Australia ICOMOS began with the Report of the National Estate in 1974 (the Hope Report), which recommended that 'we suggest that early consideration should be given to Australia becoming a member of ICOMOS'.

At the first Meeting of the Australian Heritage Commission on 27 July 1976 the 'Commission agreed that an Australian ICOMOS Committee should be established...and the Commission passed the following resolution: The Commission agreed to apply for membership of ICOMOS'.

A few weeks later Professor John Mulvaney rang me to tell me I had been appointed to the position of Director of the Commission. At my first brief meeting with David Yencken and Reg Walker (Chairman and Commissioner of the AHC) I clearly recall their discussing this as a priority task for me when I commenced.

David and Reg were both certain that if the Commission was to function well we needed a strong non-government network of both professional organisations and specialist voluntary bodies with similar general aims. They knew, and they were right, that you could pass laws and set up Statutory authorities but unless there was an informed and active community with inputs from an informed base of professional practice then you were unlikely to have sensible debate or outcomes on the conservation of the cultural and natural heritage. Progressively over the next few years the Commission helped establish bodies with interests in engineering and garden history, and helped promote the study of public history. But the link with ICOMOS was different; it was, in a sense all about the 'professionalisation' of the 'disciplines' that would undertake conservation practice ranging from historians and archaeologists to architects, planners, landscapers, archivists and engineers.

It was believed that the tiny pool of architects, historians and archaeologists interested in conservation and preservation at that time, would need to be expanded. So there was certainly a feeling that a Charter might form the ethical basis for a contemporary 'philosophy' of Australian conservation practice. It was also felt that there needed to be a set of public standards to assess whether projects conformed to high standards of both ethical and professional practice. At the time there was growing alarm over the competency and outcomes of much of what was being done in the name of conservation. Subsequently much time was spent both in writing the Charter and in the following early years of its existence discussing what sort of censure might be applied to either members or non-members for undertaking work which did not conform to the principles enunciated in the Charter. These issues were never really resolved but it was certainly a constant topic of discussion within meetings and at the bar after meetings of ICOMOS.

David Yencken set out his aspirations for ICOMOS in the first edition of its Newsletter where he said: 'ICOMOS is designed to be a democratic and non-hierarchical body in which all members actively participate. To that end members are invited to attend all Committee meetings. Committee meetings are held at approximately three monthly intervals at different sites of interest in different States'. In other words the body itself was to be 'educational' and a set of principles for a common professional 'language' was essential to that, hence the Burra Charter.

While there were numerous individuals and some organisations (like the National Trust) concerned about cultural conservation there was little professional training and no standards for the preservation of cultural property at that time. This of course later changed.

But the whole notion of a 'Charter' itself had antecedents. The great Swiss architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, aka Le Corbusier, is in many senses an international symbol of the new wave that swept Europe after World War I. Working in Paris from shortly after the War as both a painter and architect he produced his seminal philosophical works Vers une architecture and later Urbanisme. What most people did not read into his ideas was his early, brief, training with people like Joseph Hoffmann and his body of work outside of Europe in the 1930s that had made him into an internationalist and respecter of traditional building materials. His Mandrot house in Provence in 1930 was very much founded in respect for local materials and building styles. So it should not, but usually does, come as a surprise that Le Corbusier was one of the leading authors of the Venice Charter of ICOMOS.

The Venice Charter is 40 years old this year. At the 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments held in Venice in 1964 a set of basic principles for conservation practice, itself adopted from the Athens Charter of 1931 was agreed.

Today we can read the preamble to that document and weep. The sentiments, though noble, have continued to be a vain hope as we witness the efforts of the Taliban in Afghanistan and both parties in Iraq ignoring them comprehensively. Equally in many instances poor skills and poor decision-making has and does lead to some shocking outcomes in the 'name of conservation'. The saving of a fragment of a façade under a multi-story tower, the preservation of a series of facades that ultimately read like 'brooches' on a building all seem to resemble short-term expediency in the process of conservation. So the concept of the creation of a Charter seemed to have a reason both then and now.

But there was a deeper Australian problem: it was the language of the Venice Charter and its relevance in Australia at that time. In short it was felt that if we had adopted the Venice Charter as it was written then it would be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant (I think the technical term which would have been used is 'wankers'). Nevertheless the sources were strongly acknowledged in the early version of the Burra Charter.

At the first National Conference of ICOMOS held at Beechworth in 1978 the first of five resolutions agreed was for the writing of a conservation charter. A working party was duly established consisting of David Saunders, Peter Bridges, Judy Birmingham, Peter James, Miles Lewis and Jim Kerr to draft
the Charter. And that was when the fun really began! All of these people and many others put in much serious and hard, and hard-fought, work on this document.

Inputs were sought and received from all sorts of sources on the meaning of words and lengthy debates reaching pretty high levels of tension, but no actual blows, finally led to a draft document being thrashed out by about June 1979. No one ever, to my memory quoted Humpty-Dumpty (words mean what I say) but it hung in the air all the time. As Secretary of the body at that time my interest was in getting it finished almost regardless of content! It seemed to me more important to get some sort of document ‘on the table’ for people, the public or whoever, to have a go at, rather than imagining that Version 1 (as we would call it post-Microsoft) was going to be immutable. It was decided to distribute a draft and to adopt it with amendments, as well as give it a name at the then forthcoming meeting of Australia ICOMOS at Burra in South Australia.

Now in researching the history of this beautiful small town it turned out that it had originally been called Burra Burra and so when time came to finally give this document a name it was suggested first it be called the Burra Burra Charter Charter – I believe the members present could not think of anything less like the Venice Charter or more antipodean. Much thrashing out occurred at the Hotel Burra (‘phone Burra 9’, which gives you an idea of how long ago this was) and in the Miners’ Cottages where delegates to the meeting stayed.

The meeting which I believe was fuelled largely by Southwark or Westend, rather than chardonnay or pinot, had some passionate presentations on minor discrepancies in the Charter. For those who witnessed considerable disputes between Doctors Miles Lewis and Jim Kerr on the meanings of ‘restoration’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘adaptation’ it was a long afternoon and night. Nevertheless it was finally agreed to publish it but only if it could be reviewed after twelve months.

It was and has been reviewed many times. But importantly it became a sort of ‘bible’ for managers of historic sites quite quickly. This was largely assisted by the Australian Heritage Commission insisting on its use by all applicants for National Estate Grants – a truly great incentive.

Indeed the adoption was so quick that when the Australian Heritage Commission was holding a meeting in WA, Coolgardie to be precise, several years later, they were told in no uncertain terms by the Shire Clerk of that fair Town that everything he did as far as his town was concerned was driven by the Burra Charter. This led to some disbelief – but no doubting of his sincerity.

The small miracle in the annals of conservation was the degree to which the Burra Charter has attracted general support, though much specific criticism. The interest internationally has been quite extraordinary and in many senses helped put the professions of conservation on the map. It was sought by practitioners from all around the world and to some extent emulated. At international meetings from Asia to Europe you would find people citing the Burra Charter of Australia ICOMOS, possibly more so than the Venice Charter and all of this happened within ten years of its birth.

In my time as first a member of the International Council then Vice-president of ICOMOS the thing that all members around the world seemed to know about Australia ICOMOS, was that it had dared to ‘develop its own Charter’ an idea which then spread around many other national Committees.

While other specialised documents have been developed since, it seems clear looking back over 25 years that the Burra Charter, did achieve much of what Yencken and Walker set out to do, namely create an informed debate and some serious discourse about the ethics and practice of conservation and conservation management.

Endnotes
3 Extract from The Chairman's Note, Australia ICOMOS Newsletter 1.1:1 Summer 1979.
4 "Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognised. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity." Extract from the Preamble to the Venice Charter, May 1994.
5 ‘RESOLVED that Australia ICOMOS should prepare a statement suitable for interpretation and application by Commonwealth, State and local government authorities and private institutions. The statement should emphasise the need for a comprehensive approach to heritage conservation, and should discuss the contribution that can be made by various disciplines and skills, and should outline the process by which attention or conservation of historic structures or sites should be carried out.’ Australia ICOMOS Proceedings, Beechworth, April 1976, p. 169.