

The Hon Alan Carpenter MLA  
Premier of Western Australia;  
Minister for Federal-State Relations; Trade;  
... Innovation; Science; Public Sector Management,  
24th Floor, Governor Stirling Tower,  
197 St George's Terrace  
PERTH WA 6000

Fax: (08) 9322 1213

20 February, 2007.

Dear Premier,

Re: Proposed Hotel – Rottnest Island.

I write as a voting West Australian citizen with a long time love of Rottnest Island. Since the days of the Burke government I have admired and at times contributed to the work of the Rottnest Society. The objectives of this Society are firmly founded in an understanding of, and respect for, the special nature of the Rottnest Experience<sup>1</sup>. Such understanding and respect was nowhere in evidence in the days of Brian Burke, Alan Bond and Laurie Connell ... and it was the outrage provoked by their plans to turn Rottnest into a Pacific Rim Playground (their geography was somewhat askew) that gave birth to the Society.

While I am sure that this would be well known to you, it is nonetheless worth restating here since the current proposal has a familiar ring. The proposition way back in the early eighties was seen by the Rottnest-loving public as something that would result in irrevocable change to the nature of the experience which generations of West Australians had enjoyed on the Island. In essence, it is a place of simple peace where family relationships can be strengthened and the spirit healed. They feared that these subtle, yet invaluable, treasures would be lost if the Tourist Playground concept were to take hold, since it would require changes intrinsically antipathetic to that which already existed.

To many, particularly well traveled, visitors from overseas on day trip excursions, the Island is stark and unattractive in its semi-arid embrace. But for those who stay for just a few nights, the ambience soaks in and relaxation is guaranteed. The simplicity of a fishing rod in hand, sand between the toes, sparkling waters and the scent of sun cream filtered sea breeze remind one of the true meaning of wealth. They are, you might say, the 'family silver' of Rottnest. It

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*1 This generic term should be familiar to anyone who presumes a leadership role in the West Australian community. The Rottnest Society speaks of it in terms of a simple, egalitarian holiday experience in which self-directed activities are carried out in natural surroundings – but see also G Seddon "The Rottnest Experience", J. Roy Soc of WA, 66, 34-40, 1983.*

would be a mark of leadership to recognize and protect such assets: to act otherwise for the sake of misguided commercialism would be an act of bastardry.

No doubt, it will be argued by the project's spin doctors that having a private four star hotel will have little or no impact on these precious things. But in that case, please let's hear the arguments in favour of such a position. The burden of proof of "little or no impact" should rest with the project proponents<sup>2</sup>. It should not be for the common man to scratch his head to figure out the pros and cons.

Yet for those in the community who might try to do just this, the balance sheet appears very one sided against proceeding. The additional load on infrastructure such as water, power, sewage, transportation and staffing accommodation leap to mind as negatives. While these are not *per se* inimical to the Rottnest Experience, it is the features which will almost inevitably 'need' to be added later in order to make the hotel a viable proposition that are really worrisome.

The Chairman of the Board has made the case on ABC Radio that the hotel will bring much needed winter guests to the Island. By itself this makes no sense - especially if the accommodation in question is at the expensive end of the tariff spectrum. Surely, if the current features of the Island fail to attract in the depths of winter, numbers could only be increased by attracting a completely *new class* of visitor – ones with no *a priori* appreciation of the substance of the Island's riches. These new visitors would surely have every right to expect a wide range of 'out of session' experiences.<sup>3</sup> Yet Rottnest can offer only itself – tidy, clean and comfortable to be sure – but despite its subtle ambience, uncompetitive with the attractions of a major metropolis.

So what will the government do when the developer argues, down the track, that the hotel cannot make end meets over the slack winter period because without additional attractions available to congress delegates, numbers are simply insufficient? Will the taxpayer have to come to the rescue by bailing out the developer? Or will the taxpayer be forced to acknowledge that the only solution (a band-aid at best) would be to accept a fundamental sacrifice of the Rottnest Experience.

At the turn of the last century, the Act which established the guidelines for public access to Rottnest recognized its special nature as a place for family recreation. The Rottnest Society has been true to this concept since its inception. The present proposal appears to be in intrinsic conflict with the both the Act and the Society. It should not be considered without a full impact statement which includes not only the usual built and natural environment but also matters of social capital and contentment.

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<sup>2</sup> *The TNS offers them no comfort!*

<sup>3</sup> *I have experience in organizing conferences in Perth across the entire range – from small local interest groups, through national congresses to full-scale international meetings. Delegates to the latter groups may be strongly attracted to Perth as a venue, but to a large extent this is because of its broad spectrum of available activities. No attempt should be made to match these on Rottnest Island. Moreover, I suggest most conference organizers would quite properly worry about the accessibility of the Island in winter. A delayed ferry, or perhaps an enforced stay over on the Island, may be an acceptable risk to West Australians, but for those with international flight connections it could present serious headaches.*

Just as I began with a reminder, I'd like to conclude with another – this time of special relevance to you as Premier of this my home state. The following words are taken from your predecessor's Foreword<sup>4</sup> to "Consulting Citizens: A Resource Guide 2002":

*"Consultation promotes active citizenship by encouraging individuals to provide real input into public life and decision-making. The benefits of genuine consultation, involving listening and actively responding to concerns and issues raised, cannot be overstated. It means decision-makers are better placed to make informed judgments by tapping into fresh ideas and new sources of information. For individual citizens this provides an opportunity to express their views and influence the outcomes of decisions that affect them.*

*Decisions that have been reached through a consultative process carry greater legitimacy and credibility in the community. Engaging the community in decision-making builds trust within communities and in our democratic systems of government. It can lead to new partnerships between citizens and policy makers through a shared sense of ownership of the issues that impact on us as a community."*

I was moved by these words when I first read them and I was proud to have supported a political movement which could create them.

Please put this proposal from Landbank on hold until the issues raised above are adequately addressed. I do not ask that you simply wait for calmer weather before giving final approval – rather I ask that you show genuine leadership and air the issue thoroughly with the community by inviting proper submissions to be reviewed by a fully independent panel.

Due process offers an ideal tool to arrive at a solution owned by the community. It might also help lay the ghosts of twenty years ago once and for all as far as Rottnest is concerned.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Cyril Edwards.

Cc Convener, The Rottnest Society.

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<sup>4</sup> Note also the following quote from the OECD Report "Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy Making (Caddy & Vergez 2001)"

*"Engaging citizens in policy-making is a sound investment and a core element of good governance. It allows governments to tap wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions, and improves the quality of the decisions reached. Equally important, it contributes to building trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity."*