

Opera car row isolates a civic virus

THE NSW Minister for Public Works has given in very easily to the builders laborers black ban on the planned car park for the Sydney Opera House. The Builders Laborers Federation objected to the State Government's plan on the grounds that it involved the destruction of the ancient Moreton Bay fig trees in the Royal Botanic Gardens above the site.

Although the NSW chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, who backed the laborers, suggested that there were viable alternatives to the Government plan, Mr Hughes, the minister, has now decided to give up the car park scheme altogether. It almost looks like sour grapes.

In principle, of course, it is quite undemocratic that Mr Jack Munday, the NSW secretary of the BLF, should be acting as the last court of appeal on town planning matters in Sydney. Mr Munday's seal of approval seems to be needed before an old building can be demolished or a new project erected anywhere near the centre of the city. This practice of a minority taking the final decisions on matters which affect everyone is just as elitist as the planning institutions to which Mr Munday objects. But in reality this development in Sydney represents a thorough-going indictment of the planning system in the whole of Australia. Sydney is a particularly bad example of the power exerted over areas of obvious public concern by self-perpetuating, self-appointed bodies. Innumerable bureaucratic institutions, from the Department of Main Roads down to the committee regulating the height of buildings, govern city-planning decisions without public opinion having a hearing at all.

Mr Munday's union and the NSW architects, minority groups as they may be, are about the only elective bodies who have been able to say anything at all positive about planning in the city of Sydney in recent months. Even the city council has seen its preferences about city planning overruled by the non-elective State Planning Authority—an institution where the ubiquitous bureaucrats from the Department of Main Roads hold more sway than officials nominally responsible to public opinion. If there is one outstanding lesson from the Opera House car park affair it is not that the builders laborers are particularly wrong, but that the processes of city planning need to be reorganised radically. The preferences of the people who live and work in the city and whose contributions maintain it should at least be heard at a decision level, instead of being represented in a diluted and unsatisfactory way through the unions and professional organisations.