

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ROYAL PARK PROTECTION GROUP (RPPG)
GIVEN AT THE AGM ON 11 NOVEMBER 2009**

Today we are holding our twelfth annual general meeting of the Royal Park Protection Group Inc. As I am stepping down from the position of Convenor I would like to make some comments on the history of the Group not just the previous year's events. It was at our first AGM in 1998 that we announced our objectives and pledged *"to protect, regenerate and conserve the Royal Park as a unique, indigenous, central city park for present and future generations, consistent with principles of the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan; and to oppose alienation of parkland by government, commercial, sporting and other bodies to ensure public access consistent with the terms of the establishment of the Royal Park"*. Unfortunately, we have failed to adequately defend Royal Park. Over the short space of the past 13 years, first the Kennett Government, then former Premier Bracks and his operative Bronwyn Pike MP Member for Melbourne, plus compliant past and present Melbourne City Lord Mayors and Councillors, have presided over the progressive carve up, degradation, clear felling and concreting over of Royal Park, previously one of the glories of Marvellous Melbourne – set aside by our first visionary Governor, Charles La Trobe.

As detailed in past AGM reports it was the emerging threats to Royal Park, chiefly the action by the then City of Melbourne Chief Commissioner, Kevan Gosper, to clear-fell ten hectares of parkland round the Zoo, including historic Marconi Crescent and its avenue of 150 year old Morton Bay fig trees, plus stands of 100 year old elms, for construction of super market-style concrete carparks which mobilised the community. The Parkville Association failed to recognise the urgency of the threat to the Park and lodge objections to this act of vandalism. Hence we were galvanised into action and established the Royal Park Protection Group Inc...

Ironically enough, it was at the first RPPG AGM on 31 August 1998 where we spelt out objectives that the then ALP candidate for the State seat of Melbourne Bronwyn Pike, who was our guest speaker, gave an undertaking to ensure that Royal Park would, under a Labor Government, not be treated as "Terra Nullius" (i.e. vacant land there for the taking) but would be protected as public open space and as heritage parkland. She said *"Royal Park and the decision about its future are almost a microcosm of the broader debate on how we measure progress. Will we be drawn into narrow and short-sighted visions largely configured by economic aspirations? I am concerned that the culture of impatience ... may not lead us to sustaining Royal Park and other breathing spaces in the city... One thing that I hope we have learned in the 90's is that Terra Nullius is a legal fiction. Royal Park is not vacant land ready and waiting for development"*. Prophetic words indeed.

Construction of a multitude of developments followed the Kevin Gosper supermarket carparks, including more carparks at the north entrance of the Zoo; super tram stops; bike paths; a bus parking bay on Brens Drive for the Urban Camp; the State Netball and Hockey Centre plus carparks, ostensibly for the 2006 Commonwealth Games; and a mega, private real estate residential development "The Parkville Gardens" on the former Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital (RPPH) site, used for a few weeks for athletes' accommodation for the 2006 Commonwealth Games. In addition, the Federation style Heritage listed buildings of the RPPH, restored at taxpayers' expense and promised for community use, have been included in the "Parkville Gardens", divided into units, handed over to the developer Australand and then sold for up to \$800,000 a unit.

Currently still under construction is the \$1 billion plus new Royal Children's Hospital (RCH), commonly known as Bronwyn's Taj Mahal, which has involved alienation of a huge section of south Royal Park to the west and north of the original hospital. Over 7 hectares, additional to the

original 4.1 hectares hospital footprint, have been alienated for the “project construction site”, without guarantees that any land will be handed back to the park. In addition a 2,000 underground carpark for the expanded hospital is being built under the Park and, apparently, under a PPP deal a private hotel is to be built in the new hospital complex. The “Mercy Health” development, an aged care facility, is now being built on the former RPPH site. Although we believe that original contracts show approval for only a 100 aged care bed “social housing” facility, this aged care facility has 140 beds. Additionally a “Mercy Place” multi storey apartment complex is being built with 53 units for private sale, priced up to \$600,000, and has use of a wing of the heritage buildings on the site. A “retail hub” is to be built for the flats and the aged care facility with consulting rooms. Also a Catholic chapel.

Of grave concern is the fact that, first under Lord Mayor John So and now under Lord Mayor Robert Doyle the Council has downgraded the care and protection of city parks and cut funding to the community. John So even sacked Parks and Gardens staff. Royal Park will accordingly suffer. We have seen the termination of The Royal Park Master Plan Committee and its Vegetation Management Group with local community representation and establishment of a phoney general Park Advisory Committee - none of the members know anything about parks. There have been breaches of the Master Plan over which the Ombudsman was not willing to intervene. Council has rejected our application for a grant as we had applied by email.

We have seen many battles fought out over the Park in VCAT and even the Supreme Court. We have been fortunate in having a wonderful benefactor who has helped with legal costs and a great barrister Tom Pikusa who had undertaken work for greatly reduced fees. We have been threatened – unsuccessfully - with defamation action on several occasions including receiving a writ from a State Government Authority. RPPG has made submissions to numbers of Parliamentary enquiries, the latest being on Melbourne’s Future Water Supply.

On the positive side we have had some successes. In the area of the history of the Park, RPPG saved the Walmsley House, one of the earliest prefabricated buildings in Victoria, and had it included on the State Heritage Register, plus the golden elm in its vicinity put on the significant trees register. A “cultural historian” of some eminence said that it was an unsightly tin shed and recommended that it be demolished. Similarly we saved Anzac Hall, a notable World War II and RSL Hall, from the Kennett Governments bulldozers. Perhaps the most significant achievement is the fact that together with a coalition of inner city resident groups plus the Coalition of Transport Action Groups we actually stopped the extension of the Eastern Freeway which was going through under or over Royal Park, planned by Sir Rod Eddington as part of the \$18 billion “East West Link”. It will now not proceed. It has been quietly deleted from the Victorian Transport Plan. The chief bureaucrat in charge of the Eddington Review said *“Thanks to People Power the East West Link will not now proceed.”* Our latest success was to persuade the Council to refuse to allow the Paspaley Polo team to stage an event in Royal Park on one of the few sanctuaries of open parkland designed for passive recreation and informal sport.

I would like to end by thanking all our RPPG members, friends and allies for assisting over the years with all the hard work involved in rallies, protests, blockades, publicity stunts attending meetings and keeping the Government and Council under constant surveillance. I would like to end with a well known quote *“Your parks are your breathing spaces. Guard them, cherish them. Parkland is valuable and greedy eyes see the money in it. So you must always be on the alert. Hang onto your breathing spaces in this developing and already over-congested city. Protect your parks from the pressure of political concrete.”* (Patrick White at a 1972 Rally, Centennial Park, Sydney.)

Julianne Bell Convenor Royal Park Protection Group 11 November 2009.