

Commercial solutions, public detriment

The future of the Windsor has aroused passionate debate, not only from the community, but now from the developers themselves (*The Age* 30 / 03 /2010).

The National Trust, an independent not-for-profit organisation with over 5 million members worldwide, has been responsible for saving countless heritage sites across our country and without whom the Windsor would probably have been demolished in the 1970s. The imminent election is irrelevant – we deal with heritage issues as they arise and our independence is fundamental to our existence – to use a sports analogy, we play the ball and not the man.

The developer cannot dismiss the hundreds of objections made to this development and the hundreds more who showed up on the steps of parliament last week to tell the government what they thought. Eminent individuals have opposed the project such as Geoffrey Rush, a passionate advocate for our city, and Bob Brown, Federal leader of the Greens, who rightly pointed out the national significance of this site and the importance of the wider parliamentary precinct within which the Windsor sits. Fundamental concerns were also raised in Melbourne City Council's officer's report, which did not support the development, and stated that "The development is excessively bulky, it should be reduced in height and set back further....".

Since acquiring it the developer has already had one permit approved for this site based on a remodelling of the hotel within its existing volume and with a business plan justifying a \$46m proposed upgrade. There was no tower proposed. The current proposal saw the economic case for redevelopment jump from a \$46m project to a \$260m project in three years, with an economic downturn in between. The solution to the developer's commercial problem is to shatter the discretionary height limits in the parliamentary precinct for the first time ever, and if left unchallenged will set a precedent for the whole of Bourke Hill which has to date preserved the scale and setting of our Parliament. Departure from this principle needs to be given greater consideration than it has been afforded.

At \$260million the economics of this scheme has clearly been a driving force in the approvals. The Trust recognises that historic luxury hotels must be periodically refurbished and that such an upgrade is overdue at the Windsor. However this proposal involves the demolition of most of the rear and one side wing of the original hotel, and addition of a 91 metre tower. Is demolition of a significant proportion of the hotel and construction of a new tower the only way to give the Windsor a viable future? Only 35 'heritage' rooms will be left in the retained wings. Surely there must be other options. When the Trust looked around the world at other heritage hotels, there were few that had gone for such a radical 'renovation'.

It has been an enormous frustration to the Trust that the numerous objectors have not been officially heard due to the one-sided planning processes. The Heritage Victoria permit cannot be appealed by third parties, nor have we been allowed to see their reasons, or their independent economic analysis.

The Minister's Advisory Committee (*not* an 'independent panel committee' as stated in the article) could have heard alternative viewpoints, but the Minister's Terms of Reference required that only the developers and Melbourne City Council be heard, and none of the 35 invited objectors were allowed to speak. Only after much prodding did the Committee reluctantly agree to let the National Trust speak. The Committee does not even bother reporting us an objector despite our seven page submission (available on our website.)

The alternative of a lower wider tower is one that was discussed at the Advisory Committee and the developer's article cites many good reasons why this option would not be any better, and we agree. Our position is that there should be no tower at all. The Trust's submission is very clear. The new tower, though carefully designed, would be almost four times a height limit which has until now retained Bourke Hill as a precious low-rise heritage precinct and appropriate setting for the Parliamentary precinct. Mr Brumby's announcement of a greater role for the City of Melbourne in a new joint Committee for larger projects is very welcome. Our Premier clearly acknowledges the system has been failing our city. We hope the reliance on a developers own economic justification for a building that could and should be redeveloped far more sustainably and sensitively is the last.