

# ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF QUEENSLAND

## Submission to Productivity Commission's Heritage Inquiry

The cultural resources of regional Australia deserve a high level of support from governments to protect their economic, intellectual, cultural and community significance, essential to the cultural well-being of each small community.

Queensland's community historical societies collect history and preserve cultural heritage. They are the focus of visits by other community organisations such as Probus and school children's visits. They all collect documents and artefacts relevant to their local area. The museums have been established through the goodwill of local people. The collections are irreplaceable.

Donations of office equipment and rent-free accommodation in historic buildings are often the foundation of local societies. They compete with their colleagues in nearby towns for government grants to conserve and display their collections. They often have expert research services for which modest charges are made. Because of the importance of the collections and the community respect for them, it is vital that reliable assistance be provided by governments.

Each of these collections exists in an historical context which it is convenient to call heritage. Heritage consists not just of older, attractive buildings, both public and private: it also comprises the totality of the evidence over time of the activities of people in that area, their public amenities, their commercial and shopping facilities, their leisure, their water supply, their natural environment. So industrial buildings, streetscapes, landscapes, archaeological sites, remains of mining and so forth are all part of the outdoor museum which is cultural heritage.

Heritage is often the asset which regional communities promote to survive economic downturns. Towns like Charters Towers where the mining industry has declined has found imaginative ways of encouraging cultural tourism through its heritage. In many smaller communities the local historical society's ability to display material and to participate in the interpretation of the district's heritage is a key factor in supporting local government and local tourism organisations to promote the region.

We believe that the following key issues deserve consideration and study by your Commission:

- Australia's heritage is an inheritance passed on from generation to generation. It is a living record of places, stories, objects and events which define and sustain our cultural identity with the physical landscape;
- Historic heritage is a fundamental element of Australia's social capital which ought to be valued by the Commission so that appropriate government funding programs can be established;
- need for government involvement in developing policies for heritage protection nationally, and market issues (private property rights issue with funding support), economic spin off of government funding, private sector v public sector contributions;
- owners of heritage places (including governments) have a duty of care to protect those places. Funding support for private owners could include tax incentives, grants and revolving funds;
- lack of resources for undertaking heritage studies. Our historical society and others are all collecting records and artifacts which record local history;
- the extent of income in regional Australia derived from cultural tourism, while the integrity of the natural heritage sites are actually dwindling;
- the economic value of the work of volunteers in historical societies in Australia is enormous.

Our society undertakes thousands of hours per year of voluntary work promoting our region to Australian and international tourists. The not-for-profit sector including historical societies is a very cost effective provider of community services including promotion and conservation of the nation's cultural heritage. This community involvement also provides a framework for community education in cultural heritage values;

- Volunteers at Historical Societies invest their social capital into the local community. This role is extremely valuable in uplifting cultural values locally and for the mental and physical health of the volunteers. (This has already been demonstrated in social policies in the United Kingdom.)
- Social Capital has already been identified by the Productivity Commission in 2003 as the value of actions that lead to the development of social norms, co-operative arrangements, and shared understandings. Social capital generates benefits to society by reducing transaction costs, promoting co-operative behaviours and enhancing personal well-being. Tools for incorporating social capital considerations into policy analysis need to be developed;
- the level of government grants and support for historical societies and community organisations and owners of cultural heritage places in regional Australia needs to be increased;
- the opportunity for implementing a Heritage Care Program across Australia, complementing the Landcare and Bushcare programs, by inputting the historical context of all the local environmental management and rehabilitation. The report, *Public good conservation: our challenge for the 21st Century*, an interim report of the inquiry into the Effects upon Landholders and Farmers of Public Good Conservation Measures Imposed by Australian Governments, by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage addresses, supports and extends this argument.
- greater funding for preservation of historical sites and buildings. There ought to be financial incentives for owners of heritage buildings to maintain them to high standards. This should complement support for historical societies in identifying and promoting cultural heritage in Australia.
- standard criteria for determining historical and cultural significance - as under the Burra Charter should be promoted and utilised throughout Australia by all levels of government authorities.