OPENING ADDRESS: “WHOSE CULTURAL VALUES?”

The Hon. Leo McLeay MP

Introduction
Thank you Mrs Domicelj for inviting Mrs Kelly, Minister for the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories to open this public conference today. She is unable to attend and has asked me to speak on her behalf. Mrs Kelly sends her best wishes to all delegates for a successful conference.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to be part of the first international conference that Australia ICOMOS has held. This has been a big undertaking by a non-government agency and could only have been achieved through the efforts of many dedicated people.

The opportunity is being given - today and tomorrow - to conservation practitioners and other individuals from many walks of life to experience the ideas and share the wealth of knowledge that our Australian and overseas speakers bring to the conference.

Many of the speakers know this country well. For others, it is the first time that they will have experienced our colonial architecture, our fascinating aboriginal heritage and the arresting beauty of our country.

Our Region
There is a growing awareness - both within Australia and outside Australia - of our culture, the value of that culture and the linkages we have with other cultures. I’ll come back to the value aspects and talk about culture for a moment.

There is a lot of discussion in government circles at the moment - and I’m sure in many other places too - about ways in which we could foster our national pride and show our country off to advantage.

Culture is many things to many people. It is embodied in many ways - through language, poems, songs, dance, art, crafts, in objects and places that we treasure.

Australia’s culture is many faceted. We have over forty thousand years of aboriginal culture - a rich culture which links all elements of life - and overlays of European and non-European cultures.

Within this multi-cultural society much is being done to promote, conserve and display our culture:

- by individuals or local communities who organise to “save” a particular site because of its historical or traditional associations;
- by groups such as ICOMOS who play a key role in relation to the built environment; and
- governments - through their museums and galleries, grants programs and other activities.

Federal Initiatives
There are a number of initiatives at the federal level concerned with the development of Australian culture.

Cultural Policy
My colleague Wendy Fatin - Minister for the Arts and Territories - is developing a statement of commonwealth policy in the area of cultural development.

Earlier this year a discussion paper was released for public comment. Over 180 submissions have been received and there have been numerous consultations with cultural organisations around Australia.

In essence the policy being developed will state the role of the commonwealth in Australia’s cultural development and the goals of commonwealth intervention in this area. The commonwealth must aim to create the conditions conducive to the emergence of a more creative society. A society in which public intellectual life will be enlivened and a society which will be better able to project its culture overseas.
Under this agenda cultural policy would enter the mainstream of national decision making. The commonwealth’s role is likely to extend beyond the ambit of the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories portfolio to areas such as:

- broadcasting,
- education,
- design, and
- international cultural relations ....

All of which have a significant impact on our cultural life.

**World Heritage Listing**

On the international front, and of direct relevance to this conference, is the role that Australia is taking in world heritage matters.

Australia as state party to the world heritage convention has an obligation to identify, protect, conserve and present world heritage properties. We have three properties on the world heritage list for both natural and cultural values ... but no property has been included solely for its cultural values.

While there has been some feeling at the international level that “newly discovered” countries can only present nominations based on natural criteria, the Australian government is consciously working to remedy that situation.

The Commonwealth Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories - known as Daset - commissioned a consultancy earlier this year. That consultancy provides an intellectual framework to enable assessment of Australia’s cultural sites against the world heritage criteria.

Our sites - be they colonial or twentieth century buildings, aboriginal rock art sites or dreaming routes - are undoubtedly or real value to us. To satisfy the requirements for world heritage listing, such sites need to be placed in the global context and their outstanding universal value clearly demonstrated.

The unique character of our world heritage properties - such as Kakadu, Uluru and the Tasmanian wilderness - is an important drawcard for tourism. These places offer sites and experiences that occur nowhere else in the world. Local and international tourists can become truly immersed in these places and have a cultural experience which will remain with them long after they have left the area.

World heritage listing is not the only way that we can acknowledge the value of our heritage. At the local or national level, for instance, we can also recognise and promote the significance of particular sites or buildings.

It is important that we work together to conserve those things that are integral to our culture - for Australians and for others to share.

**National Estate**

The Australian Heritage Commission, for instance, is charged with the task of identifying those places of significance to present and future generations - Australian places of historic, aboriginal and natural significance.

Collaboration is taking place between the commission, organisations such as the national trusts, and state and territory government agencies, to identify those places that we want to keep. By streamlining heritage listing processes, and by developing shared information resources, both government and the community will have better access to heritage information.

The Australian Heritage Commission is exploring ways in which community values can be taken into account. In fact, available in the foyer today is a publication called “what is Social Value?” - A collaborative work of the National Trust of Victoria and the Commission.

At the philosophical level, there are issues about value:

- How do you assign values to places?
- How do you compare totally different types of places?
- Whose values do you use?
These are critical issues. They are issues that we need to fully understand so that we - as individuals or representatives of organisations - can work together to protect and preserve our cultural environment.

Conclusion
The speakers over the next two days will put into a much wider context the whole issue of values. Those speakers will - I'm sure - challenge you and stimulate you.

On that note, I have great pleasure in declaring this conference open and wish you all a rewarding weekend.