

House of Representatives, Monday 23 March 1998

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr TED GRACE (Fowler)(1.01 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report, incorporating a dissenting report, on the visit of the Defence Subcommittee to Sydney Harbour foreshores Defence properties on 14 November 1997, together with the minutes of the proceedings. Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr TED GRACE —Almost since the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson, Defence has played a major role in development of the Sydney Harbour foreshores. The current site of the Opera House, for instance, on Bennelong Point was initially a military fort, and military occupancy on Middle Head dates back to 1801. To a large extent, military establishments have contributed heavily to the current shape of the harbour, its foreshores and environs. In many instances, that occupation has been beneficial. Military tenancy on North, South and Middle Heads, Georges Heights, and Woolwich has protected those areas from the last century of encroachment by civilian developers. The product of this fortunate occurrence has been the harbour that residents of Sydney are so fortunate to have—with headlands naturally vegetated, and now undergoing transition in many cases to become part of the Sydney Harbour National Park.

In addition, military occupation of those sites has also left a legacy of history—a heritage of military construction dating back almost to the time of first settlement. The headlands of both North and Middle Heads are worked with tunnels, and gun emplacements lie half-hidden over the headlands. In several cases, this construction dates back over a century. For a young country, this is an important source of history. In a way, this is almost our 'Tower of London'. But now the time has arrived when the current strictures on Defence funding has forced the Department of Defence to rationalise its land holdings. The Department does not readily give up prestige, inner-city, harbour-front sites on Middle Head, Garden Island, North Head and Neutral Bay, and treasured heritage mansions such as 'Tresco', with their long military history. Defence has been forced to make some hard decisions, and has determined that these sites must be sacrificed in the name of rationalisation. Through the proceeds of sale from these properties, Defence is able to finance relocation of military units to sites in often less salubrious surroundings further north, where they may better contribute to Australian security. In some instances, the proceeds of sale will be used almost entirely to meet the cost of remediation of the site, to rid maintenance sites of up to a century of accumulated industrial contamination.

Many residents of Sydney are currently concerned at this disposal action. This is understandable. The past century or so of benevolent tenancy by the Australian Defence Force has given a number of privileged harbourside residents an undemanding neighbour, allowing special access to the headlands and harbour foreshores.

The Defence Subcommittee was also concerned at what might be lost, were the Department of Defence to suddenly abandon this land, which contributes so much to the nature of Sydney Harbour, giving free reign to profit-driven development. This was the reason for the committee's visit to a number of Defence properties in November last year. The committee sought to determine whether this disposal would cause irreparable damage to one of the most beautiful harbours in the world—I might say, the most beautiful harbour in the world. This report gives their findings.

In almost all cases examined by the committee, Defence has consulted closely with local community groups, and the proposed developments are sensitive to environmental concerns. Where construction is proposed, to provide the funding which makes the disposals

economically viable for Defence, that construction is restricted to areas currently occupied by Defence infrastructure. In many cases, Defence also proposes to revegetate large areas, or increase open space provisions beyond what is currently in place. Under Defence's current development plans, unattractive and contaminated industrial sites, such as Cockatoo Island, and HMAS Platypus at Neutral Bay, will be cleaned up, and access will be returned to the public.

Some local groups have made clear their disapproval of Defence's disposal option. This is also understandable, as some privileged residents may lose the advantage of some views or open space. However, the committee believes the planned disposals will not result in a blemish to the harbour foreshores, nor cause loss of the character of the harbour. Considered collectively, the planned developments and associated remediation work will improve the appearance of the harbour environs. As some development is necessary to make the disposal viable to Defence, the committee believes the proposed option offers a generally satisfactory compromise.

The only area where the committee was critical of Defence's planning is in its current provisions for protection of some military heritage sites, particularly on Middle Head. The committee was concerned that some areas of irreplaceable heritage value may be lost through neglect under current Defence planning. Some sites on land already transferred to the Sydney Harbour National Park are already being damaged by overgrowth and vandalism in areas where the state government has been unable to adequately preserve and maintain them. This is an aspect of the impending disposals where the committee recommends urgent action, at the federal level, if this is needed.

I am also aware that the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) is considering use of the Federation Fund to purchase a number of these Defence properties as a gift for public use. Should he reach that decision, this would address the interests of the local residents unsatisfied with Defence's development plans. I commend the report to the House. (Time expired)

Mr BRADFORD (McPherson)(1.06 p.m.) —I am, of course, a member of the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. I actually went on this particular visit although, I might observe, not many members of the committee did. Having had a close look at what was happening, I went away with the feeling that all was not as it appeared or, more importantly—as I said in the dissenting report that I have tabled—I was concerned that the committee was not given full information about some of the intentions of the Department of Defence in relation to some of the properties we visited. I am not suggesting that we were told lies, but I do suspect we were not being told the full truth. Because of that, in my own time, whilst I was in Sydney with my family over the Christmas holidays, I revisited the Middle Head area of Sydney and took the opportunity to have a very close look at what was being proposed there. That further deepened my concerns about what was proposed and led me to the conclusions to which I have come in my dissenting report; in fact, I am convinced that any development on this site would result in a significant man-made blemish to the hoped for bushland appearance of the headlands and will be visible from the harbour.

The committee was told quite clearly that that would not be the case. We did not have time, as it was a busy trip around the harbour, to stand on the areas which were to be developed. When I was enabled to do that by people who I assume knew what they were talking about, you had very clear views of the harbour from the parade ground, for example, at Georges Heights. If you could see the harbour from the parade ground which is to be sold off to private development, surely the people who build homes on what was now the parade ground would be able to see the harbour.

I do not put in this dissenting report lightly; I do so because I think this does not all add up. Despite what the member for Fowler (Mr Ted Grace) said—I listened to his speech in my

office before I came into the chamber—it is not about protecting privileged harbour site residences. The issue is far from that. The issue is about preserving Sydney Harbour for the people of Australia and the people of Sydney. Somehow in all the talk that is going on between the state government of New South Wales and the federal government we are missing the real point.

I heard the member for Fowler allude to the time when Sydney Harbour was discovered. Later on Captain Arthur Phillip in reporting said these words:

Here all regret from former disappointments was at once obliterated, and Governor Phillip had the satisfaction to find one of the finest harbours in the world in which a thousand sail on the line might ride in perfect security.

Defence does not need the properties it owns on Sydney Harbour any more. That has been established. The question is what should happen to them. What I think the Prime Minister is saying but the message is not getting through is the following, and I quote his remarks on the John Laws program:

The foreshores are one of Sydney's prized assets indeed one of the nation's prized assets. We are obviously looking at a number of proposals in that area because it would be a great gift to the people of Sydney and to the people of Australia.

That can happen. The Federation Fund is the way that those resources can be provided. I want to take the opportunity in the few brief moments I have to refer to my dissenting report and indicate very clearly to the parliament and to the people of Australia that things are not happening there as they ought to. I know that the member for Warringah (Mr Abbott) is aware of the concerns about what is going on at Middle Head. It is not only Middle Head but also other areas. The concerns I am expressing in my dissenting report are specifically related to Middle Head and Georges Heights. (Time expired)

Mr LEO McLEAY (Watson)(1.11 p.m.) —I am glad to hear that the member for McPherson (Mr Bradford) has moved away from the pro-development views that he had when he was a councillor on Manly municipal council. The point he makes here today is right: this issue should not be left in the hands of the defence minister; it should be dealt with at heads of government level. That is why the Premier of New South Wales in his letter to the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) late last year said:

It is my strong belief that due to the national and international significance of Sydney Harbour determinations regarding the future of our defence land around the foreshore should be made between ourselves at a head of government level.

I believe that the disposal of land around Sydney Harbour is too significant an issue for the people of Sydney, New South Wales and Australia to be left in the hands of a bunch of minor bureaucrats in the defence department who, unfortunately, are willing to bend the truth a little bit, as the member for McPherson pointed out with the North Head site.

I was on that inspection with him and we were led to believe that you would not see any of this from the harbour. The truth is, as the member for McPherson said, they were very keen to keep us away from the parade ground. When you stood on the parade ground, if you could see the harbour they were going to see the buildings that were built there from the harbour. This land was initially owned by the New South Wales people. It was taken over by the Commonwealth via sections 69 and 85 of the constitution in 1901, and it is land that the people of New South Wales should have returned to them if the Commonwealth finds that the land is surplus. It was taken under the constitution; it should be given back as a gift.

We should not be using the Federation Fund to purchase land that the Commonwealth already owns to give back to the people of New South Wales. That is a ridiculous use of that fund. As members of the National Party have complained both in this parliament and in the New South Wales parliament, there will be no money for the bush. The only person who has not complained about this is the member for Paterson (Mr Bob Baldwin) because he is not the

least bit interested in any of the things that might affect the bush. Mr Deputy Speaker Nehl, I know that you are probably very concerned about this, as are your National Party colleagues in New South Wales. The federal government should not be using the Natural Heritage Trust Fund to buy land that they already own so that they can hand it back.

I believe the New South Wales government have taken the right approach when the Premier said to the Prime Minister that a lot of this land being handed back is surplus to the Commonwealth's use. We should attempt to re-establish the Neilson concept of a green belt around the Sydney Harbour. That is what we should be doing in the most pre-eminent harbour in this country. The New South Wales government have tried to do some things in the past, as did the Commonwealth government in the Fraser years to help re-establish that concept. The New South Wales government bought Neilson Park, Chowder Bay and Langs Point in 1978-79, and the Gap Bluff in 1982. They kept the remaining parts of Kelly's Bush in private ownership in 1983. The hermitage foreshore and quarantine station was acquired in 1984, and major acquisitions in Leichhardt including Black [start page 1265] water Bay, Mort Bay and Peacock Point were achieved.

What we should be doing is adopting the New South Wales government's guiding principles to development around the harbour. Those principles provide for maximum public use of and access to land on the foreshore; that land should be made available for public space and should be retained or placed in public ownership; public access links between existing foreshore open space should be retained and enhanced; significant bushland and other natural features along the foreshore should be conserved; any change in foreshore land use should protect and enhance the visual qualities of the harbour which my friend the member for McPherson has mentioned; and all items of heritage significance should be conserved and enhanced.

These things are not happening under the Commonwealth government's attempts to transfer this land from the Commonwealth to the states. The Commonwealth government should pick up the comments made by the New South Wales Premier and deal with this at a heads-of-government level. Disbursement of this land should be taken out of the hands of the defence department and dealt with at that level. The people of Sydney should have returned to them—not at a cost to the Commonwealth or anyone else—land that they ceded in 1901.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl) —Order! It being 1.15 p.m., in accordance with standing order 102C the time for consideration of committee and delegation reports has concluded. Does the member for Fowler wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr TED GRACE (Fowler) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER —In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.