

The Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

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Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into allocation of land to diplomatic missions in the ACT

Submission by Don Anderson

Summary

The present practice of land allocation for embassies should be abandoned. It is inefficient leading to some land remaining unused for many years, to a good deal of underuse and to some inappropriate uses.

The concept of 'prestige sites' is flawed in that proximity to Parliament and Government agencies is not relevant to the effective functioning of embassies. And it is obnoxious if it implies that the government should assist countries wishing to advance their social standing (whether or not this is in return for favours). Poor countries with difficulties in establishing adequate representation in Canberra should be assisted via the foreign aid budget.

The concept of an 'embassy precinct' should be abandoned: it is flawed in that essential diplomatic and consular business involves little if any face to face interaction between staff of different embassies.

Future embassies should be located in Civic and in the business and administrative areas of Canberra's decentralised town centres. There should be ready access to public transport. Countries presently in the concentration around Capital Hill should be offered incentives to relinquish unused or underused land and to consider re-location. DFAT, with the assistance of the ACT Government, should meet Australia's obligation to assist foreign countries find suitable freehold or rental sites; the NCA role should be to ensure that the national interest is protected.

Reference 1: The role of NCA and ACT Government

The public interest ought to be of central concern when locations for embassies are being decided but, as the current imbroglio over reduction of Stirling Park illustrates, it is not being

well served by the two agencies that should be concerned. The NCA is in the invidious position of being obliged under legislation to respond to DFAT requests for embassy sites and at the same time protect and advance the interests of the national capital, in this instance protect the heritage and environmental values of Stirling Park and Stirling Ridge. Legislation should be amended so that, in the business of locating embassies, NCA's over-riding role is unambiguously to protect and advance the National Capital Plan.

The ACT Government's position in the current exercise is unclear; and, as with NCA, there are conflicting responsibilities. ACT is responsible for providing its citizens with recreational amenities and, in the present instance, protecting a widely used park (no survey has been made but probably hundreds of walkers daily) and also for protecting its environmental, ecological and heritage values. But, because of the poor deal done with the federal Government at the time of self-government, ACT is excessively dependent on developers and development for income. This has led to planning disasters such as Kingston foreshore, Acton Peninsula and, more recently, South Acton. In the present case DA78 issued by NCA in December 2012 would, if enacted, impinge on the extensively used recreational facilities around Yarralumla Bay; and this, along with the resumption of lake foreshore at Attunga point for the Lodge and realignment of Alexandrina Drive, has implications for traffic infrastructure costs, cycle paths and lake access that ACT Government should assess on behalf of its citizens.

Reference 3: Sustainability of current property types

A full survey of the lag time in uptake of allocated blocks, of the extent of use, and of the purposes for which the land is used is needed to document the inefficiencies of current processes. From the street the casual observer can see allocated blocks in the Yarralumla precinct remaining idle for many years: Pakistan for over 40, Iran for about 20, Russia for 10. In other cases substantial portions remain unused: USA about 2 ha between Perth Av and Akuna St since the 1940s, Spain a large block on the corner of Empire and Akuna for more than 30 years. France has about 2 ha fronting Darwin Av and a large site running through to Forster Cres where an unimpressive cottage occupies a prestige site. Further along Forster Cres Finland has built a splendid embassy but left the greater part of its block untouched. Similar inefficiencies can be seen in the O'Malley embassy cluster.

In 2005 the already vast Chinese Embassy was, without any public consultation, granted additional approx 2.5 ha across the entire Eastern end of Stirling Park, leading not only to the destruction of some of the Park's densest bushland, but also effectively limiting the use of a strip of land west of Flynn Drive.

As well as a survey of land use a review of the guidelines governing the purposes and uses of embassy sites would be timely. Now that land supply is an issue the priority given to amenities like swimming pools, tennis courts, large gardens, or staff residences might be questioned. The role of ACT government in approving building constructions and locations might be considered – the question is suggested as the Chinese annexe presently under construction includes what looks like a concrete bunker coming to within a couple of metres of its Forster Crescent frontage.

Reference 4: Options for Location

NCA discussion papers assume that the existing practice of clustering embassies in a precinct or 'diplomatic estates' should continue but it is difficult to see any advantages for the arrangement. Being near to Parliament is one of the proffered reasons, but formal contact with the law-makers is outside the role mission staff; and on the rare occasions that it may be necessary the trip to this pedestrian-unfriendly building will inevitably be by motor. Nor does embassy work call for much face to face interaction for staff with their counterparts down the road. And, if opportunities for casual socialising is the objective, the precincts in Yarralumla and elsewhere are social deserts, devoid of coffee shops, bars restaurants, shops or any other convivial meeting places.

There are alternatives to diplomatic enclaves centrally located or not. In most other capitals embassies are located in the administrative or business sections of the city. Canberra is unusual in having planned de-centralisation with sub-cities or town centres. And these or Civic or Northbourne Ave provide numerous opportunities for freehold or rental embassy sites. Embassies located in these places would provide staff and clients with better public transport and more convivial shops than is found in the present arid clusters.

Security may well be an issue and AFP could argue that greater dispersion of embassies would add to their work. On the other hand increased presence of AFP in the sub-cities of Canberra may not be a bad thing. In any event, while not wanting to under-estimate security needs, this concern should not drive the location issue.

Because Canberra is the national capital hosting foreign embassies is an important obligation; but this does not mean that it must go to the extent of alienating a piece of heritage bushland the like of which no other country has next to its centre of government.

Don Anderson, 30 January 2013