

Secretary,
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital & External Territories
Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

Inquiry into the Immigration Bridge Australia Proposal, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity of making a submission to this inquiry. Presumably the intention is for the Committee to look more closely at the project than has been possible to date.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a bridge across Lake Burley Griffin to commemorate immigration is an imaginative step forward from the approach adopted at the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour in Sydney. The proponent sees it as an “effective promotion of the national capital”.

While I am impressed with this unique idea, I am of the view that the proposal has considerable planning, design, construction, management, heritage and use implications for the Central National Area and Lake Burley Griffin. The Committee obviously needs to assess the project very carefully and thoroughly.

It would be very unfortunate if the completed bridge fails to satisfy the expectations of all Australians and becomes a point of long-standing contention. Given its prominent position it must be “right”.

In preparing this submission I have examined the following documents currently on public record:

- *Amendment 61–West basin* to the National Capital Plan which I understand has been approved by the Australian Government;
- *Draft Amendment 53–Albert Hall Precinct* to the National Capital Plan;
- Written submission by Immigration Bridge Australia dated 7 April 2008 to the Inquiry into the NCA in 2008; and
- The transcript of evidence and tabled document given to the Inquiry into the NCA in 2008 by Immigration Bridge Australia on 6 May 2008.

THE PROPOSAL

The proponent is proposing to finance and construct a large very prominent “major national infrastructure community project” worth \$30 million to be completed by 2013. It wants to do this in the Central National Area with the intention of handing it

over to the Commonwealth on completion. The proponent has no security of tenure over the site.

The other options considered by the proponent to commemorate immigration in the national capital have not been stated. Similarly the alternative sites on Lake Burley Griffin considered for the bridge have not been revealed.

Apart from its pedestrian function, the proponent says that the bridge will be “almost a museum” in its own right. Stories will be “told in sculptures on the bridge and on the surfaces of the bridge.” The deck will be 6 metres wide and the length 400 metres.

Immigration Bridge Australia says it has gained sponsorship and a wide range of support from “Australians in every state and territory.” In addition about 60 eminent Australians have agreed to be “Honorary Ambassadors for the Bridge.”

In evidence given to the Committee in 2008 it stated that it would be pursuing its proposal via a DA (Development Application). This will be prepared within the framework of the approved *Amendment 61* to the National Capital Plan. It said “consultation will be a major part of the process, through to DA”. The details of this consultation program have however not been stated.

An image of its current design proposal is given in one of the tabled documents. It is at “concept” stage and the proponent says “we will probably end up with a design that is far different to the concept.” However the nature and extent of the intended “significant changes” to the design have not been revealed.

PROCESS

It seems that the Committee will find it difficult to comprehensively assess the proposal on behalf of the Parliament unless it has information over and above what the proponent has already provided. In the absence of this additional information the justification for the proposal is, in my view, by no means clear.

I am unaware of any other large infrastructure project in Canberra that has been handled in this way. Why isn't the government itself designing and constructing the bridge to its own design, in association with the proponent, using the money provided by the proponent?

The conventional process for dealing with large infrastructure projects of this type is for a government to work towards a final design in stages. Stringent reviews are conducted at each stage to ensure that aspects unacceptable to the client (in this case the Commonwealth) are not carried through into later stages.

Examples of the sorts of things that, in my view, the Committee needs to consider as the proposal develops are as follows:

The need for a bridge:

The commemorative function is the dominant justification for the bridge. In its submission to the NCA inquiry the proponent included a letter of support from the

National Museum of Australia emphasising that the immigration theme “complements the museum’s role of celebrating Australian social history...”

In addition the Museum believes that the bridge will provide easier links with other institutions and enhanced museum visitor numbers. No quantitative information is however provided to support this assertion. At this stage of development of Canberra I doubt that the bridge will receive that much use of this type but perhaps the proponent may have more definitive data.

Whether cycling organizations have formally confirmed support for the bridge is not mentioned. Given that the present bridge concept appears to involve steps down to ground level the use of the bridge by cyclists seems far from attractive.

Location of the bridge:

The location of the bridge is far from ideal. The site selected is a very open and windy one. This seems unfortunate for those visiting the proposed bridge and viewing its interpretive material on the hand-rails and elsewhere. I suspect that the sailing fraternity will be concerned about a bridge here due to the suitability of the water in this area for sailing.

In addition because of the relatively flat southern bank a bridge at this site will be very prominent unless extensive and expensive earthworks are pursued as has been the case with the nearby Commonwealth Avenue Bridge.

Form and character of the bridge

I feel sure that there would be general agreement that the bridge needs to be designed to the highest standards to ensure that it does not have a negative visual effect on the authenticity of the lake as designed and constructed in the early 1960s. Consistency with the form and character of existing bridges is important in my view and this is recognised in the two published NCA National Capital Plan amendment documents – numbers 61 and 53.

At this stage of design development there are significant differences between what the proponent is proposing and what appears to have been approved by the Australian Government in *Amendment 61*. Public consultation preceded approval of this amendment and I would have thought that what was envisaged in that document needs to be adhered to.

The government’s intentions in *Amendment 61* appear to be for a slender bridge with a curved deck without roof that returns to the ground level on both banks. This approach reflects the form of the nearby Commonwealth Avenue Bridge and is similar to the two shorter pedestrian bridges crossing Parkes Way. The illustration also shows this bridge as a suspended one with large pylons on both banks supporting the cables. The visual impact of the pylon on the eastern bank would be reduced by the existing stand of the now very tall mature Lombardy poplars. Additional tree planting on the western bank could be needed.

I feel that questions must be asked as to the practicality of the intention indicated in this illustration, particularly its apparent low height that would prevent the passage of boats. If it has proved impractical to design the bridge in this way, as I suspect is the

case, the public have been misled and the government should withdraw approval of *Amendment 61* and review it.

This curved bridge form has been repeated in *Draft Amendment 53: Albert Hall Precinct*, although in this case the bridge is apparently higher and there is a spiral transition to the ground from the deck for pedestrians and cyclists.

What does the government really want?

By contrast the proponent's proposal at this stage is for a horizontal decked bridge with in addition a solar roof. The proponent has indicated that the solar roof is "not considered to be essential to the funding of the bridge at all."

Views of the Bridge:

In my view the proponent has proposed a bridge with a much greater visual impact on the lake's vistas (see illustration in its tabled document) than is envisaged in *Amendment 61*. Unlike the latter it gives the impression of a barrier. The deck is horizontal and covered with a roof and each of the ends finish well above the ground level of the banks. Presumably stairs are provided for the public to transition to the ground. It is unclear how the design will accommodate the needs of the disabled in wheel chairs.

Car parking associated with the bridge:

The nature and extent of car park areas at either end of the bridge is not stated. The proponent has confirmed to the Committee that they are not included in their project and that they see that as an Australian Government responsibility.

I do not think this is acceptable – parking should be an integral part of the design of any major infrastructure project that attracts public use, not as an after-thought.

It is to be hoped that we will not see a repeat of the crude way in which ad hoc paved carparks have been constructed on the lake foreshores in Acton Park near Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. The irony of these carparks is that once meters were installed they have received little use!

Heritage:

It would be difficult to argue that the proposed bridge reflects Walter Burley Griffin's original intentions for the lake. A pedestrian bridge at this site was never envisaged by Griffin nor by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC). The latter followed closely Griffin's original intentions in the 1960s.

I do not understand the proponent's statement to the Committee that it "... is clear now that such a bridge will also fulfil the original recreational plans of Walter Burley Griffin."

On-going management implications:

Assuming that the bridge goes ahead on-going management costs for the commemoration of immigration will presumably be greater than for other monuments in Canberra. I assume that the proponent will be submitting for assessment by the

government a detailed estimate of costs for on-going management of the bridge and its commemorative elements.

Given the experience with other commemorations in Canberra I would have thought that the proponent will be considering closely during its design process the potential vandal damage and the on-going costs of repairs. In this context I wonder whether the proponent considered housing such elements as plaques and sculptures in a more secure building at one end of the bridge.

CONCLUSIONS:

The above are some of the items I feel the committee should consider in its inquiry into this proposed very prominent high cost “major national infrastructure community project”.

Yours Sincerely,

(Dr) John Gray
Retired Landscape Architect

23 March 2009