

Inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

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Summary of Main Points Raised

- The National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan need better integration. This could be achieved by a coordinating agency such as an expert committee with broad overview and integration responsibilities.
- The nationally significant landscape setting of the city, including the hills, ridges, mountains, lakes and urban forest, must be planned, designed and managed primarily for the national interest and in a holistic manner into the future.

Response to the Terms of Reference

1. The administration of the National Capital Plan with particular emphasis on the reduction of red tape and the duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of planning systems.

For almost 100 years the national capital has been planned, designed and developed for its unique purpose, as well as for a city that will support these functions. It has also expanded to be Australia's largest inland city benefiting from its association with the national capital. What has been achieved is a city with distinctive national and local attributes and character that is visually beautiful because of its planning, design and landscape setting.

This purposeful creation has not always been easy. There have been, and are, many competing and conflicting interests between national and local issues. The dual planning system of the National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan has evolved since self-government in 1989. The National Capital Plan serves national interests and is responsible to the Commonwealth of Australia through its designated Minister. The Territory Plan serves local interests and is responsible to the ACT Government through its Minister. Although attempting to align, these plans serve different purposes and have different responsibilities.

In order to protect the national interest it is essential that there be a suitable system of governance and funding to enable a body, such as the National Capital Authority, to effectively act as guardian of the national interest and determine future directions across the whole of the Territory, not just in designated areas. On the other hand, it must take into account the interests and concerns of the people who live, work and play in Canberra. The agency that oversees the Territory Plan needs to respond to the interests of the local constituency as well as be fully cognisant of its national capital context.

The alignment of these two plans needs clearer resolution if future national capital interests are to be protected and enhanced. One suggestion would be to have an agency, such as an external body of experts, to oversee the integration of the two planning systems.

2. Whether the governance arrangements for the NCA provide a sufficient balance between the independence of the Authority's planning decisions and its accountability for its operations.

Inadequate governance arrangements are evident in uncoordinated planning decisions such as the expansion of Canberra airport without consideration of its implications on road services or the orderly development of other commercial centres. This could have been resolved by an integrated approach to planning, perhaps by an overview agency.

3. The appropriate level of oversight required to achieve the highest standards of design for areas of national significance.

There are numerous examples of insufficient oversight and strategic thinking being given to planning and design proposals. Three recent examples are the proposed development of the Australian National Library campus, the Albert Hall Precinct and Old Canberra House. In these three examples heritage values and social values were poorly understood and not adequately addressed in the design proposals. Such examples reduce public confidence that national interests are being protected and enhanced. One suspects that inadequate briefing was made available to the commissioned consultants.

It is essential that any agency responsible for the planning, design and development of the national capital fully understand the context and values of the city before instigating proposals. This may require a strong research component be incorporated into the responsible agency.

4. Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increased engagement with the Canberra community.

Canberra is acknowledged as a beautiful city, largely due to its landscape setting and its designed landscape. This comprises its hills, ridges and mountains as well as its urban parks, tree-lined streets, planted gardens and water bodies. This nationally significant landscape was envisioned when the site was selected and given form in the renderings of Marion Mahoney Griffin and the design of Walter Burley Griffin. This landscape has been systematically planned, designed and managed primarily in the national interest as a visual resource since the 1920s. It also serves local functional, environmental and recreational roles.

There is a huge capital investment in this resource, but it is also under threat. Age, bushfires, drought and the prospect of climate change and sustainability are having major impacts on the landscape of the national capital. Although designated areas are considered national responsibility, these areas are dependent on the whole of Canberra to create the supporting setting. The annual budget mechanism of the Territory Government makes long term landscape planning subject to the vagaries of the economic climate. There needs to be a strong relationship between the Commonwealth and the Territory on how this asset is to be managed into the future.

Both national and local interests would be well served by a strong strategic research base. Research into suitable species takes time and would require the selection and trialling of species of known provenance and suitable methods of propagation and planting. This was the practice of the past and has served the city well. It should be reinstated and draw on existing local, educational and scientific knowledge and skills.