

Liberals promise an overhaul of heritage system

- **Kirsten Lawson**

The Liberals say they will overhaul heritage in Canberra to bring in a "grading" scheme for historic buildings.

Liberal deputy leader Alistair Coe said a grading system would make it clear what could and couldn't be done with individual buildings.

Blundells Cottage, at the lakeside: A class 1 building under the Liberals' proposed heritage grading scheme.

Detail, including the number of gradings and their flexibility, would be decided in consultation. But Mr Coe said he envisaged gradings would be assigned by the Heritage Council when it assessed a site's heritage significance.

"When something's assessed the Heritage Council could give it a code – class 1 might be full preservation like a Blundell's Cottage, and class 5 could be something which means you ... perhaps record an oral history and put up an interpretive board at the redevelopment site. And everything in between."

Mr Coe also promised a "blue plaques" scheme to mark individuals and their connection with buildings.

The Liberals would expand the ACT Heritage Library's work on oral histories through more recording kits and advice for interviewers and interviewees.

And he promised \$200,000 extra a year for heritage groups such as the National Trust, the Historical Society, the Railways Historical Society and others.

Asked whether the current system was too protective or too permissive in his view, Mr Coe said. "It's not necessarily about a different outcome, it's about everybody understanding what the heritage listing means."

Heritage must be taken seriously, but buildings should not be preserved just because they were old; there must be a good reason, he said.

The blue plaques idea is borrowed from Britain, where Mr Coe said it was used to commemorate individuals and buildings associated with them, with the first plaque in 1867 commemorating Lord Byron at his birthplace.

A gradings scheme also operated in Britain, where historic buildings were classified into three grades – with just 2.5 per cent of listed buildings in the top grade, covering "exceptional interest". The third-grade buildings were of "special interest" warranting every effort to preserve them; the category covered 92 per cent of all listed buildings.

Mr Coe said the Liberals would also incorporate heritage sites in estate plans for new suburbs.

Heritage sites were "frequently fenced off and left to deteriorate", with valuable sites becoming "so derelict they can no longer be enjoyed by the public because they are dangerous".