As the Minister responsible for Victoria’s non-Indigenous heritage, I was delighted to open the National Trust’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Symposium. It was fantastic to see so many enthusiastic people in attendance, including many from interstate and overseas, to share information about what is essentially a new concept – and a new challenge – for Australia’s heritage professionals and governments.

I would firstly like to congratulate the Victorian branch of the National Trust for taking the initiative to organise the event and creating a three-day program that was both thought-provoking and entertaining. The support of Deakin University’s Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific; Australia ICOMOS; and the Heritage Council of Victoria must also be acknowledged.

As many of you will know, at this stage the Federal Government has not adopted the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Certainly in Victoria, the State Government’s current focus is very much directed towards the protection and care of our tangible heritage, in the form of our most significant places and objects. However, it must be said that protection is now being provided for a much broader range of heritage. Since the 2004 amendment to the Victorian Heritage Act, the Heritage Council has had the authority to include movable objects on the Victorian Heritage Register, regardless of whether they are associated with a heritage place. This has meant that items like the 1891 ‘Monster Petition’, signed by 30,000 Victoria women in their fight for the State vote; and the Eureka Flag, a great symbol of Australian democracy, now receive the State’s highest level of heritage protection. We have also seen great progress in the diversity of places provided with statutory protection, with archaeological sites, maritime sites and cultural landscapes now regular additions to the Register.

I am pleased to report that this progress continues with great energy, thanks largely to the work of the government agency Heritage Victoria and the statutory authority, the Heritage Council. The contribution of heritage advocacy groups like the National Trust is also very important in the identification of Victoria’s diverse heritage.

Of course, our focus on the tangible makes discussion and debate about intangible heritage all the more worthwhile. There are certainly difficult questions to be answered when we contemplate ‘how to protect’ what we cannot touch or see in a permanent sense. This is a new avenue that opens up vast opportunities: there is really no limit to what we could classify as ‘heritage’.

Thinking about Victoria’s intangible heritage, of course a standout example is Aussie Rules Football, as was identified in the National Trust’s Heritage Icon Awards. We already have the MCG on the Register. Its heritage significance is certainly not just about the grandstands and the goalposts...but more about the stories that have played out there and what it means to Victorians to go there for a big game.

In Melbourne, we have our coffee culture and the ritual of tram travel. In fact, the 96 tram route from St Kilda beach to East Brunswick was recently named one of the planet’s top 10 ‘trolley car’ rides, in National Geographic’s Journeys of a Lifetime book. And recently we celebrated the inclusion of the first tram on the Victorian Heritage Register, the Toastrack Tram also known as Electric Tram No. 13.

But can we protect the experience of riding the 96 tram, or the ritual of meeting for coffee or even the well-tended animosity between Carlton and Collingwood fans? Many would say that last tradition is well and truly safe! In all seriousness, the difficulties in legislating protection for these ‘cultural expressions’ are obvious – and this is an area where the State Government would need to tread very carefully.

But there is another, very important way this cultural heritage can be preserved. And in many ways, I think the community as a whole is our leader in this. As a community, our intangible heritage is passed on in our public and private discussions, what we read and write, and through our participation in cultural traditions. With the rise of the internet and citizen journalism, for example, anyone can record and publish their own story and the stories around them.

However, the State Government can certainly play a role to support the community in documenting and recording that heritage. One way this is already happening is through Victoria’s Heritage Grants program, which provides funding for both collections and interpretation. Some examples of these grants in action are:

- The Koorie Heritage Trust digitising more than a thousand oral history tapes;
- The Chinese Museum creating a podcast walking tour around Chinatown, so visitors can hear all about the precinct’s rich history as they walk;
- And the Inglewood community capturing memories of the local eucalyptus distillery in its heyday, also through oral history.

We have also provided grants to community groups all over the State to digitise and catalogue their vast photo collections, so when the original photos have well and truly faded they will still be available for future generations.

Although all of these grants are linked to tangible objects and places somehow, what is most important about all these projects is the stories and memories they are capturing, in a very permanent way.

Once again, I commend the National Trust Victorian branch for its efforts to further this important conversation. I look forward to hearing more about the initiatives in the field of intangible heritage in the future, as we work together to preserve the stories and share the diverse traditions of our rich culture.

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