

Senate, Monday 23 March 1998

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator O'CHEE (Queensland) —On behalf of Senator MacGibbon and the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present a report entitled *Defence Sub-Committee: Visit to Sydney Harbour foreshores defence properties, 14 November 1998*, together with minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator O'CHEE —I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator O'CHEE —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I seek leave to incorporate Senator MacGibbon's tabling statement in Hansard and to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

The statement read as follows—

Almost since the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson, Defence has played a major role in development of the Sydney Harbour foreshores. The current site of the Opera House on Bennelong Point was initially a military fort, and military occupancy on Middle Head dates back to 1801. To a large extent, military establishments have contributed heavily to the current shape of the harbour, its foreshores and environs.

In many instances, that occupation has been beneficial. Military tenancy on North, South and Middle Heads, Georges Heights, and Woolwich has protected those areas from the last century of encroachment by civilian developers. The product of this fortunate occurrence has been the Harbour that residents of Sydney are so fortunate to have—with headlands naturally vegetated, and now undergoing transition in many cases to become part of the Sydney Harbour National Park.

In addition, military occupation of those sites has also left a legacy of history—a heritage of military construction dating back almost to the time of first settlement. The headlands of both North and Middle Heads are worked with tunnels, and gun emplacements lie half-hidden over the headlands. In several cases, this construction dates back over a century. For a young country, this is an important source of history. In a way, this is almost our 'Tower of London'. But now the time has arrived when the current strictures on Defence funding has forced the Department of Defence to rationalise its land holdings. The Department does not readily give up prestige, inner-city, harbour-front sites on Middle Head, Garden Island, North Head and Neutral Bay, and treasured heritage mansions such as 'Tresco', with their long military history. Defence has been forced to make some hard decisions, and has determined that these sites must be sacrificed in the name of rationalisation. Through the proceeds of sale from these properties, Defence is able to finance relocation of military units to sites in often less salubrious surroundings further north, where they may better contribute to Australian security. In some instances, the proceeds of sale will be used almost entirely to meet the cost of remediating the site, to rid maintenance sites of up to a century of accumulate industrial contamination.

Many residents of Sydney are currently concerned at this disposal action. This is understandable. The past century or so of benevolent tenancy by the Australian Defence Force has given a number of privileged harbourside residents an undemanding neighbour, allowing special access to the headlands and harbour foreshores.

The Defence Sub-Committee was also concerned at what might be lost, were the Department of Defence to suddenly abandon this land, which contributes so much to the nature of Sydney

Harbour, giving free reign to profit-driven development. This was the reason for the Committee's visit to a number of Defence properties in November last year. The Committee sought to determine whether this disposal would cause irreparable damage to one of the most beautiful harbours in the world. This report gives their findings.

In almost all cases examined by the Committee, Defence has consulted closely with local community groups, and the proposed developments are sensitive to environmental concerns. Where construction is proposed, to provide the funding which makes the disposals economically viable for Defence, that construction is restricted to areas currently occupied by Defence infrastructure. In many cases, Defence also proposes to revegetate large areas, or increase open space provisions beyond what is currently in place. Under Defence's current development plans, unattractive and contaminated industrial sites such as Cockatoo Island and HMAS Platypus at Neutral Bay will be cleaned up, and access will be returned to the public. Some local groups have made clear their disapproval of Defence's disposal option. This is also understandable, as some privileged residents may lose the advantage of some views or open space. However, the Committee believes the planned disposals will not result in a blemish to the harbour foreshores, nor cause loss of the character of the harbour. Considered collectively, the planned developments and associated remediation work will improve the appearance of the harbour environs. As some development is necessary to make the disposal viable to Defence, the Committee believes the proposed option offers a generally satisfactory compromise.

The only area where the Committee was critical of Defence's planning is in its current provisions for protection of some military heritage sites, particularly on Middle Head. The Committee was concerned that some areas of irreplaceable heritage value may be lost through neglect under current Defence planning. Some sites on land already transferred to the Sydney Harbour National Park are already being damaged by overgrowth and vandalism in areas where the State Government has been unable to adequately preserve and maintain them. This is an aspect of the impending disposals where the Committee recommends urgent action, at the Federal level, if this is needed.

I am also aware that the Prime Minister is considering use of the Federation Fund to purchase a number of these Defence properties as a gift for public use. Should he reach that decision, this would address the interests of the local residents unsatisfied with Defence's development plans. It would also meet the Defence objective of generating the funding which was the original intention of the rationalisation. The Committee believes this would remove the need for the current compromise. Should the Prime Minister decide against that purchase, the Committee believes that the option intended by the Department of Defence's current planning, while less desirable, would offer a satisfactory compromise between the competing interests. I commend the Committee's findings to the House.

Debate adjourned.