

Comment

Fan is a brilliant symbol of the suffrage of women

Arguments about height, cost and completion date are just excuses from philistine – and sexist – politicians, writes Davina Jackson.

AMANDA Vanstone and her Office for the Status of Women need to think again about dumping the proposed suffragette memorial for Canberra. Minor bureaucratic bungling by the National Capital Authority and predictably sexist opposition from die-hard old blokes like Bill Heffernan are lame reasons to abandon this brilliant design for a windmill commemorating more than a century of women's activism in Australia.

It is named the Fan, partly because of its moving blades, but also in memory of the fans often carried by the suffragettes who chained themselves to fences to demand the vote for women about the turn of last century.

On Monday, Vanstone's office claimed that it was finished with the Fan because Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, the artists who won the memorial design competition, were not able to fulfil their contractual obli-

gations of producing the specified artwork on budget and by the specified date, December 16.

But the memorial was commissioned last year as a political announcement to coincide with the Centenary of Suffrage then. Now there's no reason why specific completion dates can't be postponed a few months. Only last week, the artists were told it was fine to finish in February.

Also, the Government has always known (from its quantity surveyor) that this work of art would cost not \$600,000 (the competition budget) but more like \$1 million. It has gone ahead anyway, aware that this is not a normal static sculpture. It is an architectural marvel requiring complex wind-responsive mechanics.

Turpin and Crawford – Australia's greatest artists with water and wind – often face a glass ceiling with Australian budgets for public artworks. Usually between

\$50,000 and \$500,000, these simply are far too stingy to build their large and moving environmental installations.

Also, public art budgets are way below those for static structures designed by or involving architects (mostly male). For example, the 30 giant red sticks that confront City Link motorists arriving in Melbourne are thought by their architects to have cost \$100,000 each, suggesting a total cost of about \$10 million for the whole urban art ensemble.

A federal comparison is the Department of Veterans Affairs' initial budget of \$4.8 million (now \$9 million) to build an Australian war memorial in London's Hyde Park.

Several whingers have complained that the Fan shouldn't be built on Walter and Marion Burley Griffin's main Canberra land axis from Parliament House to the War Memorial. Nonsense! This ceremonial line of sight is interrupted by a new monument to reconciliation with Aborigines, is littered with memorials to men who died in war, and is long overdue for a strong feminine symbol on line in the parliamentary triangle. Vanstone should be proof to her

Y-chrome colleagues that girls are already playing on this patch of hallowed turf.

Much has been made of its 16.5-metre height and "competitive" physical relationship to Old Parliament House. But there need be no worries on this point.

Languidly waving in the wind (to be shut down mechanically in storms), this sculpture would sit comfortably with Old Parliament House framed by the raised roofs of the old chambers.

This would be one of the few things in Canberra that actually moves. Apart from cars driving circuitously, trees shimmering in the wind and the gentle rippling of Lake Burley Griffin, everything else in the place looks static – precisely the city's problem.

Contrary to published images that show the Fan in bright red, the real thing would be more like the tone of Australia's terracotta earth (either rusty steel or powder-coated). This would visually link it to the terracotta roadway leading up to the War Memorial on the other side of the lake.

Good news. Canberra has enough memorials to bloodshed without the women's movement contributing other lurid allusions.

Controversy about the Fan needs to be understood within the broader issue of a tendency by federal politicians to thwart or destroy important works of art which they don't understand or don't like for political reasons.

Another case is the Government threatening to rip up the Garden of Australian Dreaming outside the National Museum on Acton Peninsula.

It is different, unusual, ironic, and not to everyone's taste, yet it is undoubtedly one of Australia's most important environmental installations of the postmodern period.

And, of course, the first great Canberra work of art – the Burley Griffins' 1912 plan for the city – has been mangled repeatedly by successive governments.

Although amazing works of art are often initially controversial – that's the point about amazement – our culture suffers if polities are allowed to desecrate our heritage classics of the future.

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