

## WHAT IS BEING DONE IN OUR NAME WITHOUT OUR KNOWLEDGE?

**Jane Burns**

One of the most unsatisfying aspects of life for me these days in normally entirely congenial Australia is the inability as a citizen sometimes to have a reasonable and well based input into public policy. Once was when there was easy access to the public service or, for heaven's sake, elected members of parliament in Canberra. And there would be discussion and follow up and even when the result was not entirely in line with your own desire, it was at least felt that concerns were really given a good hearing. Nowadays average access to public servants is hedged by spin, and major public policy by parliamentarians is handed down to us when decision has already been made. The channels of communication too often now used to announce policy decisions to the Australian citizens these parliamentarians represent is interview on current affairs programs on TV or radio, or expensive explanatory packages mailed in plastic envelopes to every household. Or perhaps no explanation, just implementation of policy.

A recent case in point is the particularly arrogant and invalid decision taken on the *Art/Craft Program Master Plan, and the Rotating Collections Policy in Members and Senators Suites at New Parliament House, Canberra*. You could be forgiven for not being up to speed with this. I'd like to set down the background facts very simply.

1. The architects for design and building concept for New Parliament House, Canberra were Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp. One of the partners, Pamille Berg, in close collaboration with the chief architect, Romaldo Giurgola, was the Co-ordinator (1982-1989) of the commissioned original works of art and responsible for implementation of their installation in the building.
2. During the 1980s over 60 major commissions were completed with over 120 artists and craftspeople and the works were integrated into the design of the major public and Parliamentary spaces in the new building. As well, over 3000 works of art were acquired for location within the building's 4500 rooms. This was done with careful planning and within guidelines agreed to by the parliamentarians. They understood the basic premise which was that commissioning and acquisition of works of art enhanced the building and provided an excellent showcase for Australian artists. The process carefully thought through and executed then is now recognised internationally as an exemplary method of planning, and the New Parliament House, Canberra example has since been generally followed as integral to all such major architectural projects.
3. The Parliament House Guide Service Records show that national and international visitors are impressed by the fact that our Parliament House is a place where the contemporary work of living artists and craftspeople is so prominent. The inference is that since this is a place at the centre of debate and decision-making for us as a nation, we as Australians obviously place an importance in our culture on the work of Australian artists.
4. In mid 1986, two years before the building's completion date in 1988, the acquisition process for the Rotating Collection for Members' Suites was stopped due to severe cut backs in the overall building budget. Even though all the decision-makers in the New Parliament House project had agreed to the *Master Plan for Works of Art and the Rotating Collection Policy*, which gave parliamentarians the right to choose from the Acquired Collection for their own suites, the first sign of trouble about money and the parliamentary decision-makers chose the arts to take the cut.

5. Fast forward to 2004 and the Presiding Member (Mr Neil Andrew) commissions a Report on the acquisition of works of art into the Rotating Collection for Members' Suites. Betty Churcher, a past Director of the National Gallery of Australia is appointed to undertake this.

Obviously a good choice, **except** that she is not briefed by the incumbent curator at Parliament House, or the original curator, Katrina Rumley, or the Artworks Advisory Committee, including Pamille Berg. Coincidentally, however, Pamille Berg is currently completing, at the request of the Department of Parliamentary Services, a comprehensive document setting down for permanent reference the key conceptual basis of the design for **every room and space in Parliament House**. Not an insubstantial work I would think and it would seem a huge omission for Betty Churcher not to have this document as background to any possible change in policy on the Rotating Collection. Betty Churcher had one brief meeting with Romaldo Giurgola and Pamille Berg in the course of her investigation for the report and her findings were not discussed with them prior to their being presented to the Presiding Member.

6. On 17 June 2004, the Presiding Member, Neil Andrew, reported to Parliament that in future decisions on the Rotational Collection will be made by:

- ◆ the Presiding Officers as Joint Chairs;
- ◆ the Deputy Speaker;
- ◆ the Deputy President and Chairman of Committees; and
- ◆ the Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services.

An Art Consultant, presumably not on staff, as opposed to the recently abolished Curator position, is to advise these five on any acquisitions, and an 'alternative collection of reproductions that would be suitable for hanging in Senators' and Members' suites'.

So, there you have it. Years of informed and sound planning and vision for an extremely long lasting and important area of public policy ditched, and in its place five people with no relevant experience or known knowledge given charge of expenditure on the Rotating Collection. Presumably the overriding consideration for them will be the tastes of the incumbent members. These tastes have been very publicly expressed by two present incumbents, namely Ross Cameron, Liberal Member for Parramatta, and Tony Abbott, current Minister for Health, as leaning towards landscapes and photographs of landscapes.

There are two major questions to be addressed here. What gives parliamentarians who are temporary residents of Parliament House the right to mess with policy and planning for the House as if it is their own fiefdom and not 'Our House'? And, why do parliamentarians feel they are equipped with knowledge and experience in the arts just because they have an opinion?

Answers to these questions, or even consideration of them, can only begin to register on the radar of the average politician if they appear to have a head of steam in the electorate. My cynicism about politicians has become so entrenched that I fear this will be never, unless of course after reading all of the above you feel strongly enough to ask your own member of parliament whether he/she is aware of what is being done in their name. And/or you might wish to write to the Presiding Member requesting that the Churcher Report be released to the general public for information, and that the proposed regime for the Artworks Advisory Committee be put on hold until its long lasting implications are understood.

The principle here is accountability – theirs and ours.

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