

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN SOCIETY Inc.

CANBERRA CHAPTER

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16 April 2018

Mr Ben Morton MP

Chair

Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

Parliament House Canberra

INQUIRY INTO CANBERRA'S NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Established in 1988 in Sydney, the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. commemorates the lives and works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin and promotes the ideals and vision they fostered for Australia. The Society has several hundred members from around Australia and the USA. The Canberra Chapter was formed in 2004 and has been particularly active in promoting their vision for Canberra and the continuing development of, and aspirations for, Canberra as a great national capital for Australia.

The Society has an abiding interest in the national cultural institutions, their precincts, their symbolic setting in the Central National Area and the collective and cumulative achievement of their respective functions in the long term. To this end, we have made many submissions over the years to the Joint Standing Committee with respect to funding, governance, outreach and public engagement issues involving these institutions. This present submission represents the considered and priority views of the Society.

Your Committee performs a vital role in regard to the national cultural institutions and these issues of funding and governance in particular. The Commonwealth Government and Executive Departments and agencies have altogether shown over the past decade a steady decline in interest, responsibility and commitment to the national institutions. They have failed to respond, positively if at all, to a host of emphatic Inquiries and reports of the Committee between 2004 and 2013 urging improved legislation, governance, democratic representation and consultation, profile, resourcing and outreach.

More recently, through the means of the Minister for Finance and his Department, budgetary measures and the alienation of public lands and buildings in Griffin's great National Triangle have degraded and threatened the viability of the national cultural institutions, almost without exception. Their resource bases are being depleted, not enhanced. Their statutory mandates are being treated with contempt. This policy is an echo of Paul Keating's view that a national Museum should not even be in Canberra.

Griffin planned a 'city like no other' to satisfy the 1911 design competition criterion of a national capital that would expand and develop in proportion to the growth and aspirations of the nation. It is regrettable that the national institutions are being degraded and depleted at a time for Australia of rapid growth in population, wealth creation, national identity and international status.

Most of the Society's submissions to your Committee have been directed at the National Capital Authority, whilst also embracing the National Gallery, National Library, National Museum and National Archives. The NCA is more a planning and coordinating agency than a cultural institution but it serves the same purposes of fulfilling Canberra's role as the national capital and is subject to similar issues. The submissions have persistently argued for the NCA to be given more resources and strengthened powers, but in vain. The NCA plainly lacks the capacity now to fulfil its statutory responsibilities.

In a submission to the *Parliamentary Joint Committee for Public Accounts and Audit Inquiry into the Impact of the Efficiency Dividend on Smaller Public Sector Agencies* (dated 28 July 2008) the Society listed attributes adversely impacted by the efficiency dividend:

- ❖ long term functions and strategic programs
- ❖ small organisational size
- ❖ critical mass of specialized skills
- ❖ maintenance of public awareness
- ❖ educational and symbolic functions
- ❖ representation of national identity
- ❖ role in domestic and international tourism
- ❖ productive leverage obtained through volunteer workforces.

These adverse impacts have compounded over the ensuing decade. The efficiency dividend has reached its use-by date, no longer produces any benefits and should be eliminated.

The most egregious example of the policy neglect, budget restraints and inappropriate financial measures is the National Archives of Australia, which has even lost its building. Like the other national institutions, it is handicapped in its core functions of research, collections, storage, outreach, engagement and its adoption of new technologies such as digitisation, but above all in the public exhibition, education and discourse respecting Australia's foundation documents.

The terms of reference of this Inquiry should be interpreted to comprehend the gravity of damage being done to the viability of Canberra's national cultural institutions and thereby to focus on the basic needs to refurbish their importance and restore their statutory roles and adequate resource allocations, without the burden of the efficiency dividend.

Brett Odgers

Convenor, Canberra Chapter

On behalf of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.