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NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard

HISTORIC HOUSES AMENDMENT BILL

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Bill introduced and read a first time.

Second Reading

Miss CHERIE BURTON (Kogarah—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.35 a.m.], on behalf of Mr Bob Carr: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The purpose of this bill is to amend the Historic Houses Act 1980 to reflect more accurately the role of the trust in managing and maintaining not only houses of historic importance but other buildings, structures and sites. The bill also provides measures to streamline the trust's procedures. The Historic Houses Trust currently manages 15 properties, including house museums such as Elizabeth Farm and Vaucluse House, two museums of social history, the Hyde Park Barracks, the Justice and Police Museum and two sites of great historical significance, Government House and the Museum of Sydney, which is on the site of the first Government House. When the Historic Houses Act was originally drafted the trust was responsible for only two properties. In the 24 years since then the trust has acquired an international standing in the conservation and interpretation of buildings and places of historic importance, and is the recipient of numerous heritage and tourism awards. It has successfully combined research and scholarship with innovation and popular appeal.

The philosophy of the trust is to maintain a range of properties representative of different historical periods, architectural styles and social associations—not only house museums, in which we see a period recreated, but museums and programs that engage the community in our social history and cultural heritage. The trust is guided by the view that museums should be part of current debates in the community, open to new ideas as much as they are the repositories of important collections and memories of the community. As a result, the properties managed by the trust are living places that emphasise community involvement, in which visitors enjoy and learn through activities, seminars and workshops, and theatre and dance performances. The trust has a diverse and robust program of exhibitions, public events and festivals. Its publications are widely read and appreciated, and the trust's professional advice is a valuable resource.

The approach of the trust to the presentation of its properties means that visits are entertaining and may involve a range of educational activities. Students and teachers come away knowing more about the people who lived and worked in these places, understanding the significance of the buildings, the furniture and the objects they contain. About 50,000 schoolchildren attend one of the trust's 30 different education programs each year. The trust's management of Government House is a good example of the way in which the trust combines conservation, collection management and access.

Since 1996, when the trust took over management of the property, more than one million people have visited the house and grounds. The Governor continues to use the property for all principal vice-regal functions. The trust has extensively researched the property and its history and developed policies to guide its conservation. The property also hosts a regular and diverse cultural program including lectures, seminars, a popular subscription music series, specialist tours and festivals. The trust continues to improve its capacity to manage its various responsibilities. Last month it relocated its scattered head office units into one facility at the Mint, in a project that has seen the conservation, adaptation and refurbishment of the 1850s coining factory buildings at the rear of the Macquarie Street building.

Current collection management and conservation projects being undertaken by the Historic Houses Trust also illustrate its capacity to meet the many challenges presented to it in an exemplary fashion. In August 2004 it was announced that the four children of the late Caroline Simpson had agreed to gift their mother's collection and a \$1.5 million endowment to the trust. The total value of the gift is in excess of \$12 million and makes it one of the largest gifts ever given to a cultural institution in Australia. The material comprises an outstanding collection of colonial pictures, including 21 major paintings by Conrad Martens, colonial furniture and objects and a large number of paintings of other eighteenth and nineteenth century British colonies.

The gift also includes many twentieth century views of Sydney, such as etchings by Lionel Lindsay and photographs by Max Dupain. The collection will be used to enhance a number of the trust's properties and part of it will be placed in other institutions to provide the greatest possible access to it. The trust will also guide a project to restore Newstead Homestead in Inverell, where artist Tom Roberts painted some of his most famous works. This year the trust will contribute its expertise and \$120,000 to work in partnership with Inverell Shire Council, the New South Wales Heritage Council, the University of New England and others to assist the owners of the homestead, the Bruderhof community, to conserve this important historic house.

Proposed section 7 of the Act substitutes new principal objects for the trust to reflect its role in managing, maintaining and

conserving historic buildings or places and other property of the trust. It recognises that the trust has responsibility for historic houses and house museums, as well as certain other buildings, sites and museums of historical significance. The Act currently provides for ministerial approval for alterations or improvements to trust properties. Proposed section 10 of the Act will replace this ad hoc process with a requirement that the trust develop conservation plans for each property to be approved by the Minister for the Arts. The proposed amendment will allow alterations or improvements consistent with approved plans. By obtaining approval for a comprehensive conservation plan for an entire property, including details of how repairs and construction are to be appropriately carried out, the work can be seen in context and dealt with as the need arises.

The Historic Houses Trust, consistent with worldwide museum practice, disposes of objects such as household items that are no longer suitable or appropriate to its collection. The current Act requires that the Governor must approve of the disposal of any such property that was originally acquired by the trust by gift, devise or bequest without being subject to conditions. Proposed amendments to section 11 will require the trust to obtain the approval of the Minister, rather than the Governor, to dispose of such items which the trust no longer requires, including furniture and other household objects. The amendment does not affect current requirements relating to the Governor's approval for the sale of real property, that is, properties managed by the trust.

At present the legislation allows for the Minister administering the Public Works Act 1912, the Minister for Commerce, and the Minister administering the Heritage Act 1977, the Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, to each nominate a trustee. When the trust was established in 1980 the formal input of these administrations was considered necessary to support its work. The trust has operated for 24 years and has developed expertise and an international reputation in specialist areas. It is adequately equipped to assume full responsibility for its operations without the need for formal representation by other portfolios on its governing board.

The Department of Commerce, the Heritage Council and the Heritage Office play an important role in advising and guiding a wide range of government agencies without formal representation on their governing bodies. The usual consultative channels will continue to be available to the trust as with any government body. These two trustee positions are no longer required to be reserved for public servants. Proposed section 6 (1) provides that the responsible Minister nominate all nine trustees, but that at least one person have knowledge or experience in history and one have knowledge or experience in architecture. This will allow for representation from members of the wider community with professional expertise, and is consistent with other legislation in the arts portfolio.

The reform of the composition of the board of the trust has the full support of my colleagues the Minister for Infrastructure and Planning and the Minister for Commerce. The trust balances its conservation work with the community's need to look at, experience and enjoy the properties it manages. The amendments will effect necessary improvements to the Historic Houses Trust enabling legislation. A revised Act will provide the trust with the necessary foundations to build upon its excellent record in the management of some of the most significant treasures of the State. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned on motion by Ms Jillian Skinner.

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