

Bipartisan call to save our Victoria Barracks

In addition to being an Australian heritage jewel, Victoria Barracks Sydney still plays a vital role in national defence and emergency healthcare.

Military and medical response helicopters landing on the grounds are telltale evidence of its strategic and civil role.

The choppers could be carrying commandos practising anti-terrorism drills or delivering transplant organs to nearby St Vincent's Hospital.

Each is a vivid reminder that Victoria Barracks is not only the spiritual home of the Australian Army at a time when veterans are struggling for identity, but it also has a key contemporary role.

The Save Victoria Barracks Coalition aims to dissuade the federal government from selling it off in a dispersal of defence property to raise \$1.8bn.

Why would the government spend hundreds of millions of dollars to rent space in Defence House in the CBD when Victoria Barracks can do more?

When Australia's strategic environment is so uncertain, we should heed retired Lieutenant-General Ken Gillespie, a former chief of army, when he says Victoria Barracks is essential to national security.

It provides the ADF with a secure operational base close to the city. Its location enables rapid deployment during major emergencies, security incidents, state occasions and national events. That capability cannot simply be relocated without significant cost and operational consequences.

Victoria Barracks' civil role in conjunction with St Vincent's Hospital deserves far greater public recognition.

Critically injured trauma patients and transplant recipients rely on this capability where every second counts. Anything that jeopardises this arrangement must be rejected.

Our coalition knows that Australia faces a housing supply crisis, but looking at Victoria Barracks for a solution is looking in the wrong place. The coalition supports practical, long-term solutions for more housing where it is needed, including on other defence properties involved in the review, such as a depot in nearby Randwick.

Our opposition to any sale of Victoria Barracks is sensible and responsible.

This debate is not about choosing between housing, heritage or defence capability. It is about recognising that some national assets are simply too important to sacrifice, particularly when better alternatives exist.

And, yes, Victoria Barracks' heritage value is important. It is Australia's premier colonial-era military complex and remains an active operational headquarters for the Australian Army. It is not surplus land.

Once an asset of this importance is sold, it is gone forever. It is one of the country's most significant heritage sites long supported by the National Trust and countless historians, veterans and community organisations.

Great cities preserve the places that define their identity, but retaining Victoria Barracks does not mean ignoring the housing crisis. Quite the opposite.

There are far more appropriate locations capable of delivering substantially more housing without compromising national security or destroying irreplaceable heritage.

The redevelopment of Parramatta Rd, Victoria Rd and the Great Western Highway presents enormous opportunities to unlock tens of thousands of new homes alongside existing transport corridors, employment centres and supporting infrastructure.

There is also the important question of fiscal responsibility. Expanding defence operations at Victoria Barracks and consolidating more functions there would reduce leasing costs, improve operational efficiency and deliver better value for taxpayers. Rather than shrink the role of Victoria Barracks, Australia should be strengthening it.

Our coalition is pleased that the federal opposition has vowed to oppose the sale of Victoria Barracks. The federal government can retreat on Victoria Barracks without losing political face. Australians would overwhelmingly support a strategic withdrawal.

Dr Marjorie O'Neill MP, state Labor Member for Coogee; Greg Warren MP, state Labor Campbelltown; James Griffin MP, state Liberal Member for Manly; Hon David Elliott, former state Liberal minister; Vincent Williams CSC (Retd), RSL NSW president; Ray James OAM, RSL NSW past president; Paul Nicolaou, Business Sydney executive director