

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Disposal of the Artillery Barracks Fremantle

5.1 The Artillery Barracks, Fremantle, is clearly an important heritage site. Its location, history and state of preservation alone would make it worthy of care and preservation. It also has strong community support, not just within Fremantle but also within the wider Western Australian community. The Barracks and the Army Museum housed on site have become a focal point for the ex-service community throughout Western Australia. It is one of a very few remaining historic military properties of such significance in the State.

5.2 In light of the importance of this property, the Committee considers it would be more appropriate for it be retained in public ownership. This would provide the degree of control needed to ensure that the heritage values of the site were not degraded over time. The Committee does acknowledge, however, that heritage values can be preserved equally as well in private ownership.

5.3 Although the Committee believes that the significance of the site would be enhanced by its continued use by the armed forces, it believes that it is the responsibility of Defence to determine which properties it needs in order to meet operational requirements. The Committee is also not prepared to recommend that Defence be deprived of the revenue from the disposal of this property.

5.4 The Committee's preferred approach to the future of the property is for its transfer to the Western Australian Government by means of a grant from the Centenary of Federation Fund or through some similar mechanism. This would have the dual benefit of keeping the property in public ownership and providing Defence with revenue from its disposal.

5.5 If the property is transferred to the Western Australian Government, the State Government has a choice of two leasing options—one provided by the University of Notre Dame Australia and the other by the Army Museum of Western Australia Foundation. The Committee is not in a position to determine which would be the better lessee. Of course, a third option would be dual occupancy with a joint management committee as suggested by Dr Tannock. The Committee believes that a decision on leasing any part of the property should be made by the Western Australian Government in consultation with the City of Fremantle.

Army Museum of Western Australia

5.6 The Committee considers that the Army Museum of Western Australia is a valuable facility, which fulfils a worthwhile role for both the people of Western Australia and the Army. The evidence received by the Committee supported the retention of the Museum at the Artillery Barracks, Fremantle.

5.7 Defence put forward several concerns about locating an Army entity on property not owned by Defence. The concerns about public liability and the potential difficulties of operating in leased premises, which are subject to state and local government regulation, are not considered by the Committee to be insuperable. The Department already operates out of leased premises in other locations and further sale and lease back arrangements are currently being considered.

5.8 Although co-location of the Museum with other military units is both current Defence policy and has benefits for Army and the Museum, other adverse effects of the Museum's proposed move from the Artillery Barracks to Hobbs Hall were put to the Committee during the inquiry. A potential reduction in the number of volunteers and few visitors owing to the location of Hobbs Hall were cited as factors which could lead to the demise of the Museum. Concern was also expressed about the survival of some fragile exhibits in any move. In addition, the Museum exhibits would have to be redesigned to fit the new layout in Hobbs Hall. The Committee acknowledges that Defence will provide some assistance in the relocation of the exhibits. In view of all these factors, however, the Committee believes that the Museum should, if at all possible, remain in its present location.

Disposal process

5.9 The Defence Estate Organisation has conducted the sale of this property in accordance with the relevant legislation and government guidelines as confirmed by the Commonwealth Ombudsman. But the Committee is concerned about aspects of DEO's handling of the property's disposal, especially the lack of consultation with stakeholders to identify other potential buyers and about future use of the site. Consultation is crucial in the disposal of a property that is historically important, has significant heritage values and has strong public interest. It is not in the interests of Defence to alienate the community by perceived secretiveness in the disposal process, the outcome of which is not supported by that community.

5.10 The Committee does not intend to make any specific recommendations on these issues at this stage as it will gather further evidence on them in the second part of the inquiry. It will examine these matters further in its final report.

Recommendations

5.11 The Committee recommends that the Artillery Barracks, Fremantle be transferred to the Western Australian Government using funds provided through the Centenary of Federation Fund or through some similar mechanism.

5.12 The Committee also recommends that the Minister for Defence review the Department's decision to relocate the Army Museum of Western Australia to Hobbs Hall and examine the possibility of retaining the Museum at Artillery Barracks.

Senator John Hogg
Chair

Senator Steve Hutchins inspecting facilities at Hobbs Hall

