

THE NATIONAL TRUST AND THE WAR ON HERITAGE

The major restructure at the Department of Planning is yet again set to denigrate the value of heritage with the announcement of the 'dismantling' of the Heritage Office. The Office has been emasculated with most of its staff relocated elsewhere in the Department and only a 'core' left to service the Heritage Council. This move reinforces the view that heritage is a very low priority for government, being seen as *the* obstacle to development. Most notably, the Heritage Office has been sidelined under Part 3(A) of the NSW Planning Act, which enables Minister for Planning Frank Sartor to approve developments deemed 'State significant', overriding heritage and environmental policies and legislation.

In the recent past government papers on planning and planning reviews have been pouring into the National Trust.

For example, the current State government planning review outlined in the paper 'Improving the NSW Planning System', seeks to reduce the power of local government and to stifle the public's freedom to comment on development applications. The concept of state-wide default codes put forward in the review, a one-size fits all plan, will seriously erode the special character of places of environmental or heritage value and the distinctiveness of important streetscapes. It is a virtual mirror image of the UK proposals, where heritage advocates are up in arms because of the threat to its 'green belts'.

A related concern is that Land and Environment Court cases are playing like broken records in local government areas like Ku-ring-gai. Rehashed versions of previous DAs already rejected by the Land and Environment Court on heritage grounds are brought before the Court as 'new' DAs. But the National Trust, in partnership with the community, remains tenacious in opposing inappropriate development – it has been fighting for conservation of natural and built heritage in Ku-ring-gai and throughout NSW since 1945.

And what of the current 'review' of the Heritage Act? Submissions have not been made public by the Minister but the Trust will continue to publish its views and community's concerns on its website. The final report has been completed, with nobody privy to its contents except the Department of Planning.

In response to another recent review, that of the Biodiversity Banking Scheme, the Trust advocated vehemently that development should not automatically take precedence over biodiversity conservation. Biobanking must be ecologically rather than economically driven, and is of such urgency that it should be dealt with on a global basis as is the case for climate change, via Multilateral Environmental Agreements.

Then there is Part 3(A). On Sunday, 24 February, the National Trust will be in the forefront of a mass rally to prevent the development of over 900 dwellings in the Central Coast coalmining workers' settlement of Catherine Hill Bay, an historic beachfront village of 100 homes. The place is a rare gem, rich in cultural heritage, featuring intact buildings and streetscapes from 1870s and notable for the biodiversity of its setting, home to many identified endangered species. A development of this scale would destroy its heritage and environmental values. The Interim Report to Minister Sartor by an Independent Panel led by Heritage Council Chair Gabrielle Kibble considered developer Rosecorp's original proposal for 600 houses 'unacceptable'. That development was rejected by the Land and Environment Court. The Department of Planning recommended against development at the Bay. Yet once again the dreaded Part 3(A) rears its ugly head. Minister Sartor has the authority to override State environmental and heritage legislation to green-light the Catherine Hill Bay proposals.

At Kelly's Bush on the Parramatta River in 1971 the Battlers of Kelly's Bush and the BLF imposed Green Bans, and precious waterfront bushland was saved. The Green Bans Movement demonstrated that concern for the environment touches people from all walks of life. Forty-two green bans were imposed on Sydney by 1974, also saving The Rocks and Centennial Park.

Kelly's Bush was a test case. As the Battlers stated: 'If a successful stand can be made here, then great hope... is given to other cases elsewhere in the future.' The National Trust is calling on community groups and concerned citizens to mobilise to stop the government doing further damage to our natural and built heritage.

It is sad but true that the National Trust may be the only community advocate left to fight for heritage. Its own survival is seriously under threat because of drastic cuts to government grants. As a non-government charity, now more than ever financial support is crucial to the Trust's ability to campaign during this particularly volatile period for heritage conservation. Our future may be on the line but we will continue to act as the government's conscience, advocating for the conservation of our natural and built heritage for those who come after us. It is the be all and end all of our existence.

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