

# SUBMISSION TO THE EPBC ACT REVIEW

ANON-K57V-XQP5-U

## **Name**

John Davis

## **Organisation**

Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc

## **State or Territory**

Australian Capital Territory

## **Areas of interest**

The objects of the Act; Heritage

## **Attachment provided?**

Yes

## **Do you give permission for your submission to be published?**

Yes - with my name and/or organisation

## SUBMISSION RESPONSES

**This submission was provided as an attachment only. The attachment is provided on the following pages of this document.**



**INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE EPBC ACT  
SUBMISSION BY THE FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETIES**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Independent Review of the EPBC Act.

FAHS is the umbrella body for Australia's community history and heritage associations which number over 1000 and have approximately 100,000 members. Our volunteer members are deeply involved in working towards the best preservation and presentation of historic heritage buildings and sites, as well as undertaking a very large volume of associated historical research and collection, and transmission of our history and heritage in numerous forms.

In this submission the Federation is essentially responding to issues relating to a small number of the areas covered by the EPBC Act and its regime. These are related to the primary interests of our constituents, specifically Historic Heritage rather than Indigenous and Natural Heritage issues and broader environmental aspects, which are highly important, but in which we claim no particular insights or expertise.

The Federation's comments should be seen within the context of the overall Commonwealth heritage apparatus, including the Australian Heritage Council which undertakes a significant element of implementation of the EPBC Act, and the lack of appropriate resourcing for the Commonwealth heritage regime.

The FAHS response to the Review and the Discussion Paper is also largely confined to the broad issues raised in Question 1 and to a lesser extent Question 7 – the reach and effectiveness of the EPBC Act and its accompanying regime and how it can be improved.

**INITIAL RESERVATIONS AND CONCERNS**

FAHS and many of the associations and individual members of the community history and heritage networks were strongly opposed to aspects of the EPBC Act and its regime from the time of its introduction. There were two main reasons:

**First**, it was recognised that the EPBC Act represented a winding back of Commonwealth leadership and responsibility in Heritage to a remnant small, limited and misleading concern with ‘national’ heritage. Most responsibility was abdicated/delegated to the states and local government whose adoption and exercise of responsibilities, as we predicted, has at best been uncoordinated, uneven and half-hearted.

Accompanying the EPBC Act was the abolition of the Australian Heritage Commission and its replacement with the much less significant Australian Heritage Council, and the abandonment of the Register of the National Estate in favour of a drastically reduced ‘National Heritage List’. These represent an unfortunate abdication of Heritage responsibilities by the Commonwealth.

The **even further** demotion of Historic Heritage is demonstrated by the Discussion Paper, where the words ‘historic’ or ‘historical’ are only used twice in the 9,912 words of text in the entire paper and, of those, only one (in the Foreword) is in reference to historic heritage.

**Second**, the linking together of Historic Heritage with Indigenous Heritage and Natural Heritage in the EPBC Act was predicted, and has proved, to be confusing and difficult to administer and has contributed to a downgrading of Commonwealth support for Historic Heritage.

## **COMPOUNDING LOSS OF HERITAGE PRIORITIES**

Flowing from these, FAHS points to the fact that since the EPBC Act was introduced, there has been a steady decrease in the resourcing and recognition of Heritage by the Commonwealth government, particularly Historic Heritage. This downgrading has included the disappearance of the title Heritage from the name of the Department, and an ever-shrinking, downsizing and under-resourcing of the administrative unit responsible for Historic Heritage. It is now incorporated into a small and poorly resourced rump.

Resourcing is so poor it threatens the capacity of the ever-diminishing Heritage unit to fulfil its statutory obligations under the EPBC Act, let alone providing leadership in the field of Heritage. In these terms alone, the EPBC Act has been a failure.

## **NEGLECT OF COMMUNITY HISTORIC HERITAGE SINCE THE EPBC ACT**

The marginalisation of Historic Heritage is also epitomised by the fact that the Commonwealth no longer offers financial support for community heritage organisations as all the previous grant programs have been abolished. This was at first justified by the Williams case, although other Departments or community groups (including environmental groups but notably sporting clubs) seem not to have been much impacted. It appears that Historic Heritage and community heritage have been singled out for particular neglect.

FAHS feels it necessary to point out that community history and heritage groups make a significant contribution to our national history and heritage through their collections and their various forms

of communication of our national history and heritage. They contribute to our understanding of our history and heritage through the protection of built heritage sites and the provision of exhibitions within many of them. Their role in promoting tourism and heritage tourism is invaluable. These associations are an illustration that in a sense all history is 'national' – our national history is made up of the accumulated stories and structures of our past. As one FAHS Councillor has observed, 'Our national government should be supporting the things that bind us together as a nation and a very significant part of that is our shared history.'

## **FURTHER RESPONSES TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER**

The Federation wishes also to respond briefly to other questions as follows:

17. No, FAHS does not support further accreditation of state and local authorities as it represents further devolution of Commonwealth responsibilities and this does not have a satisfactory record.

18. No, FAHS does not see self-regulation as a satisfactory process. It is too readily open to abuse.

20. FAHS supports greater community involvement as it would enable community concerns to be voiced. However, the Commonwealth has first to win the confidence of the community by showing that it supports and respects them, rather than ignoring them.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

FAHS recommends the separation of Historic Heritage from the EPBC Act and that Historic Heritage be given a separate regime under its own legislation.

FAHS also recommends that this legislation should come under the purview of the Arts portfolio, even though Arts has also been significantly degraded in recent years and has lost its Departmental standing. We recommend this because history and historic heritage are much more closely associated with Australian cultural heritage than environmental protection under the EPBC Act.

For further communication please contact:

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