

INQUIRY INTO THE BEST USE OF THE FITTERS' WORKSHOP, AND RELATED MATTERS**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS****LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**A.C.T. LEGISLATIVE
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SUBMISSION BY DR RICHARD BRABIN-SMITH AO, DECEMBER 2011

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I offer this submission to the Standing Committee both as a long-term resident of Canberra (38 years) and as an active member of Canberra's musical community for most of that time. Let me add, in the interests of openness, that I am currently the secretary of the Oriana Chorale, although it is as a private person not as Oriana's secretary that I make this submission.

All credit is due to the ACT Government for its initiative and imagination in planning to turn the Kingston Foreshore into a precinct for the arts. This is the context in which it is such a pity that its specific plans for the Fitters' Workshop, and its reluctance to offer full justification, do not add up.

There are two main issues. The first is that the initial decision to dedicate the design of a refurbished Fitters' Workshop for use solely by Megalo was taken before the brilliance of the acoustics of the building for musical performance had become apparent. In saying this, I speak as one who has sung there in two of the annual Canberra International Music Festivals, and who has thus experienced the building at first hand. Its acoustic qualities are indeed remarkable, and I cannot bring to mind a comparable performance space in the ACT. It is important, then, to review the way ahead for the Fitters' Workshop in the light of this new information.

Second is the question of whether it makes sense to spend so much money on modifying a heritage building in the extensive way that the ACT Government proposes, and (as I understand it) in such a way as to preclude its use by other community groups. Why not instead provide Megalo with a new building, purpose-designed from the ground up, and preserve the Fitters' Workshop for wider community use (not just by music groups)?

I need to add the obvious point that this submission is not anti-Megalo. I am not contesting the judgement of the ACT Government that public funds should be spent on that organisation. Rather, I am suggesting that there is a better way ahead, and one that would serve a wider community.

I applaud, therefore, the actions of the non-Government members of the ACT Legislative Assembly in setting up this Inquiry. The Standing Committee will be in a unique position to establish the facts, including with respect to what appear to have been unrealistic expectations (or misleading statements) with respect to timescales for the conversion of the Workshop for use by Megalo; the basis for the Government's judgement that its proposed way ahead was appropriate, the extent to which alternatives were canvassed and considered, and the extent to which alternatives were fully costed. The Committee will also be well-placed to draw its conclusions about the best way ahead, and why.

I fear, however, in particular on the basis of the consideration by the Assembly in late October, that there is already evidence to support the view that the ACT Government did not follow proper process and that its decisions are therefore suspect and contestable.

I have nevertheless written to Ms Joy Burch, Minister for the Arts, suggesting that it would be in everyone's interest for the Government to co-operate fully with the Inquiry. Transparency on the part of the Government would be a major help in defusing and resolving the dispute over the Workshop.

Such transparency would also be consistent with the values expressed by Ms Gallagher on becoming Chief Minister. On the other hand, a decision not to be transparent would serve only to fuel suspicions that the Government has something to hide.

In summary, significant *public* funds are involved in the matter of the Fitters' Workshop, and the ACT Government needs to recognise its accountability to the Canberra community for this proposed expenditure. The key is transparency. The Standing Committee now has an important part to play in ensuring that this necessary transparency is achieved.

Richard Brabin-Smith
6 December 2011
