

*Tabled in the Senate
13-3-2000*

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO THE
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE
REPORT**

**DEFENCE SUB-COMMITTEE VISIT TO
SYDNEY HARBOUR FORESHORES
DEFENCE PROPERTIES**

14 NOVEMBER 1997

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Over the last century, the Commonwealth has been custodian of some of the foreshore areas of greatest natural and heritage significance in Sydney Harbour. Those lands have been used by the Department of Defence for the activities of both the Army and Navy. Defence is relocating from those sites as part of the Government's program to improve the defence of Australia.

The Government recognises that Sydney Harbour is the quintessential image of our nation abroad and remains one of the most important gateways to our nation. It will be the centre of international attention during the 2000 Olympic Games. For these reasons, the government remains committed to preserving the Harbour and its foreshore for future generations.

As a clear sign of this commitment, the Government announced in September 1998, as a Federation fund initiative, that it will be establishing a Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. The Trust will maximise public access and preserve and rehabilitate the natural and heritage values of five foreshore Defence sites - North Head, Middle Head and Georges Heights, Woolwich and Cockatoo Island. The Commonwealth Government is committed to working with the NSW Government in relation to these sites to be transferred to the Trust.

The Committee was also of the view that the Authority should be separate from Defence. The Commonwealth Government's decision to establish a Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, responsible to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, accords with the Committee's comments. The Trust will have responsibility for determining the future uses of these sites. It will assume management and planning responsibilities and will be required to develop management plans for the sites within 18 months of its establishment. In developing those plans, the Trust will conduct heritage and environment assessments of the sites and undertake extensive community consultation. Until the Trust is established, an Interim Trust has been formed and a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministers for the Environment and Heritage and Defence has been agreed which will guide activities in relation to the five sites.

The Trust will commence its operations with a 'clean slate' in determining future arrangements for the five sites. Accordingly, all previous proposals developed by the Department of Defence are now redundant, although environmental and heritage assessments undertaken by Defence will assist the Trust in developing its plans.

The Government welcomes the fact that the report of the Committee is generally supportive of the Department of Defence disposal arrangements. Specifically, the Committee has recommended that the disposal of Defence properties at Georges Heights and Middle Head be revised to provide better guarantees than currently exist for the conservation and preservation of the sites' military heritage structures. The Government supports the Committee's recommendation, and notes that detailed planning on heritage and environmental protection and preservation measures will be developed by the Trust.

In regard to the specific sites mentioned by the Committee, the following comments are made.

North Head

The concerns expressed in regard to measures which could be initiated to prevent North Head being developed in the long term will be a matter for discussion between the Trust and State Government.

Middle Head and Georges Heights

The Government notes that the Committee largely supported Defence's contention that the limited development proposed for Georges Heights was unlikely to significantly degrade the natural appearance of the headland.

The Middle Head and Georges Heights Steering Committee, established in 1995 by the Department of Defence to determine the future options for the precinct, comprised representatives from the three levels of government, State and Federal officials and community representatives. The preferred outcome developed by this Steering Committee proposed that much of the natural bushland be retained as part of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore. The Government agrees that unless there is a commitment to provide and maintain adequate resources for the maintenance of such areas, further handing over of natural assets to the National Parks and Wildlife Service may not be the best long-term solution for these significant assets.

Defence has undertaken a major heritage assessment of the area which specifically addresses some of the Committee's concerns in regard to the military heritage items. The Trust will draw on these assessments in its management planning process.

HMAS Platypus

In October 1998, the NSW Land and Environment Court upheld an appeal by Defence against North Sydney Council's refusal to approve the development of 95 dwellings on the HMAS Platypus site following de-commissioning of the Navy base in mid-1999. The Government notes that the Committee was of the view that the development will enhance the environs of Neutral Bay.

Woolwich

The Government is aware that the planning for the future land uses for the now-vacant site at Woolwich has given rise to claims that public land, once vacated by the military, should be returned to local residents as open space. The Government notes the Committee's view that the previous Defence disposal plans represent an acceptable compromise in terms of provision of open space and future development.

The Trust will determine the site's future use through its own the management planning process.

Cockatoo Island

Defence has now completed a comprehensive environmental characterisation of the Island to assist the Trust determine the future land uses for the Island. Limited demolition of the timber wharves and some other structures have been necessary for health and safety reasons. The works program was discussed with the Parliamentary Works Committee, State Government officials and the Australian Heritage Commission. The future of this property will be determined by the Trust as part of its management planning process.

Garden Island

The Government has also allocated \$6 million from the Federation Fund to the Department of Defence to establish public access to the northern portion of Garden Island. Planning for public access has commenced with the NSW Government and the Australian Heritage Commission represented on a steering committee.

Other Harbourside Development

The Government acknowledges the comments made by the Committee in regard to the residential development at Birchgrove in Balmain. In particular, it notes that the degree of foreshore access and public open space is considerably less than is expected from any development Defence has proposed on Sydney Harbour. The Government shares the view of the Committee that there is a lack of consistency in the interpretation of open space and foreshore access requirements for developments on the harbour.

COMMENT ON DISSENTING REPORT

Mr John Bradford MP, Member for McPherson, has submitted a Dissenting Report in respect of the disposal of Georges Heights and Middle Head, and in particular the previous proposed residential development by Defence.

The Georges Heights and Middle Head Steering Committee looking into the future use options of the area was very aware of the need to retain the bushland appearance from the harbour and the preferred outcome that resulted from its work meets that need.

The separate advice referred to by Mr Bradford and on which he relied upon for his Dissenting Report and subsequent statement in the House was wrong. The Headquarters Training Command parade ground at Georges Heights is part of the ridgeline which was to be replanted to protect the bushland appearance of the headland.