

CONVENOR'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE ROYAL PARK PROTECTION GROUP - JULY 26, 1999

Angela Munro

INTRODUCTION

Since our AGM last August, we've tried to keep members and supporters abreast of the Royal Park campaign in a number of ways, chiefly through our News Bulletins. But this isn't a report to shareholders (or customers!), as the current climate would have us believe. It's the celebration of a second anniversary. We're alive and kicking and here to stay. The occasion of this AGM is also, in a sense, a wake, because the past five years have seen unprecedented and probably irreversible damage done to the Park by its Government custodians. We now have a partially built 3-storey international stadium for commercial, televised sport right in the centre of the park, alongside the Zoo.

Indeed, as former Lord Mayor, Trevor Huggard, reported to us at our December 13 rally, last year, if the recorded rate of loss is maintained there will be no parkland left in Melbourne in 30 years.

We have been assured by all and sundry from the word go, that we're fighting a lost cause: 'Jeff's got the numbers. There's nothing we can do.' Given the evident loss, and the significant effort for almost three years, has it been worth it? Are we a bunch of masochists engaged in futile combat with a bunch of Philistines?

Of course it's been worth it. The campaign has been of the utmost importance - for our democracy, for our environment and for our social well-being. It's very easy, like the State Government, to focus on short term, tangible outcomes. It's much harder to think and act in the long term, as we have done. And our goals, for a small, vastly under-resourced community group, are extremely ambitious.

OUR AIMS

According to our Constitution, we aim to:

- 1 Protect, regenerate and conserve Royal Park as a unique, indigenous, central city park for present and future generations, consistent with the principles of the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan: and
- 2 To oppose alienation of parkland by government, commercial and sporting bodies and to ensure public access consistent with the terms of the establishment of Royal Park.

As to the 2006 Commonwealth Games Bid, we resolved that the Netball and Hockey Stadiums and Athletes' Village should be located other than in public parkland, following a proper process of site identification.

THE OBSTACLES

Before I give an account of our activities and achievements, of how this year has differed from last year and some of the

opportunities and challenges we face, I want to summarise some of the obstacles we've confronted. Because our achievements can only be appreciated in terms of those obstacles and realistic expectations of tackling them.

i Briefly, and as has been articulated by writers such as Will Sutton and John Ralston Saul, we're in the midst of a revolution, and our elected representatives, federal and state, are actively pursuing a 'free market economy'. Power has progressively shifted from citizens to the corporate sector. Downsized, outsourced public services (state and local) are subject to extraordinary provisions of commercial-in-confidence in the state where the experiment is most extreme: Victoria the Contract State.

ii The sacking and so-called reform of local government, especially the capital city council, deprives us of the avenues and voice we once had in this State. The Melbourne City Council is diminished, deskilled and intimidated, its councillors few and served by officers who see themselves as primarily accountable to the State Government. We were reliably informed that our Ward councillor was summoned on one occasion, by the former Lord Mayor, and advised to 'control' her constituents on Royal Park.

iii The media, like the relevant professional groups, are intimidated, and subject to greater corporate influence as is now, thankfully, becoming exposed.

iv As to Royal Park, Group member, Keith Wiltshire, spoke in the Campaign Video of the government's treatment of the land as consistent with the concept of *Terra Nullius* before European settlement: there for the taking. To apply another latin tag, Royal Park is *Terra Incognita* - the unknown land. The protection of a Park whose location, dimensions, lay-out and character are so little known to public and media, has been challenging.

v The alienation, neglect and poor management of this indigenous Park has been an intractable problem for 120 years. It was in the 1870s that the Town Clerk, Edmund Fitzgibbon, coined the expression : 'Hands Off Our Parks'.¹

vi Much of the Park, including the site for the Commonwealth Games 2006 stadiums, was severely degraded. Breach of a duty of care was thus, paradoxically, used to justify further destruction.

vii In the absence of immediate loss of amenity to adjacent residents and of visibility from major roads, popular opposition to the stadiums was minimised in a community debilitated by innumerable campaigns.

viii Finally, the Big Lie, (to borrow a concept linked with Nazi propaganda), enabled the State Government, a compliant Council and supportive Opposition, to market a series of misleading propositions over the stadiums: that there would be no net loss of parkland; that this was simply an upgrade of existing community sports facilities; and that Council had made the decision based upon exhaustive community consultation within a review of the Royal Park Master Plan.

The effect of all of this is that we have been representing the public interest on the management of Royal Park virtually alone, without the advocacy of our local Councillor, Council as a whole

¹ Sanderson, W.A. Royal Park. The Victorian Historical Magazine Vol XIV, No. 3, May 1932

or our Members of Parliament. The City Council has also sought to marginalise us and stifle dissent, most obviously in response to our application for a small information grant in April. We were deemed ineligible on grounds of working 'contrary to the spirit and policy of Council's Corporate Plan', and of our information being 'inaccurate' and 'debate unbalanced'².

THE MILESTONES

To recapitulate, the last two years have represented a period of sustained activity, intensifying over the past 6 months. Crisis management has prevailed as we were forced to confront a series of major state sponsored projects, predominantly developed during a period of appointed City Commissioners.

In chronological order, these developments were: the construction of Brens Pavilion, on Macarthur Road, for elite sporting use; stage 3 of the Zoo carparks; the proposed northern expansion of the Zoo into the Park (stopped by our Appeal at the AAT); the Urban Camp/Sports Hotel (lost at AAT and subsequent Supreme Court Appeal); the Commonwealth Games Hockey and Netball Stadiums (Appeal at VCAT due on June 3, preempted by Royal Park Land Bill); the proposed Athletes Village on the Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital and adjacent sites; and the proposed east west freeway link through Royal Park.

To convey our response to these challenges, it is helpful to identify significant milestones over the past year:

September 16, 1998: Appeal to the Supreme Court against the Urban Camp/Sports Hotel, following dismissal of requests by the City of Melbourne and the Urban Camp for substantial bonds. The final judgement was that the case was not reviewable by the Supreme Court.

October 1998/February 1999: several events in or promotions of Royal Park including - November 1998, major promotion through North and West Melbourne Festival - Spring Fling; Picnic in the Park, January 1, 1999.

December 13, 1998 Parks Day Rally including speakers from the Wurundjeri, traditional landowners; past and current local and state politicians; the Save Waverley Park campaign; many state-wide parks campaigns and with a memorable didgeridoo performance by Tom E Lewis.

November 9 and December 24, 1998: Minister for Planning, Rob Maclellan, declared the Stadiums Project to be of State Significance, gazetted site specific amendments to the Melbourne Planning Scheme to enable the stadium construction, declared

² On July 28, two days after the AGM, we were advised in response to a detailed case made to the Chief Executive by letter of July 9, circulated to all councillors, that the decision had been reviewed and the grant authorised.

himself Responsible Authority and disallowed community consultation or an environmental impact assessment.

March 13, 1999: (Eve of closure of the poll for Melbourne City Council Election) State Government contracted Multiplex to construct the stadium complex.

March 26/early April 1999: Stadium site construction fence dismantled by members of Community Picket involving campaign supporters, sympathetic unionists and forest campaigners from Friends of the Earth.

April 19, 1999: Occupation of the 8.3 hectare fenced construction site by 35 members of the Community Picket for 4 hours, prior to declaration of support for construction by CFMEU and ASU and, subsequently, bodily removal of protesters by Police following purported 'revocation of licence' to be in the Park by an officer of the Department of Infrastructure. Clear-felling of over 500 trees on the site followed.

April-July, 1999: Community Picket continued at construction site and on Elliot Avenue (including presence of Save Albert Park Vigil on April 30) for three weeks and leafleting of general RPPG and Zoo-specific fliers maintained weekly at main and rear entrances to Zoo.

May 1, 1999: May Day Rally: Rod Quantock hosted rally adjacent to construction site, including speakers from local councils - Cr Martin Brennan, City of Melbourne, Mayor Andrew Rowe, City of Moreland and Cr Peter Gould, City of Moonee Valley, together with Professor Verity Burgmann, (author of Green Bans Red Union) and Bob Symington, Co-ordinator of Sydney Olympics' Green Games Watch.

May 28, 1999: Royal Park Land Bill tabled and passed unanimously by Legislative Assembly to enable construction of stadium, preempting RPPG Appeal in VCAT, due to be heard June 3. Demonstration at Parliament House and commentary by loud hailer from the steps.

June 3, 1999: Zoo Protest at GPO, including troupe of members dressed as animals. Cavalcade led by Rod Quantock to Parliament, with distribution of fliers, commentary by loud hailer and presence in Parliament to witness unanimous passage of Bill through Legislative Council.

June 27, 1999: Construction of life-sized, cardboard elephant at Zoo entrance by Rod Quantock, with involvement of children dressed/masked as animals, commentary to Zoo visitors and distribution of fliers.

July 25, 1999: Two parachutists sky-dived into Royal Park, adjacent to construction site, trailing a banner inscribed: *Hands Off Our Parks, Jeff.*

NEW DIRECTIONS IN 1998/9

All of the activities of the previous year continued as described in the previous Annual Report, namely: as a political lobby (with deputations, presentations, prolific correspondence; through research and analysis; attempting, with some success, to influence statutory planning; communication of information, marketing our case and promotional events - all accompanied by sustained media campaign.

The past year developed new directions and emphasis in five main ways:

- i **Litigation** (and the pursuit of excellent, sympathetic, affordable lawyers willing and able to act for us, as well as related fund-raising) loomed large throughout the year, until the gazettal of the Royal Park Land Act this month.
- ii **Publicity and Promotion** in relation to the litigation, two rallies, a number of small events and high profile major events, (notably the fence dismantling, site occupation and tree-sitting, Community Picket and the Elephant Sculpture) attracted significant television and radio coverage, and excellent coverage by the Melbourne Times, Melbourne Leader and North Melbourne News. RPPG articles were widely published in a variety of professional, environmental and parks newsletters and journals, including Landscape Australia. A high level of exposure of the issues and campaign was achieved through sustained access to interviews and Talk Back radio, chiefly 3AW, ABC and 3CR community radio.
- iii **Involvement in direct action**, in fence dismantling, occupation of the site and delaying access by persuasion and physical blockade, officially recognised by the Electrical Trades Union alone, but with crucial support from unionists and forest campaigners from Friends of the Earth. Such action, to which many supporters had had no previous recourse, was a reflection of the abandonment and thwarting of due democratic process by the State Government and lack of effective Council advocacy.
- iv **Strategic alliances** became crucial to the campaign's effectiveness over the past year. These included that with Save Waverley Park group (short-lived following pressure from sports and party political lobbies); with environmentally aware unionists and with members of the forests campaign from Friends of the Earth without whose support, courage and skill, the campaign would have been sidelined. Several young forest campaigners were questioned by police and one has been charged for efforts on behalf of the campaign. An alliance with members of Earthworkers was crucial to gaining access to influence at the Trades Hall Council. The continuing and unswerving support from members of the Save Albert Park campaign has been sustained over two years. It has been invaluable in terms of morale, advice, loan of equipment (including the giant parks flag) and publicity, including the generous contribution of some superb banners.
- v **Membership involvement and numbers** have increased greatly.

Involvement has been fostered by the range and variety of activities (such as the Community Picket and successive promotional events) and included preparation of numerous high quality brochures, posters and banners. There have been a number of extremely generous donations which have helped cover significant costs - of hire of equipment, printing and photocopying and litigation. Several donations have been anonymous but special mention should be made of the financial support of Julianne Bell, Barbara Falk, Anne Phefley and the Dara Foundation. Many, many members have contributed in-kind to an organisation that runs without office overheads such as telephone/fax and email.

OUTCOMES:

They may be summarised as follows:

i Legal

While the legal challenges failed to prevent construction of the Urban/Camp Sports Hotel or stadiums, (after the early success in opposing the Zoo extension), they had major outcomes. They exposed the tampering with protective legislation that had occurred; they caused the arguments to be mounted and publicised; they reflected the determination and organisational capacity of the Group to resist commercialisation of parkland; they ensured the Group's command of the facts of the assault on parkland; and forced the Government to enact legislation which acknowledged that the stadiums were in breach of the existing Acts of Parliament.

ii Research and Development:

The Group has become extremely well informed, despite the paucity of publicly available information, gaining documents under Freedom of Information in advance of the City Council and the Zoo Board, for example. Creative development of strategic opportunities and organisational relationships allowed the Group to become informed of and to promote the Sydney Green Games principles, to which the ALP has given support. Again, co-operation with the Wurundjeri in a Parkland Reconciliation Project funded by the Victorian Women's Trust, enabled the development and celebration of the history and meaning of the land before European settlement.

iii Publicity:

A high level of media release and media contact has been maintained. While there is no objective measure of the outcome in terms of publicity, it is apparent from the unprecedented and often prominent media coverage, that awareness by community and media of the Park and of the threats posed has greatly increased. The excessive level of police allocated to the site reflected Government concern as to negative publicity with international ramifications for the Commonwealth Games Bid. The management of the Zoo expressed extreme irritation, at times, as to the impact of leafleting, given the evident responsiveness of Zoo visitors to our written and graphic material on the threats to the Zoo from the stadiums. The widespread involvement of secondary and tertiary students (solicited and unsolicited) and anecdotal evidence from various sources, community-based and governmental, indicated highly effective communication of our messages.

iv Political Lobby:

As a lobby we have researched, assembled and marketed our case effectively, developing credibility in terms of analytical, persuasive and strategic capacity. The effective briefing of councillors (notably Kevin Chamberlin and Martin Brennan) was essential to their advocacy on Royal Park issues. It has been the most sustained and high profile campaign in the City of Melbourne for the past three years; the official sidelining of the Group by the former Council (pre March, 1999) was an acknowledgment of such public standing.

v Alliances:

Reference has been made to the crucial importance for the campaign of the alliances forged, in multiplying its effect. Save Waverley Park, parkland groups such as Save Albert Park, environment organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Environment Victoria, the Wurundjeri and, finally, unionists strengthened and diversified our reach. Significantly, Union links paved the way for the series of consultations between the Group and representatives of several State agencies and the stadium construction company at the Trades Hall, facilitated by the Secretary of the CFMEU, Martin Kingham and Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall, Leigh Hubbard. That is, an arena for democratic decisionmaking (hitherto denied us) was created through the alliance.

vi Relationship with Royal Park

Referring back to the concept of *terra incognita*, (despite the passionate commitment of devotees - birdwatchers, walkers and others), there have been particular moments, high points and low points, when the community's sense of the spirit of the Park has deepened. Collective witness to the brutal massacre of over 500 trees, following our eviction from the site, was one such powerful occasion. Of a positive kind, was the exhilaration of repossession of the park after the temporary construction fence was flattened; the magical, plaintive sound of didgeridoo played by Tom E. Lewis at the December 13 rally; and the extraordinary sight of two parachutists drifting out of a clear sky, on a perfect autumn day, trailing an enormous banner bearing the message: *Hands Off Our Parks, Jeff*.

vii Archive

A valuable archive has been built up chronicling the challenges faced by the community in protecting the public interest in a freemarket economy; Royal Park provides a case study in the role of councillors, the City Council, State Government and of powerful sports, entertainment and construction interests. The archive is written as well as photographic and includes television footage and a video produced by SKA TV.

The Royal Park campaign has become one of the many 'logs' which will form a log-jam through which pent up, democratic forces will eventually break. It is part of the politicisation underway in Victoria.

CONTINUING ACTION AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

THE WHAT:

- i The stadiums must be subject to operational controls and the City of Melbourne persuaded to take action, if necessary in VCAT, to ensure that occurs.
- ii Sites developed to the north and north west of the Park must be subject to co-ordinated planning and due public planning process, notably the site of the Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital.
- iii The possibility of the freeway link must be monitored and alliances maintained with the outer eastern community environment and transport lobbies.
- iv The focus of the Group should shift to promoting the implementation of the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan, commencing with high profile degraded areas such as the northern Zoo entrance.

THE HOW:

- i The recently established Website (royalparkprotect.org.au) must be developed as a strategic tool for linking members and local agencies; informing and lobbying relevant individuals and organisations, including media in Australia and Commonwealth Games countries; and involving membership and supporters in creative problem solving.
- ii Alliances established must be fostered, especially through the trade union and environment movements, including promotion of a funded Green Games Watch, consistent with the Sydney precedent.
- iii Wider appreciation and protectiveness towards the Park must be developed through pleasurable events (such as sky-diving, revegetation, bird-watching) and through cultural activities with Wurundjeri, and re-enactment of Burke and Wills departure.
- iv Work groups should take responsibility for specific areas such as fundraising, liaison with community sports organisations, implementation of the Master Plan.
- v The State election expected late in 1999 should be an opportunity for collaboration between parks groups statewide.

In conclusion, after 120 years of neglect (despite an interlude of enlightenment in the 70s and 80s), there is now, for the first time, a Royal Park community watchdog. I'm optimistic we can continue to be a thorn in the side of a Government intent on commercialisation of the Park for 'best use'; to develop and promote the 1987 Master Plan's vision of a landscape reminiscent of that before European settlement; and to enlist the community in contributing to the log-jam which will lead to the restoration of democracy in our City and our State.