



The Australian Academy of the Humanities

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submission

**Submission to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on
Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places
(December 2005)**

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) thanks the Commission for sending through its Draft Report on *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*. It was pleased to be able to make a submission to the inquiry in July 2005 and attend a public hearing on the matter in August 2005. The AAH has some concerns about the current Draft Report: We ask that urgent consideration of these views be considered before the Draft is passed.

We specify our concerns as they relate roughly to the four key points of the Draft.

1. Benefits.

The AAH agrees wholeheartedly with the Draft that "historic heritage places provide important cultural benefits to the wider community." We would specify that these cultural benefits include a sense of history, belonging, and spirituality, which together strengthen national morale and identity. That heritage "may also benefit future generations" is a certainty, not just a probability: heritage is fundamentally about future interests as much as it is about present ones. We would also add emphatically that historic heritage places have enormous educational benefits for young Australians and economic benefits through tourism.

2. Regulation.

The AAH agrees also that current regulation standards can be "ineffective." However, it does not believe that removal of all prescription is the answer. Instead of simply offering a negotiated agreement for listing, we urge instead thinking on a larger scale. First, we recommend that current conservation management regulation be revised so that analysis and planning is split and taken up by different groups and that the whole process is more public. The analysis of a place, which establishes how and why it is culturally significant, should be completed, scrutinised and endorsed, before any conservation measures are taken. This initial work should be undertaken by specialist historians and archaeologists. The conservation plan, designed to conserve and enhance cultural significance, should then be done separately by conservation architects, engineers, curators, and display specialists. Second, we believe that Australia currently offers too few opportunities for professional training in conservation architecture. Until there is high-quality and accessible training and accreditation, as well as a requirement to employ accredited practitioners on all, publicly funded, or sanctioned work, much restoration may cause more damage than good.

3. *Incentives.*

The AAH believes that the option to motivate private owners of historic heritage places to conserve through a voluntary negotiated agreement is short-sighted and extremely vulnerable to dismissal. Precisely because of the reasons stated above in point one and in the Draft itself, the preservation of historic heritage places cannot be left entirely to a free market. The market always has and always *will* fail to conserve adequately. Unless government and affiliated bodies are sufficiently funded to educate the community on the full benefits of conservation, these benefits will rarely be realised, especially if doing so entails extensive bureaucracy and the perception of private economic burdens. The AAH believes that incentives should come in the form of tax concessions. They should not come at the cost of an expert opinion that may on occasion contradict private market views.

4. *Government involvement.*

The Draft makes little remark about any extra funding required off governments. The AAH believes otherwise. As stated in its submission, and based on the points made above, the AAH asks that government consider investing more heavily in overseeing national bodies, especially the National Trust, and in educational facilities for training conservation architects. As we wrote in our earlier submission: "The AAH supports the view that government contributions to conservation can be made beneficially and efficiently by increasing the funds and eminence of existing agencies and by helping to create competitive courses for conservationist development education."

We close with a reiteration of our five key recommendations:

- a) the government should increase funding to and status of existent conservationist agencies.
- b) the government should create a body of high standards for conservation through due attention to scholarly advice and the encouragement of specialist education.
- c) governments should place conservation controls on whole areas or 'vistas' rather than on single sites when reviewing private residences.
- d) officials should break down the current 'conservation management plan' practice into stages of specialism and make the whole process more accountable.
- e) the government should view tax incentives, agency support, and investment in scholarship and education as part of the whole picture of conservation.

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