

Legislative Council

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TORRENS ISLAND QUARANTINE STATION

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (17:02): I seek leave to move Notice of Motion: Private Business No. 6 in an amended form.

Leave granted.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: I move:

That this council calls on—

1. The Minister for Environment and Conservation to—
 - (a) conserve the heritage value of the Torrens Island Quarantine Station and the remaining pristine environment on the northern end of Torrens Island by taking steps to prevent any further industrial development of these sites ;
 - (b) take steps to restore the Torrens Island Quarantine Station buildings on the South Australian Heritage Register and ensure sufficient funds are available to do so;
 - (c) engage in negotiations with the Treasurer with the objective being for the Department of Environment and Heritage to take control of the northern end of Torrens Island, including the site of the former quarantine station, from the Generation Lessor Corporation;
 - (d) take steps to provide tourist access to the Torrens Island Quarantine Station and surrounding historical sites and engage in consultation with all relevant parties with a view to facilitating regulated tourism; and
2. The Treasurer to—
 - (a) release details of the application before the Development Assessment Commission and of the proposed commercial uses of the proposed allotments; and
 - (b) cease moves to further develop Torrens Island and cease negotiations with commercial parties seeking to do so.

I move this motion today in response to concerns raised by constituents about the proposed development of Torrens Island. As some members may be aware, for some time there have been rumours to open up Torrens Island for industrial development. Understandably, this has led to many constituents and interest groups claiming that the unique heritage value of the former Torrens Island Quarantine Station and the pristine environment at the northern end of the island will be destroyed.

While details of the proposed development are at this stage sketchy, it is my understanding that an application by the South Australian Government Financing Authority (a division of Treasury) is before the Development Assessment Commission to subdivide a large section on the northern end of Torrens Island.

It is my fear, and that of numerous stakeholders such as the National Trust of South Australia, the Port Adelaide Historical Society, the National Conservation Society of South Australia,

and others, that this is the first step towards the further development of Torrens Island. It is my understanding that Torrens Island, as it falls outside the boundary of the Port Adelaide Enfield Council, is currently under the control of the Generation Lessor Corporation, an agency of Treasury. This would explain why the Treasurer has been the one negotiating with Maritime Constructions and other commercial parties for access to the land.

I have been able to procure a copy of the proposed plan of division submitted to the Development Assessment Commission which essentially details the allotments to be created if approval is granted. Of concern, it would appear that the two areas of significance—the Torrens Island Quarantine Station, which is to become allotment 205, and the northern end of the island which is largely untouched and in pristine condition—are both going to be victims of the carve up.

As I said, details are sketchy, but apparently allotment 205 is earmarked for Maritime Constructions, a maritime infrastructure contractor currently located at docks 1 and 2 in inner Port Adelaide. If allowed, this will entail the dredging of 150 metres of pristine grey mangrove habitat, the removal of the heritage listed jetty (on which new migrants once disembarked) and the destruction of tidal low and mid-marsh zones across the front of the quarantine station. Although I have been unable to confirm it, looking at maps of the island I also suspect that some of the buildings of the Torrens Island Quarantine Station, which are heritage listed, are also under threat.

While greatly under-appreciated, the Torrens Island Quarantine Station moved to its current location in 1909 and is a significant part of this state's history. Reflecting the widespread fear of smallpox and other infectious diseases, all new arrivals to South Australia were required to disembark and reside on Torrens Island until they had been medically cleared. While I am sure that new arrivals were keen to begin their new lives as quickly as possible, the necessity of being quarantined was reportedly generally accepted and the new arrivals found relief in the comforts not available at sea, such as laundry and bathing facilities.

As mentioned, the quarantine station is heritage listed and has been since 21 October 1993. For the benefit of members, I will read into *Hansard* the Quarantine Station Statement of Heritage Value found on the South Australian Heritage Register. It states:

Torrens Island has been the site of the continuous practice of animal quarantine since the early 1850s. Animal quarantine was moved to the present site in 1909 from the south end of the island.

The station also represents South Australia's origins as a separate colony and records the development of medical practices in controlling infectious diseases as related to the relevant parliamentary acts for quarantine in South Australia and the commonwealth, which assumed responsibility after Federation.

The site of the first Quarantine Station, now occupied by a power station, was used as an internment camp during the First World War, but there are no obvious remains of those activities.

The complex includes an 1870s prefabricated timber cottage, the only survivor of the original 30, which is quite rare.

The buildings on the site, the bulk of which are still very redeemable, are of extreme importance to our history. Some of the buildings of note in the quarantine station are Refshauge House, which was the home of the station doctor and the administration office. Other buildings on the site include the hospital, linen store, nurses' quarters, morgue and general living quarters.

Constituents are also concerned that the vital section of pristine and ecologically important land on the northern end of Torrens Island, which will become allotment 206, will be lost to development. I have been informed that this fear is well founded, as it is apparently the intention of the Department of Primary Industries and Resources to use this land for a biodiesel prototype.

While again few details have been released publicly, it is my understanding that the biodiesel plant is of a type that has already been trialled and found not to be commercially viable in the United States. However, if the plan is to proceed, I am reliably informed that alternative sites such as Bolívar would be not only suitable but ideal. Considering the pristine environment that would be lost if it were to proceed on Torrens Island, why consideration has not been given to this alternative site is beyond me.

While the environment in the more southern areas of Torrens Island has been significantly impacted on by humans over the years, the northern end of the island has largely remained untouched. As such, it has become a safe haven for many types of local and migratory birds, such as the Pacific gull and sooty shearwater, which use this area during their long journey to and from Japan. It is also a refuge to many species of local birds, seabirds and wildlife varieties because of its isolated position on the island. Many species, such as banded stilts, Australian white ducks, sooty oyster catchers and sandpipers rely on this habitat for foraging and breeding. It is my understanding that 11 of the sea and shore birds that frequent the area are registered under international treaties.

As an intertidal waterway, the area also supports life forms that rely on sand marsh and saltbush colonies, including microorganisms and macroinvertebrates. This section is also one of the very few areas of untouched coastline in the Port River estuary, and supports many rare plant varieties, and it is heavily clad with mangroves, which are of extreme importance for local fish stocks. These in turn support the growing Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin population, which also uses this area as a vital training tool to teach young dolphins how to catch and herd fish for their survival.

This section of the island is also the site of the heritage listed cemetery. We are aware that some of those buried there include Mr Alexander Still, Mr Robert Earnshaw and Mr L. Dickson, who died in the quarantine station between 1892 and 1919. I am also led to believe that a World War I digger is buried there as well. The sheer ecological and historic value of this northern end of Torrens Island alone is reason enough not to develop the area further. There are so many other areas of coastline that could be used for a development of this nature without destroying the flora, fauna and the historical value on offer.

When combined with the fact the heritage value of the quarantine station is also under threat, I hope it becomes clear to all in here, as it did to me, that we simply cannot allow this to happen. I was fortunate enough to visit Torrens Island recently with Mr Aaron Machado, President of the Australian Marine Wildlife Research & Rescue Organisation Inc., and I assure honourable members it is well worth the effort. From the moment one arrives, it is clear that the quarantine station and its surrounds are something special and worth protecting. If there is sufficient interest from members, I am willing to organise a group tour of Torrens Island with Mr Machado, which is likely to be after the public meeting I am hosting on this issue in the Balcony Room on 6 July.

Mr Machado has long campaigned for the protection of the northern end of Torrens Island and has even offered to purchase proposed allotment 206, not for development but to preserve it in its current pristine condition. However, while I was fortunate enough to visit Torrens Island, not all are presently able to enjoy what I have, as access to the public is

currently restricted due to having to pass through the power station to gain access to Torrens Island. While this has in part spared Torrens Island from the illegal dumping, familiar to Garden Island, and the quarantine station from vandalism, it has also denied the public the ability to appreciate the unique heritage and environment on offer.

While restricting access may have helped preserve the land, one of the great tragedies of restricting access to Torrens Island and, in particular, to the quarantine station is that, now, with development on the cards, only but the lucky few who have been able to visit the site are aware of the heritage value under threat. This point was captured in a letter from Tim Walsh, a member of the Port Adelaide Residents Environment Protection Group, to the Chief Executive of the Department of Planning and Local Government and relevant ministers, in which he states:

...such scrutiny [of the proposed development] would require reasonable access to the island, or organised tours that allow for public appreciation as to what is at stake in developing Torrens Island.

The other great tragedy, as I see it, is the failure to explore the tourist potential for Torrens Island, both for ecotourism and for tours of the quarantine station. As mentioned, the northern end of Torrens Island is a pristine habitat for numerous varieties of rare and migratory birds and a rare example of sand dune ecology, which, provided it was done responsibly, could be a major drawcard.

Additionally, the quarantine station with its rich history in the lives of our ancestors could be restored and incorporated into existing tours of the Port River and would be a major drawcard for South Australia and the Port Adelaide region. Interest has been expressed by various tour operators over the years to have this site incorporated into their daily tours of the Port River; however, to date, it is yet to come to fruition.

On the other hand, in Victoria, the Port Nepean quarantine station has been fully restored and protected and is now available for public access. Tours of that site are popular and enable visitors to develop an understanding and connection with the station's historical role and value to the state. The fact that something similar is not available here, and never will be if the Treasurer is allowed to carve up Torrens Island for industry, is indeed a tragedy.

We simply cannot afford for this development to proceed. In the words of Aaron Machado, President of AMWRRO:

the Torrens Island environments that will be affected as a consequence of any development will be nothing short of environmental terrorism that would be allowed to proceed by a money hungry government that has no consideration for local and international environmental concerns.

I would repeat the same for the quarantine station.

I ask members to reflect on the pictures that we have seen on television of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The big concern is that the marshes and the mangroves there are at grave risk of never being able to be restored. We have the largest collection or spread of grey mangroves in the entire world in South Australia and the ecological benefit of those mangroves to our fishing stock and as a breeding ground is not able to be measured in dollar terms. We simply cannot allow this little-known island to be devastated.

I note that we have two press releases from premier Mike Rann today on environmental issues and one, of course, is nuclear waste. In a ministerial statement he said that a nuclear waste dump would jeopardise South Australia's clean green reputation and that we are prepared to fight again in the future if any government tries to put a nuclear waste dump in

South Australia because, unlike the members opposite, we will always put the interests of the state above party. I would like to challenge the Premier to state publicly that the history of this state and the ecology of Torrens Island is not in the best interests of this state to be preserved.

We have the other ministerial statement of the war on locusts. A paragraph here states that, if left unchecked, there are wide ranging ramifications beyond the agricultural sector, including damage to football and cricket ovals, bowling greens, golf courses, parks and gardens. Putting this into perspective, if football and cricket ovals, bowling greens, golf courses, parks and gardens require attention and our protection, then I am sure that members here would agree that Torrens Island requires at least that amount of consideration.

Debate adjourned on motion of Hon. J.S.L. Dawkins.