



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
**FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr Ed Cocks MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT's heritage arrangements

**Submission Number: 065**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 23 May 2023**

Good afternoon,

Hope you're all doing well. Thank you for the work you all do in service of our city. It's a tough job, and we're very lucky to have fantastic people like you in our community doing it.

I'm writing to you to give my thoughts on the heritage review currently underway. Sadly I missed the cutoff for submissions to the committee, so I hope it's okay to give my opinions this way. I didn't want to miss out because it's an issue of great importance to me, and I also feel one where younger people like me (I'm 34) don't often speak up.

In short, my recommendations are as follows:

- 1) keep the current arrangement where decisions are made apolitically
- 2) ensure good culture and adequate resourcing for the heritage bureaucracy
- 3) ensure proportionality
- 4) consider arrangements to force private owners of heritage properties to look after them to a minimum standard
- 5) continue to allow for good adaptive reuse

I really enjoy and value our heritage. Despite Canberra as a city being young, we've got a lot of interesting places and with good stories to tell that are worth preserving - as well as significantly older first nations heritage that is of course also incredibly important. I cycle to work through several of the garden city heritage precincts every day, including Reid, and it's a genuine joy each day - it's fantastic that we've kept a selection of these early neighbourhoods largely as designed, down to the bus shelters and street signs, whilst allowing appropriate sympathetic or hidden renovations so they can also be great modern places to live. They're lovely places to be, and a fascinating insight into the architecture and urban design of the time. I think they're a good example of how the existing system has largely delivered really good outcomes for Canberra and Canberrans. I also enjoy that the heritage framework has been forward leaning in looking at periods that are less loved now, to ensure they're not lost to history - think the decision to preserve some of the old flats and mid century modern buildings.

That brings me onto my first recommendation - to largely keep things as they are. The system has overall been delivering good results. In particular I like that the decision isn't made by a minister or the assembly, so there is no risk of lobbying. This could be by anti-development groups trying to prevent needed housing (especially public housing) in their areas - imagine if the people trying to stop the excellent YHomes Ainslie project had been able to lobby the decision maker to heritage list the old building. Or it could be by developers, who might lobby against listing a significant thing so they can bulldoze it. Either way, it's best the way it is - decided by experts who don't need to worry about reelection or fundraising. I also think it's key that the decisions continue to be informed by internal experts, and not by commercial heritage consultants as is the case in other jurisdictions, to avoid conflicts of interest.

However, onto my second recommendation it is sadly clear from all the reporting about the issues at the old heritage council and supporting staff that there is room for improvement. It sounds like an area that needs attention is ensuring a good working culture, with good cooperation and no bullying. It also seems like more resourcing may be required to ensure the workload remains manageable and so people aren't waiting too long for advice needed to progress their projects.

The other area where some improvement could be made is to ensuring proportionality in what aspects of things are listed and what is and isn't allowed. Heritage sites are important, once something is gone it's gone, and owners are as much custodians as owners. However, the story recently of someone who wasn't allowed to instal solar panels is a bit much. That's clearly something that should be allowed. In general I feel we get this balance right - only significant aspects being listed, so insides of houses can be renovated etc. - but it's important the heritage council keep the impact of their decisions in mind. A good example of getting this right is in only keeping a small selection of the old Northbourne apartments - keeping all of them would have too much impact on the future growth and use of the city, but keeping none would have been a mistake.

My fourth recommendation is to consider a mechanism to compel custodians of heritage sites to maintain them in an acceptable condition, or a mechanism for the government to compulsorily acquire neglected sites. As a Braddon resident the site that has prompted this thought is the old bakery on Elouera Street. It's sitting there crumbling and being covered in graffiti despite being in a prime location and being nearly 100 years old. I'm guessing the reason for this unacceptable state of affairs is that it's privately owned, and whilst we can stop them demolishing it we can't make them maintain it or use it productively. Minister, I would like to hear about how the Government plans to care for this site specifically please. But it shows a general problem. Heritage sites are listed because they're significant to all of us, and their custodians, even if private owners, should have obligations that come with ownership. If they're forced into expensive maintenance maybe it will make them put the site to productive use or seek it to someone who can use it. As a last resort it may be necessary for the government to have a legal means to seize the site and restore it, before putting it to use.

On this theme, my fifth and final recommendation is to ensure heritage allows for adaptive reuse where this is consistent with preserving what matters. The Kingston glassworks and old bus depot are fantastic examples of this done well. I really hope we can soon have similar great uses for the old brickworks and forestry school in Yarralumla. I strongly support published plans for both of these sites, with the exception of the reduction in height from 5 floors at the forestry school - this was a needless reduction in density. The buildings wouldn't have impinged on anyone's view, and if people are worried about traffic then having enough density to justify a light rail stop and better local bus service seems like a good solution. Plus the active travel in the area is great. Anyway, I think it's important that the heritage framework is flexible enough to allow these sorts of projects, whilst preserving what matters.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,  
Andrew Dibb.