



The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

DEFENCE SUB-COMMITTEE
VISIT TO
SYDNEY HARBOUR FORESHORES
DEFENCE PROPERTIES

14 November 1997

MARCH 1998

INTRODUCTION

Background

On Monday 20 October 1997, representatives of the Defenders of the Sydney Harbour Foreshores (Defenders Coalition), briefed the Chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, the Rt Hon Ian Sinclair, MP, on issues of concern regarding the disposal of a number of Sydney Harbour foreshore properties currently owned by the Department of Defence. The Chairman of the Defence Sub-Committee, Senator David MacGibbon, subsequently sought a briefing on the issues for the Sub-Committee from the Estate Management Branch of the Department of Defence. This briefing was given by Mr Rod Corey (Head Defence Estate) and Mr Ross Bain (Assistant Secretary Property Management) at a private meeting held on 28 October 1997. The Sub-Committee also decided to undertake an inspection of the relevant Defence properties at the first available opportunity.

Aim of the Visit

The Sub-Committee's aim in conducting the visit was to investigate claims by anti-development lobby groups that the Department of Defence's disposal plans for the various surplus Defence sites would result in overall detriment to the Harbour environs. The Sub-Committee's main concern throughout the visit was to confirm that the proposed development options ensured protection and preservation of sites with clear and unique heritage value, and resulted in no detriment to the several bushland-covered headlands, currently under Defence caretakership, whose natural state gives Sydney Harbour its unique character. The Sub-Committee was determined not to be swayed against proposed development options by arguments seeking benefit to a relatively few privileged residents in the immediate locality of each site.

Conduct of the Inspection

The inspection tour was arranged for the morning of Friday, 14 November 1997, and was conducted according to the visit itinerary shown at Appendix 1. The ADF Maritime Component Commander kindly permitted the use of the RAN launch *Tresco II* to facilitate movement around the harbour, and particularly to permit viewing of the properties from their water approaches. As the property disposal at Middle Head involved the most issues, the Sub-Committee landed at Chowder Bay, and conducted a short driving and walking tour of the Middle Head and Georges Heights sites. The inspection also landed at HMAS *Platypus* to receive a short on-site briefing on the plans for that property.

The properties inspected by the Sub-Committee during the visit included the recently-disposed-of military residence 'Tresco', North Head, Chowder Bay, Middle Head and Georges Heights, HMAS *Platypus*, Spectacle Island, Cockatoo Island, the shore-front Defence properties at Woolwich and the Naval Support Command site at Pyrmont.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee sought throughout its visit to maintain a position consistent with its collective wish to conserve the unique bushland nature of the harbour foreshores and the unique military heritage structures contained on the various sites. To this end, it saw no significant public issues arising from the prospective disposals of the sites at HMAS *Platypus*, Woolwich or Cockatoo Island. The sites at Pymont and Spectacle Island are not currently in prospect for disposal, so issues did not arise in either of these cases, nor in the case of 'Tresco', for which disposal action is now complete. However, areas of the visit which did raise some concerns were the disposals of North Head and the Middle Head/Georges Heights sites.

In the case of the North Head disposal, the Sub-Committee was pleased to learn of Defence's intention to provide for the long-term management of some of the more significant of the North Head fortifications, through the Army's patronage of the National Artillery Museum. However, the Sub-Committee remains concerned for the long-term status of some associated fortification structures, as the status of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service funding for conservation works is not known.

In the case of the Georges Heights disposal, the Sub-Committee did not see the scope of the proposed residential development as a source of particular concern. The Sub-Committee believed that the Department of Defence had conducted a sound community consultation process, and the level of development proposed appeared sufficiently restrained, and did not appear to compromise the unique bushland nature of this section of the foreshore, as viewed from the harbour. The Sub-Committee's concern was for the sufficiency of mechanisms in place to ensure preservation of the unique military heritage structures located at Middle Head and Georges Heights. Ideally, these fortifications should be preserved in a functional way, and this would be best achieved through management by a Federal authority.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that arrangements for the disposal of the Defence properties at Georges Heights and Middle Head be revised to provide better guarantees than currently exist for the conservation and preservation of the military heritage structures they contain.

The Committee is very strongly of the view that the heritage value of Georges Heights and Middle Head is so high at a national level that it believes a Federal Authority should be established for the preservation, restoration and management of these structures, including those on land previously returned to the NSW State Government. This Authority should not be within the Department of Defence: it would require a capital grant for restoration and establishment costs but should then be self funding for its continuing operating and maintenance costs.

DEFENCE PROPERTIES VISITED

'Tresco'

1. The sandstone-construction, two-story Colonial mansion 'Tresco' was formerly used as the residence of the Naval Support Commander. Located on prime real estate with frontage to Elizabeth Bay, the property was recommended for disposal early in 1997 as a result of the Defence Efficiency Review. Subsequently in 1997, contracts were exchanged with a private purchaser. The purchase price was undisclosed by agreement with the purchaser, but published predictions estimate the value of the property is in excess of \$8 million. The property is heritage listed, and prior to contract exchange, was subjected to an interim Conservation Order by the NSW Minister for Planning. This affords an appropriate level of protection under NSW State legislation. In view of this protection, and because disposal action by the Department of Defence on the property has now been completed, the Sub-Committee saw no issues arising from this disposal.

North Head

2. The property currently listed for disposal at North Head is the location of the Army's School of Artillery, which was scheduled to be vacated in mid-December 1997. The Commonwealth site is 74 hectares and comprises a range of building improvements, and a number of early-twentieth century military structures, including an historically significant military barracks block and mess complex registered on the National Estate. The North Head site also includes a parcel of 200 hectares which has been handed back previously by the Department of Defence to the State Government as part of the 1979 Sydney Harbour Foreshores Agreement between the then-Prime Minister Fraser and the then-NSW Premier Wran. This land is currently controlled by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and includes the historical North Head Quarantine Station, which dates back to 1828.

3. Between them, the Commonwealth- and State-held sites on North Head enclose a number of historical military fortifications. This includes two gun emplacements and an extensive series of underground rooms and tunnels, a sandstone perimeter wall and associated buildings and open areas. The fortifications date back to the 1930s, when two 9.2 inch guns were installed here for harbour defence, although other harbour defence artillery has been located on North Head since the middle of the nineteenth century. The fortifications at North Head are all on the Register of the National Estate (Australian Heritage Commission) and the most significant of these - North Head Fort, the 9.2 inch gun emplacements and many of the related tunnels - are currently managed by the National Artillery Museum. A number of lesser fortifications and the perimeter wall are on the land previously transferred to the State, and currently controlled by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

4. Under current planning, two hectares of the property currently held by the Department of Defence will remain for use by the National Artillery Museum, which will continue to be supported by the Army. The remaining 72 hectares will be transferred back to the NSW State Government when the Defence requirement for the property ceases. This is in

keeping with the terms of the 1910 Deed of Occupancy, which stipulated that the land was to be returned to the State Government on completion of the Commonwealth's requirement. This transfer is expected to be complete during 1998.

5. The Sub-Committee was pleased to learn of the arrangements for the management of the historical North Head Quarantine Station which is also on the site. The station is currently managed by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and is heritage listed and protected by State and Local Government legislation. Access is controlled and conservation work is undertaken to keep the site in a good level of preservation.

6. However, an issue of greater concern arising from the inspection of North Head is the long-term future of the remainder of the site, once the final package of land is returned from Defence caretakership. Defence's long use of the property has resulted in minimal, sympathetic development only to a level deemed essential for defence of the harbour. This has preserved a portion of the unique bushland setting of the harbour, while also contributing to its heritage value. On return to State Government control, the additional 72 hectare site, like the 200 hectares returned previously, will become part of the Sydney Harbour National Park, which would place planning restrictions in regard to its future use. The Sub-Committee would have liked to see some form of guarantee put in place to prevent long-term development of the property, for the benefit of the harbour, and hence the general community. However, as the land is State Crown land, it is unlikely that any restrictions on its future use or management could be imposed once it is transferred back to the State.

Middle Head and Georges Heights

7. The Defence site at Middle Head and Georges Heights is currently undergoing disposal planning. Arguably, plans for this site have been the most contentious of all sites visited on this occasion by the Sub-Committee. The area comprises 64 hectares of Commonwealth-owned land until recently occupied by seven Defence units, and includes some 60 houses controlled by the Defence Housing Authority. Much of the area has been developed for Defence purposes and the headlands and attached areas of the Sydney Harbour National Park contain many important heritage sites. The largest Defence unit in the area is currently the Headquarters of the Army's Training Command. It is notable that a large section of the Commonwealth land in this area was transferred to the New South Wales State Government for the Sydney Harbour National Park in 1979 under the 'Fraser-Wran Agreement'.

Maintenance and Preservation of Bushland

8. The Sub-Committee particularly noted that areas of vegetation previously returned to State Government control have become overgrown with weeds such as lantana, and in many cases are unable to be accessed for public recreation. Rough-worn paths through these areas provide for local access to the shoreline in places, but this appears to have resulted from the repeated visitation by local residents in preferred areas, rather than as the result of any coherent plan for access. The Sub-Committee's preferred solution for disposal of remaining portions of this site would include provisions to ensure that areas of natural or regenerated vegetation are adequately maintained to permit continuing public access for recreational uses.

9. An aspect of particular concern to the Sub-Committee was that any intended development in the option proposed by the Department of Defence would not mar the predominantly bushland appearance of the site when viewed from the Harbour, by permitting new construction which would be more visible from the water than the construction currently in place. The Sub-Committee's inspection largely supported Defence's contention that the proposed site for development was restricted to areas where construction was unlikely to significantly degrade the natural appearance of the headland. Providing appropriate restrictions on construction heights were enforced, the development would not appear likely to detract from the external appearance of the site.

10. The Sub-Committee accepted that some development of the site was mandated by the need to fund the maintenance and preservation of bushland areas and heritage sites, the development of recreation areas, and to provide some contribution toward the cost of relocating the Defence units currently on the site. The visit confirmed that the restriction of intended development to the areas which are currently occupied by non-heritage Defence construction and infrastructure was a viable and sensitive means of achieving this end.

Military Heritage

11. While the fortification of Middle Head commenced as early as 1801, work commenced on the construction of gun batteries on the site in 1871, with construction of the batteries and a sandstone barracks building on the site complete by 1874. This development was the product of a decision by the British Government to make certain self-governing colonies responsible for their own land-based defence. Two of the batteries were subsequently modified around the turn of the century to accept updated guns, while the third was modified as a firing point for electric submarine mine defences of the harbour. The batteries are relics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century military works undertaken for the defence of Sydney Harbour, and together with a collection of related sites around the harbour, they record the history of the military defence of Sydney from the beginning of European settlement to the present.

12. A report prepared for the Department of Defence during the planning for disposal of the sites remarked that:

Middle Head has a diverse collection of fortifications showing an evolution of coastal and defence technologies over two centuries. ...the area provides the opportunity to convey a series of complex and important historical messages about Australia and colonial history, technological history, material culture and nationalism...

13. The Sub-Committee noted that the military heritage sites scattered across the Middle Head/Georges Heights site are some of the most historically significant of their type in Australia, and believes that all available measures should be taken to ensure their preservation for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

14. The Sub-Committee noted that the Steering Committee's preferred option for disposal of the site included a statement to the effect that a number of specifically identified structures, plus all fortifications, gun emplacements and tunnels would be retained. While the Sub-Committee welcomed this assurance, as far as it went, the inspection of heritage sites and

other developed sites on Georges Heights produced some concerns for the Sub-Committee. These were:

- Some of the constructions which currently comprise the infrastructure of the Army's Headquarters Training Command may have heritage value which has not been fully appreciated in previous surveys, notwithstanding the apparently temporary nature of their construction. Several of these have been omitted from the list of structures specifically identified for preservation. Examples include the Victorian-era guardroom structure, and selected examples of wooden construction barrack buildings.
- The survey of the military heritage sites on Georges Heights may not have been sufficiently thorough to identify all locations of significance. The risk arises that development in areas proximate to less obvious, or partly concealed fortifications, may result in damage to those structures. The Sub-Committee noted that the heritage value of the fortifications on this site was extremely high, and that any heritage structure or fortification lost, damaged or destroyed in the proposed development was irreplaceable.
- Measures intended for some of the structures identified for conservation may not allow for appropriate levels of display to ensure full public access and appreciation of their historical significance. Of particular concern was that several of the fortifications in the area previously transferred to State Government ownership had been vandalised and were deteriorating as the result of lack of conservation efforts.
- In spite of stated Defence recognition of the need to conserve military heritage sites, the Sub-Committee saw no evidence of an integrated plan for their long-term protection. Statements by Defence that the heritage assets would be retained in Commonwealth ownership and their conservation managed by a Trust-like body were welcomed, but to date the Sub-Committee has seen no evidence that this intention has progressed beyond the conceptual stage.

15. The Sub-Committee saw no impediment to the leasing of selected heritage structures to organisations wishing to make sympathetic commercial use of them, providing adequate safeguards were in place to guarantee their preservation. Similarly, the transfer of control of these structures to a non-commercial heritage organisation would be supportable, where any admission fees levied for public access were used towards the preservation and display of the structures and fortifications.

HMAS *Platypus*

16. HMAS *Platypus* is a fully-developed industrial site on Neutral Bay, which since 1967 has operated as the east coast home base for the Australian Submarine Squadron. It contains submarine training facilities, and was the site of a torpedo maintenance establishment which was closed in December 1996. With the intended transfer of the submarine squadron to HMAS *Stirling* in Western Australia in May 1999, the Defence requirement for the site will cease. The Department of Defence has proposed a development which will return 30 percent of the site to public use open space, while the remainder would be developed with the construction of approximately 95 high-quality dwellings.

17. The cost of remediating the site to permit the residential development is high - in the order of \$8m to \$10m. Thus the financial viability of the disposal depends on development to the level envisaged by the Department of Defence. These plans have raised some concerns at the local Council level that a greater proportion of open space (ie greater than 30% of the site coverage) should be included as part of the development. The Department of Defence argues that this is in excess of what could be required in any comparable development, and if enforced may jeopardise the viability of the disposal. An application seeking Council agreement to the proposed development had not been approved at the time of tabling of this report.

18. The Sub-Committee assesses that, notwithstanding the current difficulties with Council approval of the envisaged development, the disposal is not controversial. The site is currently industrial in nature and unattractive in appearance. Its redevelopment for dwellings with the open space provisions currently proposed by the Defence plan will enhance the environs of Neutral Bay.

Woolwich

19. The 7 hectare Defence site at Woolwich on the Parramatta River comprises two parcels of land separated by the State-owned Clark Reserve. These parcels are one enclosing Mort's Dock and associated buildings and facilities, and a site locally known as the 'horse paddock'. This land was acquired by the Department of Defence in 1964 as a site for the establishment of a Sydney-based watercraft capability for Army (as a sub-unit of No 10 Terminal Regiment, located at Middle Head). With the transfer of No 10 Terminal Regiment to Townsville from December 1997, Defence has declared the land surplus to requirements. While the historical Mort's Dock is protected by heritage listing, Defence has initiated action to have the remaining land re-zoned for residential use, and in this, has sought the assistance of the local community in the form of a Community Reference Group.

20. Firm development proposals have not yet been defined, although the Minister for Defence has recently suggested the possibility that future development may be limited to already developed areas on the site. This may include some residential dwellings and areas of open space extending well beyond 50% of the existing land area.

21. The sites in question, although green in appearance when viewed from the harbour, do not contribute significantly to the bushland nature of the Sydney Harbour foreshore environs. They would not appear to warrant the same concern for their conservation as would the natural vegetation on the headlands of North Head and Middle Head.

22. Local residents argue that the areas previously controlled by Army should be retained as open space for the benefit of the local community. While these arguments are understood, the Sub-Committee believes that the disposal plans currently envisaged by Defence would provide for adequate access to the shorefront by local residents, and an acceptable compromise in terms of provision of open space, while still providing reasonable return for Defence. Further concession from the envisaged development plan to increase the open space provisions would result in a situation where a relatively few privileged residents would receive advantage through effective subsidisation by the Department of Defence.

23. The Committee notes subsequent reports that the Prime Minister may consider use of the Federation Fund to purchase the Woolwich properties for general public use. A decision to this effect would address the interests of local groups opposed to development of the sites. Should such a decision also meet the Defence objective of generating funding to finance their relocation initiatives, this action would clearly obviate the need for a compromise between the two interests.

Spectacle Island

24. Spectacle Island is located in the mouth of the Parramatta River, adjacent to Pulpit Point, Hunters Hill, and approximately 4.4km west of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The site consists of a low island of around 5 hectares in area, containing a number of heritage-listed structures dating back to the 1860s. The island's historical uses have been mainly in Naval ammunition processes, and most of the structures on the island are heritage listed, which would severely restrict development options. The site is now currently used as a repository for RAN heritage and museum items which are rotated through the Sydney Maritime Museum and the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour. As the site is a repository, rather than a museum, public access is restricted, although selected groups are permitted entry by prior arrangement.

25. The buildings on the island also provide a training facility for Naval Reserve cadets from the local area, and are used as a base for sail training for large groups of cadets from the NSW and ACT areas. The facilities also provide an austere training venue for some other Australian naval groups. The water approaches to the island are also used as a staging post and mooring point for concrete ammunition lighters, which are used in the ammunitioning and de-ammunitioning of naval vessels berthing in Sydney Harbour workshop facilities for repair and maintenance.

26. The site has a strong military heritage, and is expected to remain as part of the Defence Estate for the foreseeable future. As this island is not currently envisaged for disposal, and does not detract from the Harbour environs, the Sub-Committee saw no issues arising from their brief inspection of Spectacle Island.

Cockatoo Island

27. Cockatoo Island, a former penal settlement, is an 18 hectare site previously used in naval vessel construction and maintenance, but now largely derelict. Its current appearance reflects that previous use. It is heavily built up with industrial structures and buildings, cranes and wharfage, and shows signs of neglect as a result of its state of disuse since the RAN's East Coast fleet maintenance transferred to Garden Island. Also located on the island are a small number of historically significant structures, such as the caretaker's residence.

28. It is understood that the Department of Defence is currently addressing a number of heritage issues and has recently completed a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan of the island. This work was to enable Defence to make informed decisions about future land use options early in 1998.

29. The Sub-Committee was of the view that the derelict site currently holds little aesthetic value, and any efforts to clear the Island of unwanted industrial infrastructure would be beneficial to the appearance of the harbour environs, and hence a welcome development. However, the Sub-Committee acknowledged that the long history of industrial use has resulted in a situation where remediation costs could be expected to be high, and this may limit the financial feasibility of some disposal options. Ultimately, land use will depend on close liaison with the NSW State Government.

Revy Buildings, Pyrmont

30. The Revy Buildings at 17 Jones Bay Road in Pyrmont were constructed in the early 1900s as victualling facilities for the Royal Australian Navy. From the mid-1980s two of the three buildings were substantially refurbished to accommodate the Headquarters element of Naval Support Command into which approximately 200 personnel relocated in 1994. Although these buildings are not currently planned for disposal, they were included on the Sub-Committee's inspection tour, as they are also located on Sydney Harbour, at the root of Wharf 17 and remain an important Defence property holding. The imposing multi-storey structure has won numerous design awards and represents an excellent example of an early 20th century building, adaptively re-used for a modern purpose without sacrificing the high heritage values of the site.

General Comment

31. As the Sub-Committee moved on its inspection visit around the harbour, a number of construction sites were seen at various locations around the foreshore. One significant such site noted abeam Cockatoo Island was a large waterfront residential development called Hoptown Quays, located at Birchgrove. Upon completion, the project will provide for 110 townhouses and apartments, ranging in price from \$340,000 to \$1.6 million. The development clearly involved substantial excavation works, which, while still in progress at the time of the visit, produced an unsightly blemish on the harbour foreshores. The Sub-Committee noted the irony of the position adopted by some groups currently opposing the development of some Defence properties: where Defence land was considered sacrosanct, and lobby groups urged their protection from any level of development, other extensive sites were currently in the process of virtual strip-clearing in preparation for major commercial construction works. The Sub-Committee sought to maintain greater consistency in reaching its conclusions and making recommendations from this visit.

Senator D J MacGibbon
Chairman

DISSENTING REPORT

1. Much of the report on the Sub-Committee's visit is undisputed between the Members of the Sub-Committee. However, I believe I must register my dissent on a matter relating to the Committee's comments on the part of the visit that inspected the Middle Head and Georges Heights area.
2. I strongly concur with the Sub-Committee's wish to preserve the bushland appearance of the site, but I am not convinced that the development plans intended by the Department of Defence will comply with that wish. Following the Sub-Committee's visit, I returned to Georges Heights, and conducted a second inspection, accompanied by a guide independent of the Department of Defence Property Disposal Unit. I was informed that the area intended for development under the Department of Defence's current plan includes the Headquarters Training Command parade ground, which I witnessed had excellent harbour views. I am convinced that any development of this site would result in a significant man-made blemish to the hoped-for bushland appearance of the headland, and will be visible from the harbour.
3. I believe that the remainder of the Members undertaking the visit were not given sufficient information to allow them to reach this same conclusion. I disagree with the majority conclusion of the report, in particular to Paragraph 9, where it concerns Georges Heights, as I believe the development will significantly mar the appearance of the site. Further, by allowing construction of private dwellings in this vicinity access to those areas by members of the public would be forever denied. I wish to register my strongest opposition to the development of this site, regardless of the height restrictions imposed.

J W Bradford, MP
Member for McPherson (QLD)