

**Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600**

Senate Inquiry - Management of Defence Estate Assets – Fort Queenscliff

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Management of Defence Estate Assets. This submission was prepared on behalf of the Fort Queenscliff Heritage Association Incorporated (FQHA) and will focus on one area of the Terms of Reference and how it applies to Fort Queenscliff:

(d) The financial assumptions underpinning estate divestment, including estimated remediation costs, net return projections, previous Defence property disposal programs and the transfer of responsibility from the Department of Defence to the Department of Finance.

Recommendation

This submission will examine previous attempts by the Department of Defence to divest Fort Queenscliff and the approaches taken by the Department to divest other sites with similar historical significance including Point Nepean in Victoria and Fort Scratchley in New South Wales.

On examination of available public documents, it is of this Association's opinion that the best way to protect and maintain heritage is for the site to remain in Commonwealth hands, and transferred from Defence to the Parks and Heritage Portfolio of the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEW).

We strongly recommend that a Fort Queenscliff Trust be established to govern the estate on behalf of DCCEW. Similar arrangements were established at Point Nepean, Fort Scratchley and Sydney Harbour Heritage sites once previous attempts to sell these properties on the open market or transfer to their respective States had failed.

About the Fort Queenscliff Heritage Association

FQHA offers guided tours and heritage services for Defence and other organisations. Experienced guides lead tours, supported by volunteers who assist with artefact restoration and collection documentation. The FQHA was originally established as the Fort Queenscliff Museum in 1982 and has been dedicated to preserving the Fort's history for over forty years. Initially, officers serving at the Command and Staff College created the museum to protect the site's heritage.

From 1982 to the mid-1990s, the Association collected artefacts and set up displays designed to interpret the Fort's significance in Australian military history. Since then, the Australian Army History Unit (AAHU) assumed these duties, with ongoing support from the FQHA in display development, historical research, artefact acquisition, and operational costs.

Our volunteers play a significant role in researching and documenting the history of the Fort. This work encompasses studies on the establishment, evolution, operations, ordnance, equipment, and preservation of key components such as the 1888 Signal Tower and the Fire Control Station. Additionally, research into the personnel who served at the Fort from 1860 to the present remains a priority. The Association membership includes a number of historians with expertise ranging from doctoral qualifications to specialisations in family history and genealogy. Over the years, numerous theses and publications have been produced, covering aspects of the Fort's history, the broader Fortress at the Heads, personnel records, daily operations, and heritage matters.

Beyond our core team of employees and volunteers engaged in daily activities at the Fort, the Association comprises over 1,200 members. Known as the Friends of the Fort, these individuals are committed supporters of the Fort's historical and cultural preservation. Many are former service members with strong personal connections to the site.

Previous Divestment Attempts

Fort Queenscliff was planned for divestment in 2000 when the Army's Staff College, which had been operating there since 1946, moved to Canberra. Considered surplus to Defence's requirement the intention was on departure of the Staff College to transfer Fort Queenscliff to the State Government. However, following strong representations by both the Queenscliffe Council and the local Federal Member of Parliament (Stewart McArthur – Liberal, Corangamite 1984-2007). Defence directed that the Army's Soldier Career Management Agency (SCMA) relocate from Melbourne and it remained there until November 2012. Today the Defence Information Access Unit (Former Defence Archives Centre), the Australian Army History Unit and 429 Squadron, Australian Air Force Cadets are the only remaining resident Defence units.

Background

On 17 August 1999 the Federal Parliamentary Works Committee (PWC) held an inquiry into the proposed Staff Colleges Co-location Project to Canberra. The PWC felt it necessary to investigate fully the basis of the need to collocate the Defence staff colleges in Canberra and to satisfy itself that adequate measures be implemented to preserve the historic Fort Queenscliff precinct. The PWC recommended that during negotiations concerning the transfer documents with the State of Victoria, the Commonwealth should insist on the inclusion of caveats and covenants in the documents to preserve the heritage value of the property similar to those that applied to former lighthouse stations.

On 2 March 1999 the Minister for Defence, John Moore MP, wrote to the Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett advising that the Commonwealth proposed to transfer properties at Queenscliff and Point Nepean at no cost to the Victorian Government. On 8 April 1999 the Premier acknowledged the offer and noted that an investigation of issues was required before providing a detailed response. There had been some initial interest in the site, but due to the annual maintenance cost and heritage upkeep estimated at \$1.5m every five years, the Victorian Government did not want Fort Queenscliff and later accepted some portions of Point Nepean after significant funding for restoration works were provided by the Federal Government.

Public Access

Apart from Anzac Day and other authorised events, Fort Queenscliff has never been fully open to the general public. Today as a Defence facility, resident units and visitors must abide by Safe Base protocols (often stylized as SAFEBASE) a three-tiered security alert system designed to manage risks from terrorism, political violence, or individuals threatening personnel and assets. Even at the lowest Level (Alert) yellow, all visitors must be escorted. FQHA holds a licence with Defence to conduct escorted tours for which it has been doing for over 40 years with annual visitor numbers often exceeding 10,000.

Governance and Maintenance

Fort Queenscliff is categorised by Defence as a Remote Site. The Senior Australian Defence Force Officer (SADFO) resides at Simpson Barracks in Watsonia and the Base Management staff are located at Fishermans' Bend. There is no Base Management representative on site and both routine and emergency maintenance is undertaken through contracted Estate Maintenance and Operational Services.

Fort Queenscliff is listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List for Natural, Indigenous and Historic heritage values. Under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), Defence has an obligation to protect and conserve its valuable heritage assets through a current Heritage Management Plan (HMP). The Fort Queenscliff Heritage Management Plan dated 16 Sep 2019 clearly addresses these aspects including schedules for priority works and preventative maintenance, maintenance guidelines and action plans.

The Black Lighthouse, constructed in 1862, is not the responsibility of Defence as the structure is maintained by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA). Unlike the White Lighthouse built at exactly the same time it is not included in the Victorian Heritage Register because it resides within Commonwealth land. This anomaly must be considered during the divestment process.

Since the release of the Defence Strategic Review in April 2023, there has been a gradual decline in Heritage maintenance culminating in the recent cancellation of the \$1.4 million restoration works to the 1888 Signal Station.

Point Nepean Divestment

The Federal Government has spent over \$30 million on heritage restoration works and remedial action to enable public access to Point Nepean since it was divested by Defence in 2004. Parts of Point Nepean were declared as National Park in 1988 during the Bicentennial celebrations and the Federal Government offered to sell the land to the Victorian Government in 1998 and again in 2001 but the State rejected both offers.

In 2002, Defence proposed selling 311 hectares (770 acres) of land for development, retaining 1.6 hectares (4 acres) which contained contaminated soil and unexploded ordnance. The proposed sale was abandoned in 2003 following strong community protest. At that time buildings in the Quarantine Station were deteriorating as there were no resident users and the future of the complex was uncertain. Then in 2004, 90 hectares (220 acres) of Defence land was transferred to the Commonwealth Government Point Nepean Community Trust. With \$30 million at its disposal, the Trust was able to undertake remedial

work at the Quarantine Station funded by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA).

The former Quarantine Station was formally transferred to the Victorian Government on 8 June 2009. The Commonwealth also transferred 205 hectares (510 acres) of bushland (the former Firing Range area) to Parks Victoria and the remaining 17.6 hectares (43 acres) at the Park entrance to the Mornington Peninsula Shire for community use.

In 2014, there was once again a groundswell of protest when the then Napthine Government proposed to lease 64 hectares to the Point Leisure Group. The newly elected Andrews Government scrapped the proposed \$100 million development. Today Parks Victoria is primarily responsible for the upkeep and management of Point Nepean National Park, including the Quarantine Station and the historic Point Nepean defences on behalf of the Victorian Government. Unfortunately the heritage sites are gradually falling into disrepair and being placed off limits to the public due to chronic State underfunding.

Fort Scratchley

The Federal Government spent nearly \$12 million on the major restoration of Fort Scratchley between 2004 and 2008 after the departure of resident defence units. It was initially leased to the City of Newcastle who could not manage the upkeep. In January 2004, the City of Newcastle and the Federal Government executed an agreement whereby the Federal Government would restore Fort Scratchley then transfer ownership to Council. The project's cost increased significantly over time due to delays caused by vandalism and the discovery of unexpected site decontamination needs.

The Federal Government originally agreed to a restoration budget capped at \$5.51 million. Due to escalating costs, there was later a second agreement to increase its contribution to nearly \$10 million. By the time the site reopened in June 2008, total upgrade works were reported to be almost \$12 million. Today Fort Scratchley is the most visited destination in Newcastle attracting more than 1,800 visitors in one day for events like Australia Day. Its ongoing success is due mainly to the efforts of the Fort Scratchley Historical Society, an organisation not dissimilar in form and function to the FQHA.

Transfer of Responsibility

The divestment of both Point Nepean and Fort Scratchley provide a contrasting and valuable insight to the challenges faced by attempting to dispose of properties that hold significant heritage values. Of note the Fort Scratchley Historical Society played a pivotal role throughout the divestment process.

Neither the State Government nor the local Queenscliff Council have the capacity to undertake remediation works or heritage restoration to a point that can make a property easily accessible to the general public. If left to the Department of Finance a realistic private sale price is not achievable due the costs of maintenance and heritage caveats in place to restrict unacceptable development. On each occasion the Federal Government was called upon to intervene and provide remediation works funding.

An enduring example of success is the Sydney Harbour Trust established by the Federal Government in 2001 to protect Commonwealth lands, including former Defence sites. The members of the Trust are non-executive members appointed by the Minister for the Environment and Water in accordance with the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust Act 2001. This body consists of 8 members including the Chair as well as two members recommended by the NSW Government, one representing the interests of First Nations People and another who provides a local government perspective and experience.

Way Forward

Since the divestment announcement was made on 3 February 2026 that 67 or 68 Defence Estate sites were identified for divestment (full or partial) to modernize the ADF and free up land for housing, there has been considerable local and regional concern for the future of Fort Queenscliff, not dissimilar to the reaction during previous divestment attempts in 2000. Defence has been an excellent host for more than 165 years and if Fort Queenscliff is no longer required for military purposes, then it must logically change hands. Transfer to the State of Victoria without a considerable Federal remediation and ongoing maintenance funding is highly unlikely for all of the previous reasons stated. Similarly, the Borough of Queenscliffe with 3000 ratepayers will not be in a position to meet the Federal Governments stated objectives of maintaining heritage, retaining the museum and opening the gates to the general public.

A Fort Queenscliff Trust, under DCCEW, will be best placed to oversee remediation, restore heritage assets, prepare buildings that may be leased to educational Institutions and others, operate a museum, conduct tours and open gates to the general public for regular events where expanded visitation would further enhance the local economy. The FQHA stand ready to assist in a smooth transition from Defence and ensure that over forty years of protecting history and heritage is not lost in the process.

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President,

Fort Queenscliff Heritage Association Inc

15 April 2026

References:

[Fort Management - City of Newcastle](#)

[Heritage Tourism Destinations in Sydney | Harbour Trust](#)



Fort Queenscliff Signal Station April 2026



Fort Queenscliff Signal Station April 2026



Point Nepean Heritage Precinct April 2026



Point Nepean Heritage Precinct April 2026