

31 August 2020

The Hon. Shayne Mallard MLC  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

*Dear Mr Mallard*

**Re: STATE RECORDS ACT 1998 AND THE POLICY PAPER ON ITS REVIEW**

I refer to the uncorrected transcript of this committee of 20 August 2020, and in particular to the comments made by The Hon Don Harwin MLC, Minister for the Arts, in his opening remarks on page 24 of the transcript.

The Minister notes:

*Also of relevance, I worked for former Arts Minister Peter Collins. During that period, I saw Peter's close work with the Historic Houses Trust—although I was not directly involved as the arts policy adviser—and, of course, with Peter Watts, and was privy to his decision to widen the Trust's brief beyond house museums to include Hyde Park Barracks, the Justice and Police Museum and the Museum of Sydney on the site of the first Government House,. He saw the potential for SLM to play a wider role than the conservation and curation of a few heritage-listed houses. But it would be fair to say that Peter Watts, as his evidence alluded to, was less convinced and would have preferred to maintain a very small scope for the trust.*

The imputation that I was opposed to the expansion of the Historic Houses Trust's (HHT) portfolio beyond houses 'and maintain a very small scope for the trust' as stated by the then Minister is totally false and I hasten to place the facts on record. How, and why, Mr Harwin could draw this inference from my evidence to the Inquiry is a mystery.

The Hon Peter Collins MP, then Minister for the Arts, sought the Trust's view on taking responsibility for The Mint, Hyde Park Barracks, The Observatory (then all owned and managed by The Powerhouse Museum), and also the First Government House Project – that subsequently became known as the Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House. The HHT willingly took on all these projects apart from The Observatory, recommending that it should remain with The Powerhouse Museum because it had the scientific expertise which the HHT did not. That advice was

taken. Other cultural institutions (from memory - the State Library of NSW, Powerhouse Museum and Australian Museum, as well as the HHT) were all asked if they wished to take responsibility for the development of a museum on the site of the first Government House. The HHT advised the Minister that it did not believe a museum on this site was necessarily the most appropriate long term solution to commemorate this important, and contested, historic place. When the Minister advised his decision was for the HHT to develop the project, regardless of our previous advice, we embraced it with enthusiasm, bringing a very bold and fresh approach to the interpretation of the place.

As the then Director of the HHT no one could have been more pleased than I was to be given this wider brief. The projects and the massive growth to the organisation that resulted presented enormous, but exciting, challenges and opportunities to a relatively new and smallish cultural institution. The professional experience the HHT had developed acquiring and developing house museums in the preceding 10-15 years (since its establishment in 1980) was critical to building a skill base to manage these other museum types. Amongst other benefits from this expanded role was the elevation of the HHT into a more visible institution, with many resulting benefits. It also recognised that very specific professional skills and experience were required in the development and management of important historic places. This was the primary reason why, in my submission to the Inquiry, I argued against an amalgamation between State Records and the HHT.

I would be grateful if this letter could circulate to other members of the Inquiry and be placed on the official records of the Inquiry so the correct facts might be recorded.

Yours sincerely

Peter Watts AM

cc The Hon Peter Collins AM QC  
The Hon Don Harwin MLC