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Dear Attorney General

Courtroom ONE – existing Supreme Court Building

This letter sets out the proposal that the internal fitout of **Courtroom ONE** **should be retained** in situ in its present form, in the way the heritage report (see below) says it should be, and asks that you support and bring about that proposal.

There is an **urgency** about this. **Demolition** of the internal fitout **could start by the end of this month** (September), or early next month.

Background

Most if not all legal practitioners will be aware of the renovation and significant extension project of the ACT courts complex. However, many are not aware of the intentions about demolition of the old court rooms in the existing Supreme Court building.

The building itself is being retained with heritage status, and

(a) the atrium is to be removed

- (b) courtrooms 3,4,5,6 are to be demolished entirely, and the area to be replaced with smaller rooms for administrative work areas
- (c) courtrooms 1 and 2 are to be retained as courtrooms, but are to be refurbished in a style to match the courtrooms in the new part of the building
- (d) The stately **old timber adorning all the courtrooms is to be removed**, and a significant part of the timber cut up for furniture.
- (e) Parts of the timber are also to be used for interpretive displays.

This proposal

Do not alter the existing Courtroom ONE – except to install IT improvements to make it as fully IT functional as the new courtrooms.

This would entail leaving in situ:-

- the bench, and timber façade behind the bench,
- jury box, and witness stand,
- associates desk, and monitors desk,
- bar table and chairs,
- all public seating,
- timber adornments on all walls,
- and (very significantly) the two sets of double doors.

Below is a photo of Courtroom ONE as presently fitted.



The existing Courtroom ONE

Heritage Status and History

Before proceeding with the planning for the site, a heritage assessment of the building was undertaken. The report is 186 pages and was provided by Phillip Leeson and Partners.

The assessment recommended the retention of the whole frame of the building, the commemorative plaques and front doors of the building.

It stated, in general:

- (a) That the "stakeholders" were JACS, Cwlth dept, NCA, Heritage Council - P16.
(That is, there were no "community types" consulted, eg lawyers)
- (b) No research was undertaken in relation to community values - P119 (It does not say why not)
- (c) It is highly valued by the legal profession - P121, but questions whether the legal profession is a "cultural group".
(There was no research on this question as part of the assessment.)

In relation to the interior of the building

- (d) Courtroom 1 is panelled in NSW Red Cedar - P90
(This was a donation from the state of NSW. The other courtrooms were from other states)
- (e) Simplicity and quality of interior furnishing and donated timbers was part of a collaborative national gesture - P125 and 126
- (f) Panelling and plaques in each Court room "should be conserved. **If it is not possible to retain them in situ, then ...**" P143 and 146

The Supreme Court website includes:

"Supreme Court Moves to the Law Courts Building

The Supreme Court occupied its present accommodation when the Law Courts Building, situated in Knowles Place on the Western side of City Hill, was opened by Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, in 1963. The first sittings of the Court in its new premises took place on 9 May 1963.

The Law Courts Building was built for the National Capital Development Commission by Clements Langford (Canberra) Pty. Ltd. Consultant Architects for the project were Messrs Yuncken and Freeman. Although designed of contemporary materials and construction techniques, the building follows traditional lines of court architecture. Its exterior walls are of polished grey Wombeyan marble, with replicas of the Australian coat-of-arms above the two main entrances. A notable feature of the building is the glass-sided open atrium extending the height of the two-storey building. A significant feature of the courtrooms on the ground floor is the use of

timbers donated by, and representative of, the six States of the Commonwealth. Each State provided timber for the panelling and furniture of one of the six courts as follows:

New South Wales – Red Cedar;
Victoria – Mountain Ash;
Western Australia – Jarrah;
Queensland – Silky Oak;
South Australia – Red Gum; and
Tasmania – Blackwood.

https://courts.act.gov.au/supreme/about_the_court/court_jurisdiction_and_history#history

Commentary

It is rather tragic that no courtrooms are to be retained in their original form – not even Courtroom One, which has seen thousands of new practitioners take their oaths and affirmations for admission to the legal profession since 1963.

That room could be, and should be, kept in its existing form as a physical reminder of the history of the rule of law and justice in the ACT. The darkness of its wooden panelling and its "60s" design would provide a stark contrast to the daylight that is to flood our new Court rooms.

All the existing timber features (including the two double entry doors) could be retained, and the Courtroom maintained in its present layout. Any additional IT requirements could and should be installed to enable that Courtroom to continue in a fully operative way.

If there is any cost to the Project resulting from the cancellation of that part of the refurbishment, it is unlikely the additional amount would be more than the saving from not refurbishing. That is, a likely net saving.

There does not seem to be any reason for the change in the fit-out of that Courtroom, except to bring about uniformity with the other court rooms. Not having that uniformity is the very reason why the change should not be made. It will stand out different, and as a monument to its time. The attraction that comes from the retention of the building structure will be significantly degraded if the "heart" is ripped out.

My informal and ad hoc enquiries have indicated support for the retention of the existing fitout. I am seeking more identifiable support via a petition.

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(Lawyer – admitted in Courtroom ONE)
6 September 2018