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Army 'reform' is a shameful retreat, a moral failure

The proposed sale by the Department of Defence of Sydney's Victoria Barracks in Paddington is not a reform, it is a retreat. It represents the culmination of decades of quiet dislocation that have slowly pushed the Australian Army from the civic and cultural heart of Sydney. To sell it now, under the rhetoric of "asset optimisation" or "unlocking value", is to confuse efficiency with erasure. What is at stake is not just a building, but a living repository of military history and identity, a cornerstone of the army's soul and Australia's story.

Built from sandstone in the 1840s, Victoria Barracks has been the enduring home of army command in NSW. It has stood through Federation, two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the long campaigns in the Middle East. Its parade grounds have sent off generations of soldiers; its corridors have echoed with the decisions that shaped both conflict and peace. It is not merely a workplace, it is an archive in stone, a testament to service, sacrifice, and continuity.

Yet the decision to dispose of it is being justified as though it were no more than a property transaction. Such reasoning betrays an impoverished understanding of value. This is not about "rationalisation" or "modernisation"; it is about political convenience, a fiscal sleight of hand to mask the widening gap between defence ambition and defence investment. Selling heritage to fund hardware is false economics.

This pattern is not new. Over the past 50 years, successive "reforms" have hollowed out the army's presence in Sydney. The School of Military Engineering left Moorebank; the 2nd Division was decoupled from its historic city ties; artillery, logistics, and reserve units once based at Marrickville,

Penrith, and Georges Heights were closed or consolidated. Each reform was sold as progress; each pushed the army further from the public eye. By the 1990s, Victoria Barracks was the last bastion of a visible army in Australia's largest city. Now, even that anchor is being loosened.

The Australian Labor Party, more than any other, should understand the symbolic cost of such a loss. When the Tree of Knowledge in Barcaldine, the birthplace of the ALP, was poisoned in 2006, the nation grieved because something irreplaceable

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had been destroyed. That tree was more than timber and leaves; it was the living embodiment of struggle, solidarity, and the party's moral roots. Labor acted swiftly to restore it, understanding that without that symbol, its story would be diminished.

The same principle applies here. Victoria Barracks is to Australia's national history what Barcaldine's Tree of Knowledge, Melbourne's Trades Hall, or the old wharves at Woolloomooloo and Fremantle are to Labor's own history – physical embodiments of identity and purpose. When Labor protects those sites, it is protecting itself; when Defence Department officials willingly discard their own, it is disowning part of the nation's history and character, which is, frankly, not theirs to sell.

The economic argument for disposal, that the site could be sold to fund new capabilities, collapses under scrutiny. No proceeds from heritage real estate will meaningfully shift the dial on Australia's strategic underinvestment. Billions are required for submarines, missiles, cyber, and space programs; the sale of Victoria Barracks would barely register as a rounding error in that ledger.

More importantly, the message it sends is corrosive: that heritage can be traded for efficiency, and that cultural continuity is expendable in the face of budgetary expedience. Such thinking reduces Defence to an accountant's game, capability measured by spreadsheets, not spirit. The army's effectiveness is not solely a result of equipment; it rests on the culture that sustains its people. Victoria Barracks embodies that culture, with its continuity of mentorship, camaraderie, and the lived tradition of service that binds generations of service and sacrifice. To sell it is to sever the army from its own narrative.

There is also a broader civic dimension. Victoria Barracks has long been a bridge between the army and the Australian public. Its presence in the heart of Sydney reminds citizens that their defence force is not remote or theoretical, but an integral part of the nation's shared life. To retreat behind the walls of Canberra or to outer-city compounds is to make the army invisible, and, in doing so, to make it easier for a disengaged public and parsimonious policymakers to forget its worth.

Australia does not suffer from an excess of heritage, but more from a deficit of memory. The sale of Victoria Barracks would not make the army stronger or more agile; it would make it smaller in spirit and weaker in identity. It would be an act of vandalism disguised as fiscal prudence, a retreat masquerading as reform.

Like the poisoning of the Tree of Knowledge, selling Victoria Barracks will one day be remembered as a moral failure; a moment when those entrusted with an important stewardship of national significance chose short-term benefits over long-term heritage.

The army's roots, like Labor's, run deep, but even the strongest roots cannot survive if the ground beneath them is sold.