

Commentary

Trust me, Paul's right

THIS column has been critical of the petty provincialism of much of the discussion about the future of Hobart's waterfront.

However, the Lennon Government seems to be heading in the right direction — finally. Perhaps it's because it has entrusted the project to some of the more open-minded and less politically slavish bureaucrats, such as project leader Geoff Gilmore.

Premier Paul Lennon was right to get Hobart City Council out of the centre of the picture. The HCC's record on planning issues is one of dysfunctionality, laziness and myopia.

Still, state governments don't always get it right, either. Take Sydney's Darling Harbour: an appalling collage of tizziness and rank commercialism with all the appeal of a Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra concert rehashing film music favourites.

Mr Lennon, though, looks to be heading in the right direction through the creation of an independent waterfront authority that will be advised by an expert panel. He has the opportunity to appoint world-class designers, visionaries and business people to these institutions. The temptation to appoint Labor mates must be resisted. (Last week I heard the names of Honey Bacon and Judy Tierney, a former journalist, mentioned. With respect to both, they are not what we want for this authority.)

If not conflicted, the Lennon Government could do worse than select Richard Blythe, Gerard Reinmuth or Scott Balmforth, of the leading Australian firm of Terroir, to sit on the advisory panel or the authority. (As an aside, it seems extraordinary that Terroir's brilliant Peppermint Bay hotel development — one of only six Australian exhibits at the Venice Biennale this year — missed out on a Tasmanian architecture award!)

The Lennon Government appears to be fixed on the idea of the waterfront being the cultural quarter for Hobart. It wants to address



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the disgrace that is the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, a matter upon which this column has campaigned for some time.

Opening up the gallery, expanding it and turning it to the waterfront will be an early development opportunity in what the Government says is a 10-year redevelopment and enhancement process.

Despite the criticism and cynicism levelled at the waterfront development process so far (and it has to be said the Government's PR has been about as effective as Walker Corporation's efforts to convince Ralphs Bay residents that canal developments are a good thing), it does seem consultation and the fundamental right of appeal will be the order of the day. All existing appeal rights relating to the waterfront area will be retained and the Government has decided to allow the waterfront authority's decisions to be subject to the Judicial Review Act.

One of the important philosophical underpinnings of the Government's approach to the waterfront issue is establishing processes that avoid more Zero Davey-type developments.

In contrast to the intellectually indefensible attitude of Hobart Mayor Rob Valentine that you can't legislate for good design, the Government is going to establish what it calls a "pro-active, rather than reactive" approach to development.

There will be a long process of draft development plans, consultation with existing users of the waterfront area and the Resource Planning and Development Commission will hold hearings on these plans.

The waterfront authority will act as facilitator and developer and

work in partnership with proponents of developments.

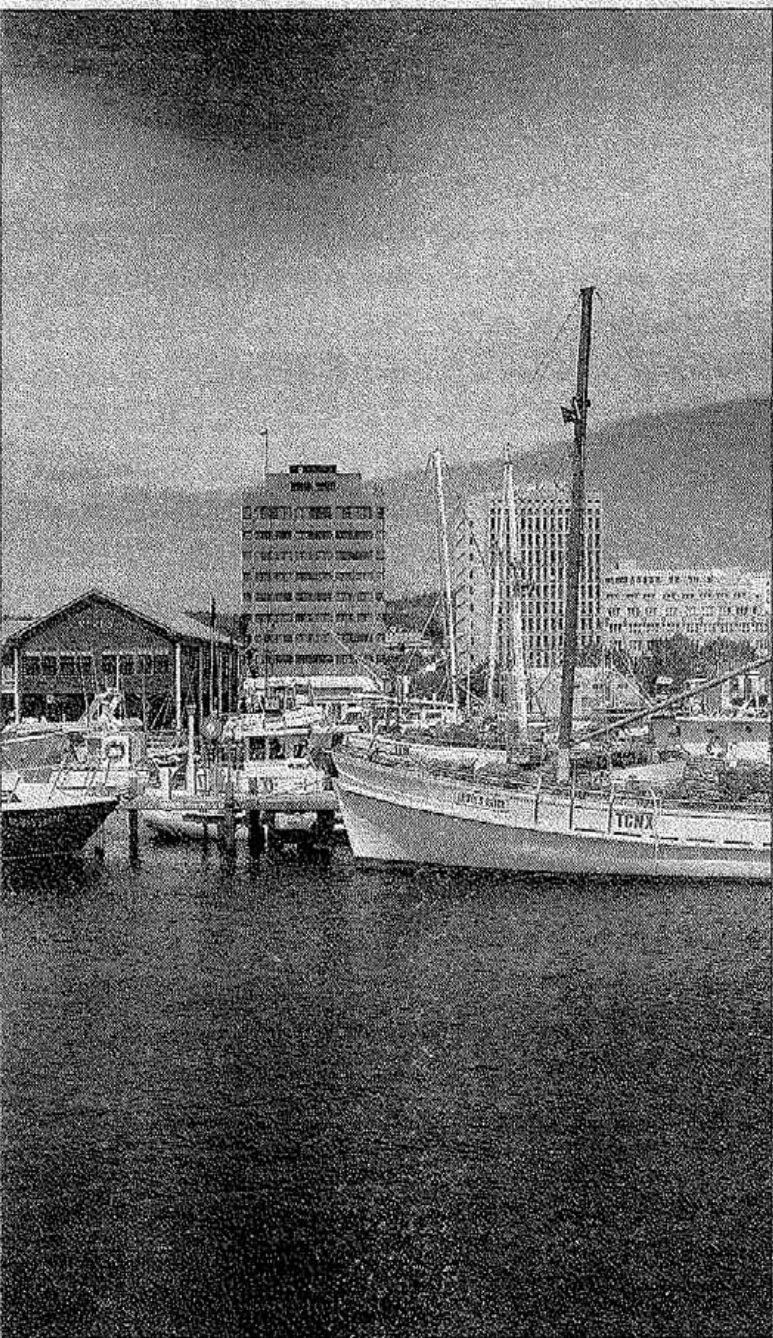
There is talk of international architectural design competitions for such areas as the Art Gallery and there is a sense the Lennon Government has grasped the notion that thinking outside the square and with unprecedented vision might actually be an exhilarating experience.

Three suggestions for the Lennon Government. First, a perfect chair for the authority would be former prime minister Paul Keating. Although he's a "Labor mate", Keating's knowledge and vision about architecture and good design is second to none in Australia. He is also passionate about music, art and the capacity of architecture to enhance democracy.

Second, let's ensure there is low-income housing in the waterfront area. Developers should not be allowed to get away with building apartments for the wealthy — perhaps we could pull down Zero Davey and develop that as a low-income housing site. Low income earners have as much right to live in prime areas as the rich.

Third, if we are serious about turning the waterfront into a cultural quarter, let's build a decent concert hall/performing arts centre. Vision and desire would see a space that envelops the water and meshes with it. The present concert hall is bland and looks like the water tower for the Grand Chancellor.

The Lennon Government is heading down the right path on our waterfront. Perhaps to enhance its credentials it could put an end to the Ralphs Bay proposal at the same time.



RIGHT DIRECTION: The Hobart waterfront.