

THE NEED FOR NATIONAL ACTION ON HERITAGE

A 2020 Communiqué to the Prime Minister by the National Brains Trust Forum

8 May 2008

INTRODUCTION

Australia's heritage is a treasure chest filled with all the stories of the development of our land, society, and inheritance. This knowledge, accessible through an understanding of the past, provides the best possible guideposts to the future. The knowledge base for the 2020 Summit is embedded in Australia's heritage –natural, built and cultural. Yet heritage was not on the 2020 Summit agenda. The National Brains Trust Forum was held to address this absence and to forge recommendations using the same model of discussion, vision and consensus.

The driving force behind the National Brains Trust was the critical need to analyse the elements that define Australia's heritage, and to extract the lessons from the past to guide decision-makers towards the best directions for the future.

The consensus of the National Brains Trust Forum is a call to action for the Federal government to address the key issues of governance and policy in recognising the value of Australian heritage as the keystone to national identity.

Heritage is at risk in Australia today. Governments have effectively abandoned true leadership, eroded their independent agencies, and reduced funding for heritage, leaving places and environments across the country at risk.

Key observations:

- Australia lacks national leadership on heritage.
- Australia needs a national heritage policy that is embraced by Government at all levels.
- There is a need to integrate heritage as part of mainstream decision-making, not to marginalise it as an isolated activity.
- Positive change is shaped by knowledge and experience. Understanding our heritage is the key to successfully managing our future.
- Change is acceptable and necessary as long as it is managed well.
- There is a mistaken perception that heritage is an imposition rather than a benefit.

- Heritage is a creative asset, not a liability.
- Heritage is not about fossilisation. It is the foundation to our sustainability.
- Financial incentives for heritage must be reviewed.

ONE BIG IDEA

Heritage is fundamental to building Australia's capacity for a sustainable future. To achieve a sustainable future the government needs to:

Establish a national endowment fund for cultural heritage to complement funding for the natural environment.

TWO GOALS

- Care for our country and protect our inheritances which encompass natural, built and cultural heritage. Heritage must be central to:
 - Environmental, planning and development processes
 - Education, and
 - Community life.
- Use the knowledge heritage gives to inform and guide future development and ensure that it is sustainable.

SIX KEY POLICIES FOR URGENT IMPLEMENTATION

- Adopt a whole of government approach to heritage conservation. Natural, built and cultural heritage considerations should be integrated into policy development and decision-making across all portfolios.
- Provide national leadership on heritage.
- Review opportunities for financial incentives.
- Provide greater support for community groups and organisations involved in heritage conservation, education and research.
- Restore independent heritage agencies within Federal, State and Territory Governments.
- Implement independent monitoring of the state of the heritage resources.

THREE PRINCIPAL CONSIDERATIONS OF HERITAGE POLICY

1. Sustainability

Australia's most critical challenge is sustainability which encompasses natural, built and cultural heritage. Sustainability is the core of heritage: it is integral to the lives, spirit and wellbeing of all Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is:

- the foundation of Australia's national identity, community and social inclusion
- a key part of economic infrastructure and activity
- an important educational resource, and
- fundamental to building Australia's capacity for a sustainable future.

There is a lot Australia can learn from the past. Heritage items can teach us sustainability. They can offer models for building in harmony with the environment, of using natural materials, of energy efficiency. We need to learn from heritage places; and to document, promote and practice what we learn.

2. Financial incentives

- Review opportunities for financial incentives and instruments for heritage conservation, e.g. heritage land tax valuations, grants and tax rebates.
- Tax incentives would demonstrate that heritage is a vital part of our intellectual capital.
- There should be a tax system review to study how to encourage and reward private conservation initiatives e.g. conserving embedded energy by adaptive re-use of buildings and materials rather than wasteful demolition.
- Review the extent and nature of financial support given to community groups involved in heritage conservation education and research.

3. Making heritage accessible to everyone and fostering a community wide appreciation of heritage

i. Aboriginal culture as central to Australian society

The Federal Government State and Territory governments should develop a national Indigenous Linguistic, Cultural and Social Policy to conserve and promote Aboriginal and Indigenous cultural heritage.

An important focus for such a policy is the development of place based educational programs for the community on Aboriginal heritage from the past to the present.

There is a vital need to foster an acknowledgement, appreciation and understanding of the integral role of Aboriginal culture as the foundation of our heritage, in particular about:

- the 'traditional custodians of the land', the Aboriginal people, whose special knowledge and experience of Australia's places has immeasurable value for everyone

- the significance of Aboriginal words to modern Australia which have been incorporated in the English language e.g. place names and street names
- customs and practices such as smoking ceremony, corroborees, music, dance, the Dreamtime, symbolism
- practical skills and crafts learnt from the Aborigines e.g. navigation through heavenly bodies, art, bush food
- significant Aboriginal people in history.

ii. Cultural pluralism is critical to heritage policy

- Heritage is about **inclusion**. It embraces every Australian, past and present, as well as future generations.
- Heritage is about **engagement**. It involves all Australians in valuing and nurturing our collective experience through the celebration of our diverse cultural identities.
- Heritage is about **belonging**. It provides the basis for all Australians to feel a positive and creative connection to their country.

iii. Technology as a means of education and understanding

- Fund and promote an accessible integrated heritage database of heritage places as sources of inspiration, learning and connection.
- Implement digitisation and online access to stories from regional and local heritage studies to foster community understanding of, support and concern for, and visitation of heritage places.
- Develop a program to conserve and document Aboriginal languages.



NATIONAL BRAINS TRUST INAUGURAL FORUM

The inaugural National Brains Trust was organised by the National Trust of Australia (NSW) and was held on Monday, 28 April 2008 at the Seidler Apartments, 2A Glen Street, Milsons Point NSW 2061.

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