Professor Graeme Davison AO on Parklands Heritage and EPBC Referral 2026 10637

Impact of the proposed Moto GP on the Heritage of the Adelaide Parklands

The Parklands have long been regarded as a defining feature of Adelaide. They are the most visible evidence of South Australia's origin as a Wakefieldian 'systematic colony'. They are a singularly attractive recreational resource which Adelaidians have stoutly defended from unsympathetic incursions for more than a century. They are also one of the nation's most significant heritage sites, recognised by their inclusion on the Australian Heritage Register. Recent historical scholarship has reinforced their international significance as the single most outstanding specimen of early colonial town planning and as a precursor of the celebrated Garden City school of urban planning. As such, in my opinion, they are a credible candidate for World Heritage registration.

The current proposal to hold the international Moto GP on a section of the Parklands, and the consequent removal of old olive plantings and the construction of new roadways to facilitate the event have generated significant public concern about their likely impact on the heritage value of the place. I have been encouraged to offer an opinion on whether the proposed changes imperil the values that have accorded it National Heritage status and whether the Minister for the Environment should exercise his power to prevent them.

I am an Australian historian with a special expertise on the history of cities. Among other qualifications, I am a former President of the Australian Historical Association, co-editor of the *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, and author and editor of some twenty books, mostly on Australian urban history, including *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, *Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered our Cities* and *City Dreamers: The Urban Imagination in Australia*. I also have a long record of involvement with heritage issues, both as a commentator, for example as co-author of *A Heritage Handbook*, and as a former member and chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria. In 2011 I was made an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) for 'distinguished service to the community as a leading scholar and commentator on Australian urban

history.' I am familiar with the colonial history of Adelaide and its Parklands and their place in the broader national and international history of town planning. As a Melburnian, I have also observed the longer-term impact of the Formula One Grand Prix on another 'people's park', Albert Park, an experience with cautionary lessons that Adelaide should surely observe.

In determining whether the proposed changes to the Parklands should be permitted, I submit that the Minister should attend, firstly, to the high significance of the place. The more significant the place, the more vigilant he should be to ensure its integrity and the less alteration he should permit. Secondly, he should pay particular attention to the impact of the proposed changes on the features of the place that contribute to its unique heritage value.

'A Public Park to Beat Them All'

Adelaidians have long felt a justifiable pride in the beauty of their Parklands. No other Australian city honours its founder as Adelaidians do with their statue of William Light. But their significance is much more than local. Recent scholarship on the history of town planning in the colonial empire enables us now to recognise the unique importance of Adelaide's plan and its most distinctive feature, the Parklands, in a global, rather than merely local or national, context. In his recent book *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (2013) Robert Home reviews the broad history of colonial town planning from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and across the empire from North America and the West Indies to India and Australia and concludes (p. 29) that Adelaide was 'the most complete realisation of the colonial town planning model' and (p. 32) that its parklands were 'a public park to beat them all'. As has long been known, the Adelaide Parklands also played a significant part in the thinking of Ebenezer Howard, the founder the Garden City school of urban planning, as noted, for example, by Sir Peter Hall in his magisterial survey *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, 1988 and later editions, p. p. 89). Home's and Hall's insights add a further dimension to the significance already attributed to the Parklands in the 2008 National Heritage List (https://www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/heritage/places/national/adelaide-

parklands) and places an even weightier obligation on the city, state and nation to conserve them.

What are the Essential Heritage Values of the Parklands?

How the Parklands are to be used and conserved depends on the essential heritage values they embody. As historians have long observed, Colonel William Light, the colonial surveyor who laid out the Adelaide Parklands, offered no explicit account of why he created them and provided no directions on how they were to be used. From the context, however, including the Wakefieldian principles that animated the founders of the colony, from the statements of other contemporaries and from Light's remarks elsewhere, a fair idea of his intentions can be inferred. In part, the Parklands were simply a kind of buffer zone, designed to reinforce the sharp division between town and country, and hence to discourage land speculation, as directed by Wakefield in his theory of systematic colonisation.

It also clear, however, that Light envisaged the Parklands as performing a range of other aesthetic, sanitary, social and symbolic functions. In his *The Friend of Australia* (1830), the retired East India Company officer T.J. Maslen specified that

> All the entrances to every town should be through a park, that is to say, a belt of park about a mile or two in diameter, should entirely surround every town . . .this would greatly contribute to the health and pleasure of the inhabitants; it should render the surrounding properties beautiful, and give a magnificent appearance to a town from whatever quarter viewed.

In later writings (1843) Maslen described a green belt half a mile wide, similar in dimensions to the Adelaide Parklands, rather than his previous specification of 'a mile or two'. Whether Light was influenced directly by Maslen is uncertain. More likely both were responding to wider interest both in the United Kingdom and the Empire in planning towns along similar aesthetic and sanitary principles. For example, in 1833, shortly before the foundation of South Australia, the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee on 'the best means of securing Open Spaces in the Vicinity of

populous Towns and Public Walks and Places of Exercise activities to promote the Health and Comfort of the Inhabitants'. The mention of 'walks and places of exercise', along with references to 'health', 'pleasure' and 'beauty', suggest that Light anticipated an 'airy', natural, quiet and aesthetically pleasing environment conducive to passive recreation and leisurely sociability.

How should these essential heritage values influence the use of the Parklands?
Adelaidians have long believed that the Parklands are sacrosanct and deserve to be protected from uses incompatible with their essential aesthetic, sanitary and social functions. "Hands off the Parklands' has been a popular cry for at 120 years since the establishment of the Adelaide Parklands Preservation League in the early twentieth century.

Among the early supporters of the League was Charles Cameron Kingston, son of Light's troublesome deputy, George Kingston, and himself member for Adelaide, former premier of South Australia, and a leading federationist. In 1906, Kingston appealed to Prime Minister Deakin to amend the Eminent Domain Bill, then before the Commonwealth Parliament, to exempt public parklands from the wide power conferred on the Commonwealth government to appropriate both private and public land for its purposes, citing 'his father's part in the original preservation of the parklands and his constant care– ever green– for their guardianship'. His plea was successful and the bill was amended to exempt 'public parks dedicated to public recreation'. Long before the passage of National Estate legislation in the 1970s, the Parklands were evidently seen as a legacy of sufficient importance to deserve special attention by the national government. (*Advertiser* 7 September 1906).

In interpreting the heritage value of the Parklands, and in determining the appropriate range of uses to which they may be put, I submit that the Minister should attend, not only to the vision of their founders in the 1830s, but to the long debate among Adelaidians on the subject. In recent years, heritage experts have given greater weight to 'social value', that is, to the value which citizens accord to places, as well as their architectural and historical importance as evaluated by experts. If you want to know

what ‘social value’ attaches to a place, one writer suggests, then try threatening it. (Chris Johnston *What is Social Value*? Australian Heritage Commission, Technical Report No. 3, 1994).

Over the years, often in response to threats to the integrity of the Parklands, Adelaidians developed a consensus about their appropriate and inappropriate uses. The Parks Preservation League resisted the alienation of the Parklands to private activities and the incursion of activities that were inconsistent with its original purpose, which it interpreted as concerned primarily with the health and recreation of the people. So, for example, it protested the threatened construction of public abattoirs (*Daily Herald* 6 November 1919). It resisted the incursion of tramway lines through the south parklands as a disturbance to the natural park-like ambiance of the area. (*Daily Herald* 9 September 1915). It later opposed the erection of a licensed club, both as an infringement of the public character of the Parklands and as a likely source of disturbance. It opposed an application by Ashton’s Circus to occupy the parks on the grounds that it was a ‘money-making’ concern (*Daily Herald* 27 Match 1953).

Implicit in these debates was a set of assumptions about the core values of the Parklands: that they were to promote the health and recreation of citizens; that they were a public resource to be used free of charge and for public purposes rather than private profit; and that they should be safeguarded from activities, and especially from the encroachment of buildings and other physical structures, that were detrimental to these core values. Today, these values need to be applied in the light of changing patterns of human behaviour and social needs. They nevertheless provide us with criteria for assessing proposed changes to their traditional uses. Today, we might regard some of the activities opposed by contemporaries, such as tramways and circuses, as perfectly permissible, but the level and type of intrusion involved in the proposed MotoGP is of an entirely different order. It will be far noisier, smellier. more disruptive and commercial in character than those which troubled previous generations of Adelaidians. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an activity less compatible with the values it was originally designed to promote and stoutly defended by Adelaidians over many years.

What can be learned from Melbourne's Experience?

Melbourne has its own parklands, the greenbelt laid out by Lieutenant- Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe in the 1840s and defended in the early 1850s. By degrees, they have been whittled away for sporting facilities such as the MCG and the Tennis Centre, exhibition centres like the Royal Exhibition Building, hospitals like the Royal Children's Hospital and even alienated for private development, such as along the frontage of St Kilda Road. Albert Park, originally envisaged as a promenade like London's Hyde Park, has now been largely whittled way for sporting ovals, a swimming centre and, despite public protest, for the Formula One Grand Prix.

The fate of Albert Park offers a lesson for Adelaide as it contemplates allocating part of its Parklands to the MotoGP. When Melbourne stole the GP from Adelaide and put it in Albert Park, it was building on precedent, for the Australian Grand Prix had been held there in the 1960s using existing roads. When the GP returned, it was assumed that the same would happen: the roads would be the existing roads and the structures required for the event – grandstands, garages etc – would be temporary. Over the subsequent 40 years, however, the road circuit has been expanded and the buildings have become larger and more permanent to the point that the entire lakeside section of Albert Park is almost exclusively dedicated to motor racing.

It will be argued, no doubt, that the current proposals for the removal of plantings and construction of additional roads to accommodate the MotoGP are modest and that any further expansion of facilities will require new approval. But the lesson of Melbourne's experience is that, once the first decision is made, the augmentation of facilities becomes well-nigh inevitable and irresistible. In my judgement, the current proposal to hold the Moto GP in Adelaide constitutes the most serious assault on the heritage value of the Adelaide Parklands in their 190-year history. I urge the Minister to exercise his discretion, as Alfred Deakin did in response to the appeal of Charles Cameron Kingston, to safeguard this precious national heritage.

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