

17 September 2020

Mick Gentleman MLA
Minister for the Environment and Heritage
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Minister

Our Heritage in the Australian Capital Territory

We write as a group of concerned individuals with a long and deep passion for, and involvement in, the heritage of the ACT, to raise a number of important issues in the context of the forthcoming election.

The 2020 ACT election presents the opportunity to reflect on the many successes but also to give consideration to the current and substantial problems in the recognition and protection of the ACT's heritage—fundamentally related to:

- re-setting the community, industry and government conversation regarding heritage in the ACT;
- resourcing for heritage activities in the ACT;
- developing an ACT Heritage Strategy;
- achieving a better integration between the Commonwealth and ACT planning and heritage systems; and
- addressing a number of issues related to several important heritage places.

The ACT has a wonderful and rich heritage interwoven across the natural, Aboriginal and historic environments. While our focus is on historic landscapes, sites and buildings, it is none the less important to respect and cherish all parts of our heritage, cultural and natural, the designed national capital city, and to recognise their inter-relationships at the core of Canberra's heritage.

In the historic realm, the ACT's heritage includes the early European colonial remnants like the pastoral landscape of Lanyon and St John's Church, the early national capital places such as the Sydney and Melbourne Buildings as well as the many cottages and Garden Suburb features in Reid, and the later national capital places associated especially with the National Capital Development Commission like the Dickson Library. There are large heritage places and the very small, the public and the private, the old and the comparatively recent, and the obvious and the hidden.

The ACT was a Commonwealth creation and much of its heritage relates to the Commonwealth story. Following self-government, this heritage has been awkwardly split between the Commonwealth and Territory jurisdictions with their different heritage, environmental and planning systems.

Australian cultural heritage management has an international reputation as best-practice in many regards, and the ACT's heritage systems should fully reflect this.

A number of specific issues with the ACT's heritage are discussed below.

Re-Setting the Conversation about the ACT's Heritage

Perhaps the most important challenge is the need to re-set the community, industry and government conversation regarding heritage in the ACT. The ACT community is relatively wealthy and educated, yet there continues to be an impoverished dialogue about the value of our heritage, its conservation and sympathetic integration within a modern society. There appears to be a continuing lack of awareness and knowledge about heritage, what it means to register heritage places and their management into the future.

There is a lingering and powerful view that heritage is a problem, not an opportunity, and that heritage is for the elite few rather than the broad community.

There needs to be an active and ongoing outreach/engagement program to challenge these perceptions and present the positive and best-practice case studies that exist within the ACT and from elsewhere. This program should be led by the ACT Heritage Council and Minister for Heritage, supported by ACT Heritage, and it should be a key feature of the ACT Heritage Strategy (discussed below).

Resourcing Heritage Activities

Resourcing for heritage activities in the ACT needs to be significantly improved.

In particular, the roles of the ACT Heritage Council and ACT Heritage appear to be severely hampered by current levels of resourcing. All indications suggest there are substantial delays in and constraints on key tasks which impact planning, development and community engagement. The reported inability of the ACT Heritage Council to engage with the Kingston Arts Precinct proposal is an example of this problem. The ACT's heritage is by far best served by timely heritage listings, pro-active and early engagement, and early expert input and advice.

While it is noted that the bushfires earlier in the year, pandemic and major hail storm have impacted activities, the resourcing problems appear to extend well beyond these factors. In addition, bushfires can no longer be regarded as a rare occurrence. They are a regular factor and the impacts must be addressed through normal planning and recurrent resourcing.

The ACT Heritage Council must also be resourced to enable it to be the active expert public champion for the ACT's heritage. It is also vital to maintain an active heritage listing program, and the old-fashioned online register database must be modernised to make it much easier to access vital information about the ACT's heritage.

We note that it is 10 years since the last independent expert review of the *Heritage Act 2004*. It may be timely to advance many of these suggestions through another such review.

The ACT Heritage Library should be substantially enhanced to play the role of a heritage resource centre and focus, continue with its current role as well as supporting/integrating the work of other key information keepers in the ACT.

Support for the community heritage sector must also be part of this approach. While the ACT heritage grants are warmly welcomed, a capacity to provide a degree of administrative support for the community heritage sector must be included to ensure its important supplementary role.

ACT Heritage Strategy

In 2016 a discussion paper was released about a forthcoming ACT Heritage Strategy. At the time, the Minister noted,

The preparation and implementation of a Heritage Strategy will determine a range of strategic priorities and actions that will further recognise, protect, conserve and promote our heritage assets, building on the framework of the existing legislation and initiatives such as Canberra Tracks, the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival and the ACT Heritage Grants. Similar strategies have proved effective in other Australian jurisdictions, major cities and local municipalities.

The strategy has never appeared, and this perhaps reflects ongoing resourcing problems.

The strategy should be finalised in a timely fashion as the framework document for the ACT's heritage, including the re-set of the conversation about this heritage.

Integration with Commonwealth Planning and Heritage Systems

The ACT has one community but with heritage controls divided between the Commonwealth and Territory. It is suspected the community does not understand or really care about this division – they cherish the Australian War Memorial as well as Lanyon, and Albert Hall as well as Old Parliament House. The community wants the ACT's "Commonwealth" and "Territory" heritage to be cherished and celebrated together as the heritage of the one community.

The Commonwealth and Territory should strive to achieve greater integration of all aspects of the two heritage systems – protection, conservation, management and interpretation.

Again, this requires resourcing, as well as a willingness and commitment.

Place Specific Initiatives

The National Heritage listing for the core historic and planning aspects of Canberra has been proposed since 2011. It has apparently been delayed because of opposition by the ACT Government. The lack of support for the National Heritage listing by Government sends a negative message to the community about both the valuing of heritage and the Government's commitment to heritage issues. The incoming ACT Government should embrace the listing as a welcome recognition of the outstanding national qualities of Canberra.

The proposed redevelopment of West Basin is not sympathetic to the heritage values of Lake Burley Griffin. Filling in part of the lake to facilitate adjacent commercial

development will have clear impacts on the lake and the development will impact important views associated with West Basin. While approval for the reclamation has been given, it is within the power of the ACT Government to halt the project and re-open consideration of options which are fully respectful of the lake and its values.

The development of the Kingston Arts Precinct includes the ACT-listed historic Kingston Powerhouse. While this development has undergone numerous planning studies over many years that have respected its heritage values, the current proposed design shows a complete lack of respect for the historic buildings, particularly through over-development of the site. The proposal should be fundamentally re-thought and a fully sympathetic development implemented.

In these and other cases, the special and internationally recognised qualities of Canberra and its defining landscape need to be respected and conserved, including by sympathetic new development.



These are some of the key heritage issues facing the ACT. It is hoped that all political parties will reflect positively on the role of heritage in the community, and they will embrace a positive suite of policies to cherish this heritage.

We would be keen to meet with you to discuss these matters, and provide further advice on making substantial improvements for the future of the ACT's heritage. The contact is Duncan Marshall on 0418 600 832.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Duncan Marshall".

on behalf of

Dr Lenore Coltheart
Member, ACT Heritage Council, 2003-2014

Dr Dianne Firth OAM
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