The History of Heritage

Wilf Prest

Australia's Indigenous peoples may well have the world's longest history of heritage conservation. But all human beings weave tissues of legend and story around places and structures valued primarily on account of their past associations, whether with dreamtime ancestors, medieval saints, modern politicians and sportsmen, or more prosaically, a tribe, clan or family–parents, grandparents, more distant ancestors and relatives, even our own younger selves. Thus cultural or social memory gradually accumulates over time.

Attempts to protect such embodied collective memories also have a long history. In the later sixteenth century the government of England's Queen Elizabeth I made desultory efforts to preserve ancient monuments from Protestant iconoclasts. Not until the second half of the twentieth century, however, did Australian governments generally accept some responsibility to safeguard built structures from demolition or despoilation, thus preserving their cultural capital for the benefit of present and future generations. In South Australia the Dunstan Labor government, and the Tonkin Liberal government which succeeded it, both took built heritage conservation quite seriously, as did their Federal counterparts under Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser.

Since then there has been a real shift in attitude, certainly at Federal and State levels. Of course this is a broad generalisation, to which there are doubtless exceptions. But there seems to be increasing indifference among policy makers to the fate of older structures, and some consequent downgrading of heritage conservation as a political priority. Thus in 2004 the Commonwealth government 'froze' the Register of the National Estate (established by the Whitlam Government in 1975), and from 2012 that Register will cease to have any legal significance. In South Australia the Rann government's post-election decision in 2010 to remove the term 'Heritage' from the official title of the ministerial portfolio previously devoted to 'Environment, Heritage and Natural Resources' might be regarded as an equally telling symbolic action.

Various possible explanations for this apparent change of sentiment suggest themselves. No doubt the rise of neo-liberal economic rationalism from the late 1970s onwards has made it harder to justify restraints on market-mediated outcomes, particularly those involving economic returns from property development. Pressures to reduce the tax burden, strongly backed by the Murdoch media empire, may have effectively shrunk the total pool of public funds from which heritage conservation can be financed. More specific to South Australia were the problems for a small economy, excessively dependent on the manufacture and sale of consumer durable goods, created by the Hawke-Keating government's abandonment of protectionist tariffs and deregulation of the finance sector in the early 1980s. Sharply rising unemployment levels impelled the Bannon government, which came to office in 1982, to place an overriding emphasis on economic development, especially in the construction industry, at a time when funding for major commercial building projects became more readily available than ever before. Sharon Mosler's account of *Heritage Politics in Adelaide*[1] covers much of this ground, albeit in a somewhat partisan fashion, as Dr Bannon himself vigorously pointed out recently when he launched Dr Mosler's book. While we may well mourn the fate of the Aurora Hotel in Hindmarsh Square and the Myer Building in Rundle Mall, it was under the same Bannon administration that the relatively sensitive and successful redevelopment of the East End Market took place.

At the same time it is hardly surprising that those who succeeded Dunstan and Tonkin as leaders of the State's two main political parties displayed less personal commitment than their predecessors had done to the cause of built heritage conservation. Apart from increasingly significant economic development and employment imperatives, they doubtless wished to strike out on their own account, rather than merely following in the footsteps of a former premier. It may also have seemed that, with the passage of legislation establishing machinery to identify and list buildings of heritage value, the battle had been effectively won, and it was time to move on to more pressing causes. The enemies of heritage conservation were also increasingly vocal, not least among them the odious Tim Marcus-Clark, personal architect of the State Bank disaster, who before that debacle gained considerable and generally supportive media coverage for his claims that Adelaide was in imminent danger of being transformed into a 'museum under a glass dome', thanks to the malign activities of the anti-development "heritage lobby".

Besides the blatantly self-interested, there were and are people who simply fail to see *any* compelling reason for preserving physical relics of the past, especially if space currently occupied by such structures can be put to some alternative and arguably more beneficial (or profitable) use. Those of us who might usually take a contrary view should not assume that only persons of limited intelligence or basely venal motives lack an appreciation of the cultural and social importance of preserving past artefacts and buildings from the ravages of time and misguided "development". Like the Taliban commander who blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan, or the radical protestants who smashed medieval stained-glass windows and demolished market crosses in Reformation Europe, present-minded iconoclasts are often men with a mission, who see themselves as serving a higher good, whether against idolatry, superstition, or mere sentimental nostalgia for a past that has no relevance to the present. Thus the philosopher and social critic Jeremy Bentham spent a lifetime denouncing his former teacher William Blackstone, who sought to expound and explain the law by recounting its history, whereas Bentham believed that 'Our business is not with antiquities but with Jurisprudence...'. He went to claim, in typically clotted prose, that 'our first concern is to learn, how the things that are in our power *ought* to be...the knowledge of what they have been is of no further use, than as by pointing out the causes by the influence of which they have been brought to what they ought to be, in the few articles of ancient date in which they have been what they ought to be, and by which they have failed of being what they ought to be in the many instances in which they have *not* been what they ought to be ...' (this sentence continues for another 8 lines, but you probably get the general idea).[2]

South Australia owes a particular debt to Bentham, whose utilitarian doctrines strongly influenced Edward Gibbon Wakefield's proposals for systematic colonisation. But the problem with Bentham's approach to social engineering is that of calculating exactly how 'the greatest good of the greatest number' is to be achieved, or indeed what values should be attached to the component elements of this apparently straightforward 'felicific calculus' in any particular case. The demolition of Union Hall in November 2010 was only possible because Paul Caica, the minister responsible for overruling the recommendation of his own heritage advisory committee, accepted the claim of the University of Adelaide that the economic and social benefits likely to flow from scientific research conducted in a new building

erected on that site comprehensively outweighed any possible cultural or social damage stemming from the loss of a unique work by Adelaide's only internationally-recognized modernist architect (Louis Laybourne-Smith), a strategically-sited multi-purpose building which had played a vital role in campus and city life, together with a concomitant reduction in student amenities and opportunities. The university's vice-chancellor, Professor James McWha, asserted that those opposing demolition were solely motivated by emotional attachment to an inefficient structure and the past which it represented, as against a realistic appreciation of the solid future benefits which the work of Professor Tanya Monro and her photonics research team in their newly-constructed facility would bring to the community. But how well grounded was his faith in those benefits, and how widely are they likely to extend? Moreover, how do we weigh up against those intangibles the loss of a significant part of the university's and the city's history?

In the preface to his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money[3]*, the economist John Maynard Keynes proclaimed that 'The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones...'. While elsewhere professing uncertainty as to whether knowing nothing but the present or knowing nothing but the past was the more likely to breed conservatism, Keynes himself may best be described as a radical small-l liberal in both politics and economics, with a considerable and well-developed appreciation of both past and present. But the notion of a fresh start, looking forward, clearing away the lumber and mistakes of the past which stand as obstacles on the road to a bright new future, can appeal to politicians of all parties and persuasions. In the 1990s Tony Blair's 'New Labour' sought to project a 'Cool Britannia' image at home and abroad, emphasising the contemporary in art, design, science and technology, while strenuously downplaying traditional tourist-poster images of Britain as a land of heritage and history.

Is it too far-fetched to speculate that something of this same mind-set may have rubbed off on our own current state government, perhaps during one of Mike Rann's occasional visits to his birthplace, or Mr Blair's occasional excursions to Australia? In his final ministerial statement to the House of Assembly on 20 October, Mr Rann expressed 'his own view... that South Australia is positioned for greatness if we continue to look forward and not be distracted by a noisy minority who oppose and

have always opposed any change'. While not further identifying these backwards-facing obstructionists, it seems only too likely that the former premier believes they include what is sometimes termed the 'heritage lobby'. Let us hope a more enlightened attitude towards history and heritage in this state will become apparent under the leadership of Jay Weatherill. An excellent starting point would be 'Living Heritage Vision 175', a discussion paper recently released by the South Australian branch of the National Trust, which seeks 'to promote the perception that retention of built heritage is empowering (rather than any sort of obstacle)'.[4]

About the Author

A Fellow of Queen's College, University of Melbourne, Prest, taught history at the University of Adelaide until 2002 when he took up an ARC Australian Professorial Fellowship for a research project on the life and works of the eighteenth-century English legal author William Blackstone, moving to the Law School in 2003. His biography, *William Blackstone: Law and Letters in the Eighteenth Century* was published by Oxford University Press on 25 October 2008, to coincide with the 250th anniversary of Blackstone's first lecture as the foundation Vinerian Professor of the Laws of England. Prest's final academic appointment before retirement in 2007 was as Professor of Law; he is currently Professor Emeritus and Visiting Research Fellow in History and Law as well as President of the History Council of South Australia, and in 2011 he was elected to the Council of the Selden Society.

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[1] Sharon, Mosler, *Heritage Politics in Adelaide,* University of Adelaide Press, Adelaide, 2011

[2] J. Bentham, *A Comment on the Commentaries*, C. W. Everett (Ed.), Oxford, 1928, p. 136.

[3] John Maynard Keynes*, The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money,* available as an e book through The University of Adelaide Library eBooks @ Adelaide.

[4] Marcus Beresford, 'Enhancing South Australia as the "Heritage State"', *Heritage Living,* November 2011, p. 14.