

The Committee Secretary,
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
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The terms of reference for the inquiry, referred by the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon Bob Debus, MP, provide for the committee to inquire into:

1. The administration of the National Capital Plan with particular emphasis on the reduction of red tape and duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of 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;
3. The appropriate level of oversight required to achieve the highest standards in design for areas of national significance;
4. Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increased engagement with the Canberra community;
5. The effective national promotion of the National Capital, and the roles of the NCA and the ACT Government in advocacy for new infrastructure projects including responsibility for events and developing the distinctive character of the National Capital. The committee has been asked to report by 30 June 2008. I wish to make the following comments in relation to the issues covered in the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the role of the National Capitol Authority in the planning and development of Canberra.

I have had a career as an engineer/town planner/urban researcher spanning fifty years. I have worked in state planning and local planning authorities and served on the board of public land development agencies. My most recent experience in the non-academic field in this area was to be a member of the Planning and Land Council of the ACT Government for the three years of its existence.

The separation of the planning powers between the Commonwealth Government and the ACT Government was thought not to be a sensible move at the time and experience has proved it not to be. The attempt to divide responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the ACT government by creating separate planning authorities was always bound to create difficulties. The planning and development of Canberra in recent years provides the evidence.

There is a need for the Commonwealth's legitimate interest in the national functions of Canberra to be protected from development that might be overly related to the domestic operation of Canberra. The simple separation of powers and the creation of two planning authorities the NCA to look after the national functions and the ACTPLA to look after the local or domestic issues has, however,

inevitably created a situation where there is a continual struggle between them for supremacy and has led to duplication of effort.

This separation has also been a wasteful use of scarce planning resources and works to the detriment of the two agencies. The apparently more prestigious NCA attracted and held staff but there are not enough national issues to fully exploit their talents. This has meant that they have tended to explore issues where the boundary between the Commonwealth's interest and the more 'domestic' concerns of the ACT are not and cannot be laid down clearly. On the other hand ACTPLA has not been able to attract or sustain the highest quality staff. It has not had senior planners of national experience and those it does have tended to be overburdened with more domestic issues or engaged in fruitless struggles with the NCA. The consequence is that the interests of both levels of government in the better development of Canberra are not well served.

The planners of neither level of government appear to understand the strengths of the leasehold system of tenure and the power this gives them to produce the development needed for Canberra. They have managed to introduce a planning system that mimics the failed planning systems employed in the states where the land is not in public ownership and recreates development the outcomes of those systems.

The way that development has occurred at Canberra airport has been to the disadvantage of the city as a whole is a good example of development that should have been seen as part of ACPLA responsibility yet was not. The result is that the airport development that is not related to the prime purpose of an airport viz to provide services for air travel has increased the burdens on the local residents and businesses that operate under ACTPLA planning. It adds to the environmental stresses that the citizens of Canberra must cope with and has reduced the efficacy of the airport as an airport to meet the needs of both the parliamentarians and businessmen who must travel through it and the local residents who might want use it or simply pass it by. Had there been more recognition by the NCA of both the national implications in this unplanned inefficient development and the effect of its development on the domestic life of the city many of the problems now experienced could have been avoided. Moreover, the energy and vitality now present on the airport site would have been welcome and sensible development in Gungahlin and the other town centres that make up Canberra.

That is, the airport development is a good example of how the separation of the planning and development interests of both levels of government has led to an unfortunate outcome for both and, of course, for the residents of the city.

One of the obvious failures in this unfortunate situation is that the location and way development has occurred has limited the

opportunities to develop a good public transport system.

Another illustration of the failure of the planning schizophrenia lies in the way that the transport networks and their development have not been able to address the problems faced in Civic.

Civic was the first of the 'centres' in the larger city. It has been the focus of intensive development which has meant that the other centres in Woden, Belconnen and Tuggeranong have not had the attention they deserve and the development of Gungahlin has proceeded largely on the assumption that it will be a 'dormitory' development to sustain Civic. One of the consequences of this focus has been that Civic itself is cut in two by a major traffic artery with the area to the west now essentially cut off from the retail and commercial development in the city.

The planning ambition is to encourage more people to walk yet the traffic management cycle on Northbourne Avenue takes two 'cycles' of the lights for pedestrians to cross which is a serious discouragement and means that such small businesses that do operate in the west of Civic do so 'disconnected' from the economic life of the centre.

To a large extent this division of Civic arises out of a pre-occupation with the so called 'Griffith Legacy'. The preservation of the road system defining the Parliamentary Triangle has meant that the planning by neither NCA nor ACPLA has paid sufficient attention to the problems that have emerged as the city has grown to more than eight times the population for which Griffin designed it. That is, there has been highly selective attention given to the desire to preserve what is claimed to be the Griffith legacy while significant elements of the Griffin Plan have been ignored. Much of this failure in planning has been due to the fact that there are two agencies with overlapping and conflicting responsibilities for the planning and development of the city.

The reality is that Canberra is a capital for a nation that has a different constellation of powers than existed between the states and Commonwealth at the time the Griffin Plan was devised. Canberra is of a scale that gives it a different role to play in the region in which it is located compared with those it was conceived to play. Its residents have lifestyles and concerns very different from those it was conceived to serve.

Canberra's consumption of eco-system services creates stresses in the bio- region in which it is located that are very different from those of a century ago and it will need to adapt in ways never imagined when the citing and nature of the city were decided. Climate change and peak oil will create stresses that will need to be resolved if the city is to have a sustainable future. None of these issues have received the level of attention we would expect planning authorities

responsible for the planning and development of the city to give them.

NCA has given some thought to how Canberra should respond to the regional environmental challenges the city faces. Unfortunately neither planning body has been engaged with or sponsored research into these issues. Both have slavishly followed fashions pursuing policies that, while dressed up as designed to address environmental issues, are not grounded in research evidence but serve to increase environmental stresses. Both have championed development policies that lead to reduction in bio-diversity. Both have pursued policies that privilege developer interests at the expense of the public. Both, surprisingly for public planning agencies, place greater weight on the short term than the longer term development of the city.

It does not seem to be beyond the capacities of our political leaders at the Commonwealth and ACT level to devise a system of planning and development administration to look after the interests of both levels of government and of the community that lives in Canberra.

I suggest that a National Capital Planning Council be created and charged with the responsibility to advise the two levels of government on the efficacy of planning and development of the ACT. Such a Council with a membership of seven to be appointed jointly by the Federal Minister for Home Affairs and ACT Minister for Planning. One member should be appointed as Chair and another as Deputy Chair.

Both the Federal Minister for Home Affairs and the ACT Minister for Planning would have the power to refer matters to the Council for advice on the sound development of the ACT.

The Council should report to both Ministers and through them to the Federal Parliament and the ACT Assembly on all matters affecting the planning and development of the ACT including those matters that might have national significance.

The Council should be supported by a planning authority which was staffed professionally and supported financially by both levels of government.

The transition from the present arrangements should be made to ensure that rights and entitlements of present staff of the NCA and the ACTPLA should be preserved but that it should be understood that some rearrangement of personnel will be necessary.

I would be happy to discuss issues raised by the Committee.

Yours faithfully

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