



Better Places to Live

Government, Identity and the Value of the Historic and Built Environment



Front cover image:

*Group examining the north gate of
Hadrian's Wall, Chesters Roman Fort.*

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Back cover image:

*A member of the Chinese Elderly Luncheon
Club, Liverpool, creating the Great Wall of
China, as part of "Memory Blocks", an
English Heritage project exploring
memory, place and identity.*

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An Essay on the Historic and Built Environment

Preface

Britain's historic landscape, urban and rural is recognised by those who live here and those who visit as one of its greatest cultural assets.

We should be proud of it, and we should cherish it, and it is the duty of Government, whether in London, Edinburgh or Cardiff to protect and promote it for everyone.

The reasons for this can be expressed in terms of economic, educational or social policy benefits. But this essay tries to sketch out – in an entirely personal way – the cultural argument.

I believe our built environment and rural landscapes – old and new – make most sense when interpreted in terms of people and events. Buildings and their settings are important because of the stories they tell, and the connections they make; who we are, why, and where we came from.

In many ways this clear sense of national identity is more important than ever. Far from fading under the pressure of globalisation national identity becomes more important for many who feel that change is threatening rather than reassuring, that cultural identities are being undermined by the homogenising forces at work in the world today. We all need to feel secure

somewhere. We all need to feel that our cultural perspectives are respected and that our plural identities can find expression. Everyone, everywhere in the world, has such plural allegiances – layers of loyalty, spreading out from those intense attachments to family and friends to local political loyalties to national allegiances. Everyone has sets of overlapping identities: our own individual personality and the identity that we gain from our relationships with others: family, friends, village or town, region and nation. A sense of belonging, a rooted belief in the nation of which we are a part – our Britishness – is a critical part of the process of creating the confidence each of us needs if we are to be able to deal with the accelerating pace of change. But Government needs to do more than that. We have to make the hard choices about how and where to allocate scarce resources. The public whose money pays to sustain our built heritage has a right to know why one building rather than another is funded. And that decision must not be made arbitrarily by politicians and bureaucrats but reflect, as far as possible, a national consensus on what is precious. Heritage defined for our times while still respecting the past makes a powerful contribution to that sense of belonging, that sense of national identity.

So our concern is not just to preserve and interpret the best of our heritage. Yes, we have a duty to the past, but we also have an obligation to the present and to the future. Our buildings tell us so much about who we are because they tell us, visually and materially, where we have come from. In 'Little Gidding', T. S. Eliot wrote of how 'while the light fails/On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel/History is now and England.' Today's builders and architects are entitled to be able to show us what they can do. And to do so in settings, and on sites, where all can appreciate them.

This tension – between old and new – is at the heart of creative activity in all fields, but never more so than in our built environment. I hope that the essay that follows will stimulate debate and encourage others to pick up the same issues.

Tessa Jowell.

Tessa Jowell

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Better Places to Live

Government, Identity and the Value of the Historic and Built Environment

Nearly four years ago, a few days after 9/11, the Prime Minister asked me to go to New York. I was asked to represent the Government in making sure that the families of UK victims got the best possible support. It was, as you would expect, a harrowing and humbling experience.

This is not the place to describe what I found when I got there – and was repeated on the many times I visited the city in the months that followed – but one thing in particular stuck in my mind and provided the seed for what I am going to write about here.

The Twin Towers in New York were not, when they were built, lauded as an architectural masterpiece. Their sheer scale drew gasps of awe, but they were not loved as fine buildings. Yet they entered the consciousness of New Yorkers over the years. Their destruction on that terrible day affected New Yorkers – and Americans more generally – in so many profound ways.

But I lost count of the number of people who told me that losing the towers themselves had left a terrible psychological scar, quite apart from the physical wound that the circumstances of their destruction involved.

One New Yorker summed it up.

“I’d never really thought about them before. Just part of the skyline. But now they’re gone, it’s as if they’ve took away part of me. Like when you lose a tooth, and your tongue never quite gets used to finding the gap.”

In some ways this is a perfect example of how the built environment, whether historical or modern, becomes part of our common culture and our personal cultural consciousness, and why we – politicians and public commentators – need to develop a vocabulary to describe the importance of the historic and built environment.

In a sense we need to do this for the historic and built environment more than we have had to for the wider cultural sector. Organisations such as English Heritage and the National Trust are trying to widen their membership and widen their appeal beyond their traditional middle class audience, and many private owners are keen to reach a wider audience. Diversity in the historic and built environment sector, has a long way to go before it has caught up with other parts of the cultural sector.

This essay is an attempt to highlight some of the values associated with ‘heritage’. I hope it will be a spur to organisations such as English Heritage, the Historic Houses Association and the National Trust who must work together with us if we are to transform the way in which we tackle the historic and built environment; and a reminder to Government of the importance of remembering who we are and where we came from.

A key part of our culture

For me, it goes without saying that the built environment, old and new, is part of what we describe as culture. Historic sites, objects, modern or historic architecture can move us in just the same way as

literature, music and the fine arts. But although they can all – in different ways – inspire and engage us with their beauty, truth, or visceral reality, there are other ways in which the historic and built environment is distinctive and separate.

To begin with, it gives physical form to our individual and communal histories. Every teacher, and every parent, knows that our landscapes, castles, cathedrals, great houses, canals, churches, mills, workhouses and much else tell us of our history with an immediacy that few books, pictures or pieces of music can match. There is an inescapable human need to know where we have come from. And perhaps even more importantly, this in turn gives us a sense of who we are as a nation, our national identity.

Think of the Roman settlements and fortifications in the North East – Segedunum Fort and Hadrian's Wall, for example. Much has been written about this period in our history, and photographs of the ruins and artists' impressions take us still further. But it is only when you stand amongst it, and feel the biting wind off the North Sea and see the lush green of the rolling landscape, that you get any sense of just how threatening and *strange* it must have felt for the Roman invaders. And when you do so, you are making a connection through time that no other cultural medium can match.

Sometimes our built heritage brings home to us uncomfortable aspects of our past: the cruelty of child labour or Union Workhouses, the cruel realities of slavery. But it also reminds us we have much to be proud of. Who can stare at the majesty of Salisbury Cathedral without marvelling at the courage, the sheer determination and ambition of the master craftsmen who created it.

The second way in which the historic environment is distinctive, is that we do not have to seek it out. It is constantly before us as we go about our day-to-day lives, as were the twin towers in New York. It is a great equaliser too, with the finest and most inspiring sometimes to be found in the least promising surroundings. In that sense creating awareness and engagement is easy. People merely have to lift their eyes.

Thirdly, it is an aspect of our culture that is in constant change. Because it is so much a part of our day to day lives it is ever being adapted in response to new demands and conditions. It is not just our past. We adapt and create and, in doing so, we make the heritage of future generations. And this is nothing new. The way in which the Victorians took inspiration from a mediaeval inheritance in their art and architecture but then moulded it to the needs and concerns of their own age had profound implications for their society. What Pugin, Morris and others did continues to influence us not just in terms of our attitude to the built environment but in the way in which we see civic structures that enhance our public spaces and our sense of public value. It is no accident that the founders of the National Trust were concerned not just about preserving a mediaeval building like the Almshouse at Alfriston – their first acquisition – but also about open spaces, accessible countryside and a clean environment. That matching of built environment to social and civic values is as relevant to the 21st century as to the 19th. For a layperson like me, the splendour of the Palace of Westminster seems all of a piece. The fact that its different parts were built more than 750 years apart enhances, rather than diminishes, its heritage value.

Because of these features our heritage has particularly strong potential for promoting the higher aspiration and wider public engagement I advocated in *Government and the Value of Culture*.

In this essay I want to set out the very particular role I see for the historic and built environment in helping to meet those aspirations. But let me begin by making clear what I am talking about.

“Heritage” is a wide concept which embraces the historic environment both man-made and natural, landscapes and buried archaeology, parks and open spaces, museum and archive collections, artefacts and works of art, and even our traditions, customs and languages. Everything, in fact, from Routemaster buses to *The Last Night of the Proms*. That is a perfectly legitimate concept of heritage but sometimes the definition can be so elastic as to lose focus. Here I want to write about something more specific: of the man-made historic environment, of buildings, public and private places which provide the physical context in which we live and also of how they feed into the needs of the 21st century people to sustain connections in an increasingly pluralistic society.

It has been argued that the political importance of national identity is waning in the face of the great global transformation of the last fifty years. In fact, in this rapidly changing world, we need a sense of belonging, a sense of our Britishness, more than ever before. Our historic and built environment reminds us of the ties that bind, that root us in our own place and time. Mori research published in 2003 showed that it contributes to our sense of identity because it represents what we, as communities, have contributed both economically and culturally to Britain in the 21st century. We need

a strong sense of national purpose which is based on a clear sense of national identity. I am convinced that our historic and built environment can help in this.

These buildings and spaces are not merely a backdrop for, or a roof over the head of, something more important. The quality of their design, the way they are maintained and the settings in which we place them have a huge impact on those who inhabit them – and that means all of us. A well-designed building or public space is not important merely for how it looks – it is one that will serve its purpose well, serve the people who use it, and make a lasting contribution to the community in which it is set. People want to live in well built, well designed houses, new or old. It makes us feel better, and gives us a pride in the places we live.

Developments that have an impact on historic sites (and there have been literally dozens of examples of this in the City of London alone), and new buildings such as 30 St Mary Axe, The Sage in Gateshead, attract a great deal of notice, and almost always create animated public discussion. Because it impinges on all our lives, architecture is one aspect of culture which can hardly avoid generating interest and often controversy. In this way it is a powerful vehicle for encouraging engagement with culture more widely, and greater civic awareness. The mundane and ugly in music and art are soon swept away and forgotten; their built equivalent is there for all to see, and sometimes for decades. There is therefore an even greater obligation to produce new buildings of the highest quality.

The human dimension

We identify closely with places where we came from, where we live or work, or where we like to visit. We want a say in how they are maintained and developed. A sense of ownership and involvement is necessary if people are to have pride in those places, and to want to sustain their quality. How to do this is the challenge.

Too many people feel excluded by the professional jargon that disfigures too much of the debate about design and conservation. All professional communities have their own language and shared assumptions, and these can exclude those that are not in the club. The heritage world is no exception. It has been debating questions of the values of heritage ever since it began its work some 150 years ago. Heritage is always a creation of the present: an act of ascribing present-day values to aspects of our inheritance from the past. It is therefore entirely subjective, forever evolving as attitudes and opinions change. But values are not shared equally among people or across time, and sometimes clash. Government and heritage organisations intervene both by encouraging people to express these values, and by establishing frameworks and procedures to balance competing priorities.

TV programmes like *Restoration* and *Time Team* have popularised heritage issues, and done a huge amount to empower and give a vocabulary to people from many backgrounds. It is not by chance that heritage is one of the Lottery good causes. People want lottery funding to support heritage in its widest sense. And the Heritage Lottery Fund is doing just that, supporting heritage projects, large and small, all over the country. Over the last ten years heritage lottery funding has,

through its emphasis on access and learning, opened up heritage and created many more opportunities for people and communities to be involved in identifying, enjoying and caring for heritage.

And there are a number of other initiatives which aim to help people to understand what makes for a good building or space, and to develop skills that enable them to talk confidently and persuasively to developers and designers. These skills are essential if communities are to be well placed to influence decision makers, and ensure their neighbourhood is enhanced, that the legacy of the past is recognised and valued, and that adventurous new schemes are properly assessed in terms of their quality and potential contribution.

I think of iconic structures like the Tower of London, Durham Cathedral, Liverpool waterfront, Maiden Castle, or the Roman Palace at Fishbourne. They embody the history and cultural development which brought us to where we are today.

They are not just museum pieces. All of these historic places still form part of the people's lives. Some are still in functional use, some are maintained as vital cultural and educational resources. Understanding the history, design and significance of these is essential if we are to make fully informed decisions about future development.

The thread running through all this is the human dimension, of course. Buildings, old and new, are important primarily because of their use or, to put it another way, their relationship to people, be they occupants, visitors or simply spectators walking by. This is not all about our big iconic sites. It is about the places which have local significance and are valued by local communities. The debate about Nelson in Lancashire was a perfect example of where the

community and the experts united to defend something of enormous value and significance to local people

We should do more to make this connection between people and places. We enjoy exploring the past, unlocking the stories hidden in the fabric of buildings, in the wider landscape and beneath our feet. Buildings are also important social binders, connecting people now with the aspirations of people in the past and in the future, connecting places with their communities. They contribute to our sense of identity and our understanding of what it means to be British in the 21st century.

English Heritage has done – and continues to do – good work in this area. Recreations of historical events, particularly battles, are an obvious example of this, but they have pioneered other approaches too. Together with the Civic Trust and 26,000 volunteers they have turned Heritage Open Days into the largest single cultural event held annually in England. The Blue Plaque Scheme is a breathtakingly simple way of (literally) flagging up these connections. Already 120 years old when English Heritage took it over from the Greater London Council in 1986, it has become a much loved part of London life. They are now taking it outside the capital and will, I hope, look at ways of extending its reach still further, perhaps doing more to take in events as well as people. Much was learned also from the Historic Houses Association's collaboration with the Black Environment Network and I would like to see private owners taking an even greater part in this work.

There are other ways of polishing up the human dimension. The recreated Victorian village at Blists Hill, in the Ironbridge Gorge in

Shropshire, recreates a period community with working shops and even its own bank, issuing currency in pounds, shillings and pence. It works because it delights and entertains its visitors by getting the small details right. On a grander – but simpler – scale, Battle Abbey in Sussex uses clever open-air displays and a personality-focused audio guide to bring the Battle of Hastings alive. The visitor can not only visualise the progress of the battle, but get a real sense of how the landscape itself played a part in it all.

In recent years Government has invested in regional museums through the *Renaissance* programme, not least to increase their capacity to offer high standard educational programmes. The teachers who organise school trips appreciate the tailored support that their charges now get when they visit the local museum. English Heritage is already looking at making greater use of volunteers to develop a similar approach at their sites. The Council for British Archaeology has a flourishing group of Young Archaeologists. And the network of Architecture and Built Environment centres is spreading throughout the country. I hope that through the Regional Historic Environment Forums, all these excellent initiatives will link into these regional hubs.

But it is much more than education in the formal sense. It is about understanding who we are. This is where the historic and built environment connects us with other aspects of heritage – the memories, shared experiences, the oral history and the written records – that bind across the generations. This can be done with new buildings as well as old.

The role that heritage can play in national identity has been the subject of an on-going debate led by The Heritage Lottery Fund. As

well as a major national conference, *Who do we think we are?* and a partner event in Wales called *The DNA of Heritage in Wales*, HLF has also run a series of workshops with young people in the Thames Gateway. The scheme aims to develop recommendations for cultural provision and ensure that the heritage and identities of existing communities are not forgotten in the regeneration process. On-going Citizen's Juries across the country have also highlighted that local communities believe their heritage is important for contributing to a sense of civic pride and confidence, developing shared values and bringing people together to strengthen communities.

Another example is Daniel Libeskind's new Imperial War Museum of the North – a cutting edge architectural creation for the 21st century that is a powerful signal of the civic regeneration of Manchester and Salford. But inside its ability to pick up on dozens of artefacts and mementoes of ordinary people's experience of the Second World War – a ration book, casing from a bomb fragment collected by the 12 year old schoolboy now a pensioner, diaries and photos of Manchester's 1940 Christmas blitz, the oral testimonies of those who lived through it – links the building with shared experience. And in this 60th anniversary year of the end of the Second World War I am particularly proud that funding from the Lottery is helping veterans, students, historians and others to make connections via the Veterans Reunited and Heroes Return Schemes.

The paradox of our time is that when families and generations are often more loosely connected physically than ever before there is more interest than ever in our roots. The explosion of genealogy – aided by the Government's initiatives to put the 1861 and 1901 censuses on the internet – is an expression of this. More of us than

ever before are researching our family tree, with the help of the increasingly popular websites which allow us to do the research from the comfort of our own homes. Often this ‘need to connect’ is linked to buildings. Pick up any local newspaper that has a ‘Then and Now’ page where readers seek to renew or explore family ties or lost friendships and they will often focus on a building or a setting, surviving or otherwise. We need to encourage and celebrate the personal and the social in connection with the built environment – not just because it is an aesthetic or a cultural good but because they are vital building blocks in sustaining a sense of community, citizenship and public value. Celebrating our plural inheritances in time and space – whether it be trails celebrating the Sikh impact on Britain, the contribution of a gay man like Alan Turing to breaking the codes of Nazi intelligence at Bletchley Park or that of women to the 1939–45 war effort – is not just historically important, it says vital things about what sort of inclusive, generous and progressive society we hope to have in this country in the 21st century.

In *Government and the Value of Culture* I addressed two important themes: the case for valuing cultural activity in itself, rather than merely for the (admittedly important) contribution it makes to more utilitarian economic and social agendas; and how we reconcile the twin aims of increasing access and promoting excellence. I also argued that encountering great art or music contributes a lot to what we are, and to the quality of our inner life:

“Without an expression or a connection to complex culture I firmly believe we have fewer resources from which to draw on in life. I regard this as personal heartland rather than hinterland.”

This applies to the historic and built environment too. No part of our culture is more important to the observer than the look of the environment in which we live. You do not have to attend mock battles or major houses to be very concerned about the desecration of streetscapes or the decay of city centres.

I believe that when we see beautiful or intriguing buildings and places, whether ancient or modern, we are adding to that reservoir of personal resource as much as music, literature, or the visual arts. There is no doubt that there is a strong public appetite to enjoy and understand these things. Membership of the National Trust is heading towards 3½ million and English Heritage has over half a million members. And this sector attracts the commitment of 160,000 volunteers – all valued partners and now developing a powerful voice through *Heritage Link*.

But there is more to be done. We need to attract visitors from across our society; some groups are badly under-represented in the statistics. There are some excellent initiatives being led by English Heritage to work with people who might normally think that the historic environment is nothing to do with them and connect them in new ways with the places where they live.

The debate about access and excellence takes a particular form here. The dichotomy between innovative and beautiful design and fitness for purpose nevertheless strikes me as false. A building or space that is not a pleasant or interesting place to be, that does not engage the people who use it, is likely to have a short life due to neglect or vandalism born out of indifference or outright hostility.

The role of Government

Organisations of many kinds have a role in caring for, presenting and improving our historic environment. Two thirds of our historic houses and sites are owned by private individuals who are responsible for their upkeep. Historic places of worship are a valued part of every community. They need resources and people, including master craftsmen and women to look after them. Those that no longer serve as places of worship are often put to imaginative new uses.

In Bristol the Churches Conservation Trust is using an 18th century church as a circus school. This has kept the building and its wonderful interior intact, linked it strongly into the local community which in turn protects the building from its previous experience of vandalism, drug-taking etc. Now the church is a flagship for the regeneration of the whole area.

Some sites run successfully as commercial ventures. Others are owned and maintained by voluntary organisations. And when all other options fail, the State may have to step in, as we did recently to secure the future of Apethorpe Hall.

Government at every level has an important part to play, providing vision, leadership and support, including public investment as necessary.

The need for public intervention is clear. When we consider changes that affect the environment in which we live, decision making cannot be left to the elite “who understand these things”. Government must encourage that wider understanding.

Much of what concerns us in dealing with the historic and built environment is that we leave a strong legacy for future generations. That requires bold and sometimes unpopular decisions which may go against short term commercial demands. Only government – as the expression of a democratic society – can regulate development in a way that takes account of this imperative.

Protecting our historic environment and widening access requires more than just regulation. In some cases public investment is needed too. And so it is self evident that Government need to provide resources for the preservation and improvement of historic sites where market and voluntary provision fall short. Sites which do not have a conventional ‘use’, such as the World Heritage Sites at Stonehenge, Fountains Abbey or Hadrian’s Wall will only survive, and be accessible, if there is public funding available. Investing in the preservation and presentation of these places is an investment in our national identity, an investment in our future, and an investment in that personal social capital.

What’s more, these places – and Stonehenge is perhaps the easiest example to grasp – are icons, not simply of our heritage but of our civilisation. Governments over the decades have been rightly reproached for their treatment of Stonehenge. I, too, sometimes despair at how slowly the implementation of the master-plan has progressed. But we are committed to realising our vision of restoring its setting within the natural and historic landscape and allowing visitors at last to get a sense of its true mystery and wonder. And this cannot be achieved – nor should it – without carrying the myriad stakeholders with us and as in every field, there will always be controversy about the balance between public and private provision.

Modernising how we protect the built and historic environment

The system of heritage protection always features strongly in any discussion of the historic built environment. This is not the place for detailed discussion of the reforms we have initiated. Our plans to modernise the system are well known. We will move to a system that is more consultative; has systems which are open to scrutiny; explains the reasons for the decisions it makes; makes clear the scope of the protections it creates; and relies wherever it is effective and desirable on flexible agreements rather than imposed restriction.

We aim for a new way of doing things, involving the whole community, and winning the support of those who own – and those who use, enjoy or simply walk past – our important buildings and sites, whether ancient or modern.

Can we take this further? As I have made clear, I am firmly committed to moving towards a more democratic system, and one that empowers people. But there is no getting away from the fact that consensus on what should be preserved will not always be possible. Sometimes there is a perfectly coherent case for preservation, in terms of aesthetics and architectural history, but there is an equally persuasive argument against, in terms of social gain or an opportunity for an innovative new design. We can do more to recognise that these are not mutually exclusive. But we also need to look at how existing or new uses will enhance the local community, engage key groups of people whose voices have not been heard previously and can otherwise feel alienated from development and regeneration *grands projets*. We must learn the

lessons of the 60s where whole communities felt excluded and literally bulldozed out of the way in favour of brave new architectural works that worked better on paper than in practice. We need to keep in mind William Morris's golden maxim – 'form follows function' – and be particularly sensitive to what communities and the ground are telling us. Bottom-up development can be painstaking but it is more conducive to the promotion of community than top-down fervour – and the role of Government and heritage bodies should be to enable and assist those expressions to come forward and be articulate. We already have plenty of excellent examples of the historic environment being put to imaginative use alongside fantastic new design and leading to the regeneration of whole communities. The repair of 15 historic buildings in Nottingham's Lace Market, assisted by Heritage Lottery funding, has attracted in 450 firms, a quarter of which are keeping alive the tradition of fashion design and production. The rest comprise a mix of cultural and creative industries, retail outlets pubs and bars.

As the Cabinet Minister with responsibility for both protecting our historic environment and promoting new architecture, I am only too aware that our finest living architects deserve the chance to display their genius on more sites than are sometimes available

It is inevitable the some buildings from the past will be lost, and lost forever. This is a high price to pay but it does not imply that we lose all of their heritage. I think technology may suggest a way of dealing with this. Digital photography and cinematography now make it relatively easy – and increasingly affordable – to create a perfect 'virtual' moving image of a building, inside and out. Estate

agents increasingly use it, so that the prospective buyer can tour a property using their computer screen and mouse to swivel the camera wherever they wish. Imagine applying the same technology to a listed site under threat of demolition. Would it be such a huge imposition on the developer to make it a condition of listed building consent for a record like this to be made? I have already said that ‘there is no substitute for the real thing’ in heritage matters, and I firmly believe this. But when the choice is between obliterating a historic building so that nothing is left but the architect’s drawings; and having a perfect digital record of every square inch, available for students and historians for all time, I know which I would rather have.

Conclusion

I concluded my essay on *Government and the Value of Culture* by saying that

“we will need to keep proving that engagement with culture can improve educational attainment and reduce crime. But we should also stand up for what culture can do for individuals in a way that nothing else can.”

This and, indeed, most of what my previous essay contained, is equally true if we substitute the word “heritage” for culture. The historic environment and wider heritage contributes to a wide range of Government ambitions to cut crime, promote inclusion, improve educational achievement, but is worth supporting in itself, for the way it can encourage people better to understand and engage with their history and their community, and help slay that

poverty of aspiration which holds so many people back from fulfilling their potential.

A number of questions arise from this brief essay:

- (a) How should heritage organisations give leadership to and contribute to national debate on identity and Britishness?
- (b) Is my analysis of the value of the historic and built environment as I have defined it here correct?
- (c) How can we best capture and present evidence for the value of that heritage?
- (d) What can we do to create public engagement and widen the sense of ownership of the historic and built environment? How in particular do we introduce true diversity in terms of engagement, workforce, and audience?
- (e) Does the sector have the necessary skills and structures?
- (f) What in particular should DCMS get bodies such as English Heritage to do differently, to lead the wider sector into a true transformation by example?
- (g) How can we better define and deliver the role of Government in supporting it?

As Culture Secretary it is my duty to raise these questions, and to look to the heritage sector to engage and respond constructively. I look forward to the continuing debate.



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