

Submission No: 14

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Secretary:

Inquiry into the Role of the National Capital Authority.

Brian Binning.

In a previous submission made to this Joint Standing Committee, I argued that the continuance of the NCA, with its present powers, was necessary to secure the distinctive character of the National Capital. In the time since that submission, the course of Canberra's development, and the mode of operation of its planning, have led me to change my views. I now believe a radical recasting of the mode of planning, and of its attendant administrative responsibilities, are needed for Canberra to fulfill its role as the Nation's Capital.

Apart from the differences of view which have arisen over such matters as the planning of the Gungahlin Parkway, and of the ACT Prison and Airport; the overriding issue is the adoption and initial implementation of a metropolitan "Spatial Plan" by the ACT Government, which fails to support the National attributes of the Capital. Insofar as this Spatial Plan fails to conform with the National Capital Plan; it also lacks any legal foundation. Yet the National Capital Authority has been silent on these matters, and seemingly lacks the capacity to address the issues. Instead, the focus of the Authority has been promotion of its "Griffin Legacy" proposals, allied to detailed planning of the National Triangle.

From its inception, the Planning of Canberra has relied on achieving a well-considered nexus between the heart of the Capital and its surrounding suburbs and open spaces. While retaining this principle, Griffin's founding Plan was modified in 1958, and further modified by the "Y Plan" of 1967. The Y Plan was (for its time uniquely) based on research that showed that to cope with rapid suburban growth accompanied by attendant rises in the use of the private car, a directed decentralization of employment was desirable. The research also showed that longitudinal extension of the arms of the Y , accompanied by a transfer of a large portion of inter-town travel to public transport, would be required as the population approached 500,000 inhabitants. Without these measures, the guiding premiss of the "Y Plan" was that the environmental quality of the Central areas would otherwise become badly congested as Canberra grew. In proposing to develop into NSW areas, The 1967 "Y Plan" further foreshadowed the need to develop areas within NSW, and called for co-operative Planning arrangements with the NSW Government.

The "Y Plan" depended on the Commonwealth using its powers, initiative and funding to implement what can be described as a "Federal Colonisation" of its newly designated Capital Territory. During this Post-War period, operations all aspects of new settlement were centrally directed. Both as a socio-economic and physical construct, many aspects of Canberra's development relied on acceptance of government's duty to plan and deliver a wide range of services. By contrast, this position has now been overtaken by the more pluralist attributes of contemporary society. This has important ramifications for the development of both the "spatial" and "non-spatial" aspects of the National Capital, which are developed in my conclusions to this submission.

When the NCA was first established, and following the devolution of State-level governmental powers to a new ACT Government, the lack of maturity of the ACT government led to the Commonwealth continuing to exercise control through its National Capital Plan. This included matters such as the Metropolitan Structure Plan, areas deemed to have National Significance, and for all the planning and implementation of development in Designated Areas.

As the ACT Government has matured, the retention of a wide range of these Commonwealth powers has increasingly been under attack: and not solely from the ACT Government, but equally from businesses and community groups critical of the resulting duplication and delays to development, and by the lack of accountability to the Canberra community.

These tensions are evident in matters such as the development along Main Avenues, the locations for new Parkways, and for differences of development priority (eg as resulting from the manner in which the Commonwealth's Airport disposal to the private sector subverted hitherto accepted planning norms). More fundamentally have been the actions taken by the ACT Government to override the National Capital Plan and to replace it with its own "Spatial Plan". Within NSW, Queanbeyan is now pursuing its own development initiatives, which respond to cross-border development pressures.

So today, we not only see the presence of several and often competing parties, but underlying these changes, private-sector development initiatives have seen the emergence of a strong axis of development, within and eastwards of Civic, through Fyshwich, to Queanbeyan, and further to Bungendore. The emergence of this axis builds on transport and inter-enterprise synergies, to such an extent that it would now be counter-productive for future planning to attempt to change this emphasis.

As already noted, a vital attribute of Canberra's planning has been the enhancement and protection of its Central National Area. And in this respect, Canberra uniquely has its Central National functions embedded within the communications and parkland systems of the surrounding city. Given the proposals of the ACT Government to develop large-scale residential areas in the Molonglo Valley, this conjunction would result in dramatically increased traffic moving towards the growing employment axis located to the east of Civic. This would have very serious consequences for the environmental quality of the Central National Area. The impacts could only be countered by accepting

the high costs of modifying the supporting infrastructure. Even if this proved feasible, my judgment is that there would only remain a partial chance of retaining desirable levels of National Capital quality.

The preoccupation of the ACT Government with the Molonglo Valley has some relationship to the devastation of this area by bushfires. A more likely cause could well be attributed to the evident determination of the ACT government to retain all development within the ACT borders, and to thereby maximize its revenue from land sales.

During the consultative process leading to its Spatial Plan, the ACT Planning Authority invited a small group of leading planners to comment on its proposals. Since members of this group failed to understand the motives and rationale behind the Spatial Plan, they asked for detailed briefings on a range of issues, wishing to convince themselves that the Plan was well-founded. After these issues were raised, questions went unanswered. The Planning Authority then disbanded the group. Members of this Committee might well understand that I, along with other members of the group, was disappointed by this outcome. I would add here that members of the group were not simply wedded to a wholesale retention of the "Y Plan". The group simply wished to see evidence and to give support to a professionally well-founded plan.

It was during this time that many looked to the National Capital Authority, expecting either comment, or even rebuttal. By its unilateralism, the Territory Government was subverting the powers of the Commonwealth, yet throughout the Authority remained silent. In this respect, my conclusion was that the lack of action by the Authority was clear evidence of a negligence of responsibility. It matters little that the Authority did not have the staff, resources, or capacity to plan; or that by circumstance it was ill-placed to undertake either independent analysis or to invite discussion and reach its own conclusions. However, the situation I describe demonstrates that effective metropolitan planning can only be achieved when resources and will are put to the task. And here by its failure, the Commonwealth is as responsible for the current impasse as is the ACT Government.

The last issue I wish to raise is that of defining and promoting the role of the National Capital. This should extend well beyond a narrow brief which addresses tourism, to encompass the far more challenging question of enhancing the Capital as a "melting pot"; in which business, academic, security, environmental, external relations issues of importance to Australia can be canvassed at an enhanced level.

In all these respects, matters now need to be brought to a head, and new ways forward found. In respect of spatial planning, dualism of responsibility for functions should be replaced by an administration which minimizes overlaps, has well-resourced components, and is acceptable to all the major parties: to the Commonwealth, to the ACT Government, and to NSW. In respect to the evolution of the National Capital functions in themselves, there needs to be a quite separate entity.

Addressing the more focused questions provided by the Terms of Reference:

Issue 1.

There should be a new metropolitan planning administration, funded and staffed by shared agreement between the three governments, and reporting to all three. This body would examine and research issues, maintain data, and develop alternative planning approaches. Governments should individually be able to input criteria, and to comment on outcomes. Major decisions would be made at a political level by the three participating governments. Until a new metropolitan plan has been agreed, adoption of the ACT Government's Spatial Plan should not proceed. The new Metropolitan Planning agency would be enduring, with staff levels and funding that would vary in line with needs.

Concurrent to the above, the Commonwealth and ACT governments should jointly develop a new and strategic level Central Area Plan. This would include the National Area, Civic, Fyshwick, and the Airport. The team doing this work would be provided by both the Commonwealth and ACT Governments. This planning entity would have a sunset clause which terminated when the work had been completed and in a specified time frame. The terms of reference for this team would include provision of development conditions and implementation mechanisms for areas such as Constitution Avenue, and the Main Avenues, and for Parklands. Once the new Central Area Plan had been adopted, responsibility for development of the areas noted above would be transferred to the ACT Government. The processes of producing this Central Area Plan would interact with the development of a new Metropolitan Plan.

Following the example of Washington, sole responsibility for planning and developing the Parliamentary Area and Anzac Parade would remain as enduring Commonwealth responsibilities.

Issue 2.

It is not possible to retain the independence and accountability of the National Capital Authority in its present form. Conflicts of role and responsibility are endemic, and accountability must be redefined in terms of the specific planning functions noted above.

Issue 3.

The question of oversight needs to relate to that of the relevant planning functions. For example, the new Central Area Plan should have input and oversight from government, business and professional groups; the planning and development of the Parliamentary Area should have oversight from an expert Committee, reporting to Parliament.

Issue 4.

Engagement with interest groups and the community at National, NSW, and ACT levels would be determined in relation to the respective planning functions.

Issue 5.

As regards the enhancement of National Capital functions, this discussion and any arrangements are quite new. I believe this work would best be conducted independent of the spatial planning functions/entities, but input ideas to them. It would report independently to the three governments.

The separate question of infrastructure funding needs to relate to the different tiers of planning. It also needs to relate to the reality that increasingly infrastructure is provided by the private sector, and planners and their methodologies need to contend with quite new methods which integrate planning objectives with development outcomes. The need for direct reliance on Government funding would be diminished, and in this way key projects would have greater chances of success.

Conclusion.

This submission holds that the current planning arrangements are outdated, dysfunctional, inefficient, and unduly reliant on initiatives from governments. The current concept of overlapping areas of interest should be replaced by a new hierarchy of planning functions, accompanied by appropriate administrative arrangements and lines of reporting.

Brian Binning is both an architect and town planner. He is a former Director of Strategic Planning and Urban Design in the NCA. In 1988, he established Brian Binning Consulting Services. He is a former member of the National Capital Regional Development Council and is the former Chair and currently remains a Board member of the Nature Conservation Trust of NSW.

Brian was responsible to the NSW Government for the evolution of the policies, planning and development documentation for the Rouse Hill Regional Centre in North West Sydney. This is being implemented as a joint venture development between government and the private sector, with the private sector constructing and handing back the required infrastructure. He has also advised the Commonwealth on the planning and future development of Canberra Airport.

Brian is now retired from professional life, and runs a farm near Yass.

