A Strategy for Australian Heritage

I wish to make comment on the April 2014 Draft for Consultation on *A Strategy for Australia’s Heritage*

I am responding to the Draft as an individual with an involvement in history and heritage for the past 50 years

I am a member of National Trust of SA and a past Trustee of the History Trust of SA (now History SA)

I have been actively involved with the development of The Sheep’s Back museum in Naracoorte, whose wool industry collection, provenanced from the South East of SA and Western Victoria, has been recognized as being of national significance. I have been a member of the Naracoorte Lucindale Council’s Heritage Advisory Committee since it was formed in 1990.

I have also published 10 books of regional history.

I speak, therefore, from a varied experience at the community, hands-on, level of heritage recognition and conservation in South Australia.

**Comments**

***National leadership***

I commend the proposal to support heritage conservation through more realistic funding, and to recognize and support heritage groups at all levels, including within smaller communities across the nation, in their efforts to improve the conservation and presentation through various means of the value and meaning of heritage sites and buildings. I would like to also commend to the reviewers the cause of moveable heritage in collections across the country collections, as well as the recording in books or film, the history of our people and culture.

While each state has a process for advising and supporting this aspect of heritage to some degree, it must be said that the work of reaching high standards in this field is not well supported financially, and is becoming less so, with significantly fewer grants being offered for competition than in the recent past. There is also some resistance to issues of standard setting, although most states use a common set of standards for conservation of both built and moveable heritage as a guide.

***Innovative Partnerships***

The suggested support for innovative tourist experiences has the possibility to be really helpful, but must consider what can be achieved on a budget available to small operators as well as iconic ones.

The linking of sites that share a common culture historically, even across state borders, or show development of an idea or an industry in different places is valuable...in other words, facilitate the transformation of scattered small experiences into one significant experience. Some work has been initiated in my own area, where businesses and community organizations which are tourism oriented in the one-time ‘Green Triangle’ of South Eastern SA and Western Victoria, which share a common history and many business links are attempting to create a recognized visitor destination cross-borders…. An ideal subject for funding and information/skills sharing.

***Community Engagement***

I believe that in order to encourage the drive and commitment so necessary to make a project such as the Green Army achieve its aims in changing attitudes and providing opportunities for committed work, then the perception of heritage conservation need to be made more ‘trendy’ to younger people.

As a member of the older generation, I can recognize the power of social media, while admitting that I cannot use it effectively myself… but anything on a tablet these days seems to carry an authority with those we need to continue our work with history and heritage well above any of the usual channels more familiar to my generation. The failure in acknowledgement of each generation for the others’ way of thinking seems to me to be a critical problem in the continuing conservation of heritage nationally.

Could I also suggest that we look for an alternative term to ‘Heritage’ when we refer to the subject. The protection of historic buildings and landscapes has been an obstacle for ambitious business concerns or traditional thinkers who value with passion their rights of absolute control of what they perceive as theirs and has produced sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and modified if we are to retain an ongoing programme of protection of important aspects of our past and its influence on how we think now.

As a hands-on worker in the field, I would like to mention the problems of such celebrations as heritage celebrations Australia wide. We celebrate History Month in May at present, because it is a pleasant and appropriate time to tour and travel… which either prevents our own workers from gaining this experience, or leaves what is already a small group, working to capacity, short-handed. At the end of the month we wish we could never see a museum or heritage building again! Perhaps there is a more creative way of focusing on our subject.

The recognition of so-called ‘history champions’ is a delicate matter. May I make the personal comment that such a soubriquet is patronizing? Most people who work in the history/heritage field do so because it is a driving interest. Many are active or retired professional people, who want their work acknowledged as such, not a pat on the head. They are also team members, and often feel a real hesitation in accepting recognition for themselves when their achievements are built on the work of others as well as their own. For my own part, the recognition of the expertise I had acquired by inviting me to take a seat on the Board of the then History Trust of SA was what really rewarded me... to be able to contribute as an active worker in the field when decisions were made affecting the field of history and heritage in SA. Too often the contribution of the many people such as myself is ignored in wider decision making, and the decisions are the poorer because of it. One does not need to be near the seat of power to think and act with wisdom and imagination , so rather than a pat on the head, could you not set up an advisory forum, and hear what those you wish to acknowledge can contribute to the wider decision making… then give respect to their views.

Judith Murdoch OAM BSc BEd DipT