provide some positive solutions and recommendations for increased funding. It was very disappointed in the recommendations of the Draft Report, especially its key recommendation.

We see the key recommendation as extremely disappointing as we believe it is destructive

Privately-owned properties should be included on a National, State, Territory or Local Government statutory heritage list only after a negotiated conservation agreement has been entered into and should remain listed only while an agreement is in force.

We are afraid the long term effects of this recommendation will be the loss of virtually all the privately owned heritage listed buildings in Australia. Our built heritage is an important part in teaching about and providing an understanding of Australia's history.

We believe another effect of this recommendation would be total lack of stability and uncertainty, not only to the owners of heritage listed items, but also to the owners of other properties in the vicinity of heritage listed items

On page 88 the Report makes comment on Heritage Impact Statements (HIS). This Society supports the use of these statements, but experience has demonstrated the quality of these statements can vary greatly. The Society thus believes that to obtain an impartial assessment of the impact of proposed work, particularly where the application is for demolition or major profile changing renovations, that the author of the statement should be independent. That is, the author should be employed by either the council or another third party, and not the owner, or developer of the property about which the report is written. In this system payment for the statement would be part of the application costs and carried by the owner. We know some owners of heritage assets have leant on the writers of HISs, urging them to modify the recommendations and other owners have gone shopping for a second opinion, when an HIS has not been in their favour.

The HSHS is very disappointed in the Commission's apparent failure to understand the purpose of heritage conservation in conserving now for future generations and to focus on short quick returns to disgruntled private owners. The Commission's major recommendation of voluntary listing, panders to this group. It has been observed that not infrequently, people are attracted to the ambiance of a heritage conservation area and buy an expensive house there, knowing full well development is restricted. The new owner subsequently complains when a request for demolition is rejected. They apparently fail to realize what they want to do will destroy what had attracted them to the area in the first place. Under the Commission's plan, these new owners would get their house de-listed, demolish it and destroy not only that house, but the ambiance and amenity of the surrounding area.

On pages 182 to 185 the Commission listed seven groups of heritage buildings. It listed, as its second group, buildings that are not readily adaptable to modern living expectations, as they are too small. What the Commission failed to take into account is the market for small dwellings. Not everyone wants a four bedroom, multi-bathroom house. In the 2001 Year Book the Australian Bureau of Statistics projected that by 2021 between a quarter and one third of all households in Australia would be single person households. Many single people and older couples would prefer to live in a small house to living in the same size unit.

The fourth group encompasses residential buildings in declining areas. In general, these buildings do present a problem. In some areas this problem has been solved by variations to the planning laws to allow the heritage buildings to be subdivided off, onto a small lot with a separate title. Where these buildings are not too far from the larger centres of population, they are being purchased as weekend retreats.

The third and sixth groups of buildings are those in areas zoned for redevelopment. It is from owners of these buildings that most of the complaints come. Whilst the Historical Society acknowledges that a few persons may feel disadvantaged by the long time ownership of a heritage listed building in such a precinct, they would have had the opportunity to object to its inclusion in the LEP at the LEP development stage. A survey of land titles and ownership movements suggested that such properties are frequently owned by speculators.

The seventh group of buildings included those for which there is little or no reuse value and the Commission offered examples such as pumping stations or gasworks. What the Commission failed to acknowledge is the innovative adaptation and reuse that is taking place in many of these apparently redundant buildings.

On page 173 the Commission stated that the current method of heritage listing, based on the principles of the Burra Charter, provides an inappropriate mix of historical heritage places. The Commission is wrong in this assessment. Currently areas and buildings and other heritage assets are assessed by external, heritage trained specialists, before their inclusion in the LEP. The effect of voluntary listing would be to give a highly skewed mix of heritage listed places.

The Society believes there are two major elements missing from the Report. Those missing elements are:
a recommendation for increased funding, and

a recommendation for a public education campaign about heritage, and the rights and obligations of land ownership etc.

There are a number of creative ways funding could be raised including a lottery system as used in the UK, rate relief for owners of heritage buildings or a small additional heritage rate, GST exemption for the purchase of materials used for the maintenance and conservation of heritage structures.

If the key recommendation is implemented besides decreasing the heritage stock within the shire it would impose an enormous financial burden on council with out any compensation for the additional costs.

There are a number of publicly owned assets within the shire many of which are poorly maintained by their owners/managers. This is an issue not addressed in the report. The report should contain recommendations, with incentives, for the proper management/maintenance of publicly owned heritage assets.