

The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
DCMS
2-4 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 5DH

5th June 2006

Dear Minister

THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE

ICOMOS-UK wishes to protect strongly at the proposed move to de-list the Grade II* Commonwealth Institute in order to maximise the proceeds of any sale of the building and its grounds.

The planning processes in this country are intended to be open, transparent and completely lacking in bias: indeed the UK is often seen as a model for the way heritage legislation protects what is valued by society as a whole. If a Bill were to be put through parliament to de-list the Commonwealth Institute in response to pressure from its owners, we consider that this would completely undermine confidence in protective processes for all our listed buildings and give licence to many other owners who might wish to maximise the financial returns from their assets at the expense of protection and in the name of a 'good cause'.

The aims and worth of the Commonwealth Institute are not in question: neither is the merit of the Commonwealth Institute building. Suggesting that the former might benefit from the extinction of the latter would seem to be a licence for weighing up the value of a listed building against the potential benefits that its monetary worth might generate. Such a formula would remove any notion of the intrinsic value to society of our nation's best buildings, which should be protected by heritage legislation administered ultimately by the DCMS.

We strongly support English Heritage's views and their offer to discuss with the Commonwealth Institute how to optimise the potential of the existing building and its site. How to use listed buildings in a relevant way to benefit society today, is something that the UK prides itself on. We should be showing the rest of the world how to rise to the challenge of using highly value architectural masterpieces effectively – not giving in to pressure and suggesting that demolition can be justified if sufficient pressure is applied.

The Commonwealth Institute building cannot be seen in isolation: its use must be determined through normal planning processes if it is not to undermine completely the fundamental principles of our much valued and respected heritage legislation.

Yours sincerely,

Susan Denyer
Secretary, ICOMOS-UK