



The English-Speaking Union Victoria Branch

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Australian English-
Speaking Union Ltd,
in co-operation with
the English-Speaking
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Commonwealth and
the United States

10 April 2026

Management of Defence Estate Assets Inquiry
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Australian Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

MANAGEMENT OF DEFENCE ESTATE ASSETS

SUBMISSION in relation to Terms of Reference (e): The heritage significance of Defence estate assets and the adequacy of measures to protect that significance during and following divestment, including the impact on veteran and community connections to sites of military service.

1. About the English-Speaking Union (Victoria Branch)

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) was founded in London in 1918 with the express aim of uniting the English-speaking peoples in order to re-establish and preserve world peace. The ESU Victoria Branch was established in Melbourne the following year, with similar aims: to make the English-speaking peoples of the world better known to each other and to engage in educational and cultural activities designed to further that end.

In its first five years, the ESU Victoria Branch attracted many ex-service personnel as members. Three Vice-Presidents in that period held (or had held) notable roles at Victoria Barracks (Melbourne). Many of the early ESU members were united by their experience of World War 1 and sought to establish peaceful means for resolving future conflicts.

The ESU Victoria Branch is now a limited liability company, registered as an educational and cultural charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.

The ESU Victoria Branch is aware of the benefits and challenges involved in managing significant heritage assets: it owns and occupies premises of state significance that are included on the Victorian Heritage Register. The ESU Victoria Branch has invested substantial resources in the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan and in the maintenance and restoration of its own heritage building.

2. This submission

The ESU Victoria Branch supports in principle the need for significant heritage places to become more accessible to the public, but not at the likely cost of loss, compromise or demise of the heritage fabric and the heritage values of such places.

This submission discusses:

- The status of the heritage listing of Defence assets Australia-wide if they are divested from Commonwealth ownership (§3);
- The heritage significance of Victoria Barracks Melbourne, including its connections with leaders of the ESU Victoria Branch (§§4-6);
- The proposed protection measures for Victoria Barracks Melbourne (§7); and
- Our proposal (§8) for Australian Government ownership of Victoria Barracks Melbourne to continue as the only satisfactory means of:
 - maintaining community connections to the site, and also
 - protecting a location and buildings critical to the history and heritage of Australia.

The ESU Victoria Branch makes three recommendations as part of this submission - see §3, §7 and §8.

3. Heritage listing

It is not clear to us that a Defence place currently on the Commonwealth Heritage List will continue to be protected via that registration if the property is transferred or sold out of Commonwealth ownership.

Delivering The Future Estate: the Defence Estate Audit Report (2025) fails to discuss the future heritage status of divested sites. Mason and Miller, the consultants who wrote *Defence Estate Audit: An Independent Assessment of the Defence Estate (2023)* made no recommendation concerning this important matter. We are deeply concerned by this omission. We fear that Defence places now on the Commonwealth Heritage List will lose their heritage protection once they are not owned by the Commonwealth.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The ESU Victoria Branch recommends that Defence assets on the Commonwealth Heritage List be granted registration on the Australian National Heritage List immediately and simultaneously with any divestment that may occur, and that such heritage places be granted full, immediate, continuing and ongoing heritage protection, in accordance with the provisions of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* for properties on the National Heritage List.

4. Don't sell Victoria Barracks, Melbourne - Preserve our legacy and our story as a nation

Victoria Barracks Melbourne is not a disposable asset. It is one of Australia's most important military and heritage sites, with a continuous history dating back to the 1850s.

From the colonial era through to the establishment of the nation of Australia and through to the direct defence of our country in the face of the gravest military threat ever posed to Australia, Victoria Barracks Melbourne has had a key role in shaping Australia's defence interests and national identity.

Generations of men and women have served Australia at the Victoria Barracks and its buildings and grounds stand as a living record of their service and sacrifice.

The future of Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road Melbourne must honour the historical significance and legacy of the site and of the veterans who served there.

5. Historical context and ESU connections

Victoria Barracks Melbourne has played a pivotal role in Australia's military history from colonial to modern times.

Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road took shape originally as barracks accommodation for the 12th and 40th Regiments of Foot. The latter regiment was involved in a seminal event in Victorian and Australian history by quelling the Eureka Stockade rebellion in Ballarat in 1854. The Barracks were named in honour of Queen Victoria and have had a direct association with the Colony and subsequently the State of Victoria since their construction in the 1850s. G Block, the earliest building at Victoria Barracks, and other Barracks bluestone buildings were built between 1856 and 1872. These buildings are enduring illustrations of Victoria's and Australia's military history and comprise impressive examples of wonderfully preserved early Victorian governmental architecture in Victoria and in Australia.

The ESU Victoria Branch has direct connections with Victoria Barracks Melbourne through three of its early Vice-Presidents: General Sir John Monash, General Sir Brudenell White and General Sir Harry Chauvel.



General Sir John Monash



General Sir Brudenell White



General Sir Harry Chauvel

Monash, White and Chauvel were each Australian-born; each became highly decorated for their distinguished military service.

General Sir John Monash served in various military roles at Victoria Barracks Melbourne in the pre-World War 1 period and during 1914, before embarking on overseas military service.

Arguably Australia's most prominent military leader, Monash's military career began as a member of the Victorian section of the Australian Intelligence Corps, based at Victoria Barracks. He was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1908 and continued working at the Barracks, directing intelligence and militia training in Victoria until 1913.

Upon the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Monash was appointed to command the 4th Infantry Brigade. He was based at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, in September 1914, preparing for active service, before leading the brigade to Egypt.

Post-war, General Monash led Anzac Day marches and played a key role in designing the Shrine of Remembrance, near Victoria Barracks.

Monash served as a Vice-President of the ESU Victoria Branch in 1923-1924.

General Sir Cyril Brudenell White and **General Sir Harry Chauvel** both served in senior military roles at the Victoria Barracks Melbourne from the 1920s, and were each Vice-Presidents of the ESU Victoria Branch during that period.

Brudenell White served as Chief of the General Staff of Australia's Military Forces.

As Australia's chief military strategist and planner, he worked from the Victoria Barracks from 1920 to 1923, shaping the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) following the First World War. He performed this same role on the outbreak of the Second World War, again operating from Army Headquarters at the Victoria Barracks until his tragic death in a Canberra air disaster in 1940.

General Sir Brudenell White's portrait features as part of the military board collection at Victoria Barracks.

In April 1917, following active service at Gallipoli, **Harry Chauvel** became the first Australian to command a corps when he was appointed to the rank of lieutenant general leading the Desert Mounted Corps. He commanded the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba in October 1917, where Australian mounted troopers captured the town and its vital water supply in one of history's last great cavalry charges.

In 1919, Chauvel was appointed Inspector General, the Army's most senior post. He was also Chief of the General Staff of the Australian Army from 1923 until his retirement in 1930. During the Second World War, he was recalled to duty as Inspector in Chief of the Volunteer Defence Corps. During these post-war appointments, General Harry Chauvel was based at the Victoria Barracks.

These direct connections with the Victoria Barracks Melbourne enable the ESU Victoria Branch to call for an enduring commitment to Australia's military history and legacy by protecting and maintaining the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne in Australian Government custodianship.

6. Additional historical context

Victoria Barracks Melbourne has also featured prominently in Australia's development as an independent nation, first housing the newly created Department of Defence following the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia through Federation in 1901. Victoria Barracks continued to house the Department of Defence (including a civilian workforce, both male and female) until 1958 when the Department moved to the new Russell Offices in Canberra.

Victoria Barracks has also contributed to a significant element of veterans' history, with the expansion of the Barracks in the 1930s to provide Repatriation Commission Outpatients Clinics for World War I veterans.

During the Second World War, Victoria Barracks housed the Australian War Cabinet and the Defence Secretariat including senior military staff and the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Sir Frederick Shedden. Both Sir Robert Menzies and John Curtin as Australia's wartime Prime Ministers had offices adjacent to the War Cabinet Room throughout the war.



Cabinet meeting in Victoria Barracks War Cabinet Room

Victoria Barracks was also home to the Royal Australian Navy's cryptographic unit which intercepted and deciphered Japanese military codes. This code-breaking work was instrumental in protecting Australia and contributing significantly to the defeat of the Japanese naval forces at the battle of Milne Bay in 1942.

In the broader context of Australia's defence history, Victoria Barracks served as General Sir Thomas Blamey's Headquarters as Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces and Commander-in-Chief Allied Land Forces in the South-West Pacific Area.

These critical moments in Australia's history - and particularly Australia's military history - must be acknowledged and the buildings and grounds in which these seminal events took place must be preserved.

7. Heritage protection measures

We note that several of the buildings at the Victoria Barracks Melbourne site are Places included in the Commonwealth Heritage List. As outlined in §3 (above), we are not, however, confident that their protection under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* will endure if the site is divested. We fear that the heritage significance of the site as a whole, and its individual buildings, will be compromised by private ownership. We are deeply concerned that divestment of this site by the Australian Government will lead to a profound breach of community trust and expectations.

Our concern is not alleviated by reading the Department of Defence web page about the proposal to divest Victoria Barrack Melbourne. The Department states that:

The Government has an obligation to protect the Commonwealth Heritage Value of a property as part of any sale. Alternative heritage management options will also be considered, including:

- Retention of heritage elements.
- Adaptive reuse of sites to preserve heritage facades and certain characteristics of the buildings.
- Relocation and/or restoration of remaining buildings to preserve heritage values.
- Archival recordings of buildings.¹

Of these “alternative heritage management options”, we support only the first dot point (*Retention of heritage elements*) as being appropriate for a site with the cultural and social significance of Victoria Barracks Melbourne. Our rejection of the other three dot points can be explained as follows:

- *Adaptive reuse of sites to preserve heritage facades and certain characteristics of the buildings.*

While adaptive re-use is an option for management of some heritage places, the significance of Victoria Barracks Melbourne would be grossly reduced by facadism.

- *Relocation and/or restoration of remaining buildings to preserve heritage values.*

The *relocation* of a heritage building is a remedy of last resort. The Australian branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites expressly discourages this practice in its highly regarded publication, *The Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (2013):

- 9.1 The physical location of a place is part of its cultural significance. A building, work or other element of a place should remain in its historical location. Relocation is generally unacceptable unless this is the sole practical means of ensuring its survival.

Restoration of heritage buildings is problematic unless clearly defined and implemented in accordance with *The Burra Charter*.

1 See: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/locations-property/delivering-future-estate/victoria-barracks-melbourne> (viewed 4 April 2026).

- *Archival recordings of buildings.*

Documentation of heritage places for archival purposes is commendable in principle. Unfortunately, it is too often a requirement imposed on the owner by a heritage department as a precursor to authorised demolition.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The ESU Victoria Branch recommends that Defence reduce its management options for Victoria Barracks Melbourne to include only:

- **Retention of heritage elements.**
- **Adaptive reuse of elements of the site where essential to enable public access and heritage interpretation.**

8. Proposal: A Defence History and Heritage Centre in Melbourne

The Department of Defence is first and foremost the custodian of Victoria Barracks site and its legacy.

Victoria Barracks Melbourne is a heritage site, not a housing development opportunity.

Any building development on this site, whether for housing or commercial purposes, and whether high or low-rise, would amount to a denigration and disavowal of Australia's history and constitute an act of cultural vandalism.

The Australian Government should retain ownership of Victoria Barracks Melbourne and provide all Australians with access to the site as an enduring legacy in recognition of its significance to all Australians.

The Victoria Barracks site should be opened to public use by Melburnians and by all Australians who wish to visit the Barracks and immerse themselves in their legacy.

This could be achieved by:

- Retaining Australian Government ownership and oversight of the Barracks;
- Providing a tri-service 'Defence History and Heritage Centre' in inner Melbourne for the Australian Army, the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force;
- Relocating the Australian Army History Unit from Canberra to the Barracks;
- Establishing an Army Museum of Victoria at the Barracks because there is no such museum, in contrast to the Army Museums of New South Wales, Queensland (North and South), South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia;²
- Establishing partnerships with organisations such as the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria, veterans' associations and patriotic community groups;
- Designating the Barracks as part of a 'Military History' precinct, in collaboration

2 The only Army museum in Melbourne is located in the suburb of Macleod (i.e. the Australian Army Signals Museum at Simpson Barracks).

with the Victorian Government (re: the Shrine of Remembrance), the City of Melbourne (re: many memorials in the King's Domain), and the City of Port Phillip (re: the Boer War Monument on the west side of St Kilda Road); and

- Delivering public programs (e.g. exhibitions, displays, lectures, guided tours, publications, online programs, etc.) so that audiences from Australia and overseas can engage with and appreciate Australia's military and civilian defence history.

The **Shrine of Remembrance** is Victoria's national memorial honouring the service and sacrifice of Australians in war and peacekeeping. It would continue to serve as a location for remembrance and reflection and to honour Australians' service overseas and at home.³

A publicly-accessible **Victoria Barracks Melbourne** would complement the Shrine by providing a tangible link to the role of Australia's military in the history of Victoria and in the defence of Australia in the face of the gravest peril our nation has ever confronted.

The **Australian Army History Unit (AAHU)** could relocate some of its museums, displays, collections and operations to the Victoria Barracks site. The AAHU is responsible for developing policy and programs for the collection, conservation, interpretation and promotion of Australian Army history. The AAHU operates 16 military museums across Australia; manages the Army History Grants and the CEW Bean Prize; conducts research; has published more than 200 books; and organises the Chief of Army's History Conference.⁴

The **Royal United Services Institute of Victoria (RUSIV)** already has premises in B Block within Victoria Barracks. Australia-wide, the Institute aims to promote informed debate and improve public awareness and understanding of defence and national security of Australia. Importantly, at Victoria Barracks Melbourne, RUSIV hosts and manages the Monash Memorial Defence Library, recognised as 'the best military library in the state' for its holdings of both historical and contemporary materials.⁵

A 'Defence History and Heritage Centre' at Victoria Barracks Melbourne could provide and co-ordinate:

- a tri-service hub for public, veterans, professional, scholarly and government research;
- public programs;
- museums, galleries, libraries and archives; and
- a 'repository of last resort' for Defence and community collections relating to Defence history and heritage that no longer have homes and/or custodians.

3 <https://www.shrine.org.au/> (viewed 6 April 2026)

4 <https://www.army.gov.au/community/engage-and-learn/army-museums> (viewed 6 April 2026).

5 <https://www.rusivic.org.au/> (viewed 6 April 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 3

The ESU Victoria Branch recommends that Victoria Barracks Melbourne be repurposed, under Australian Government ownership and oversight, as a 'Defence History and Heritage Centre'.

Adopting this recommendation would provide a fitting legacy for Australia, a genuine commitment to Australia's heritage, and a place for recognition of all veterans (military and civilian) who served at the Victoria Barracks Melbourne.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Furlan

PRESIDENT

The English-Speaking Union (Victoria Branch)