

**Submission to:
The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External
Territories**

**From:
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Joint Standing Committee on the
National Capital and External Territories

Submission No: 21

Date Received: 9/4/2008

Secretary:

The Inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority

- 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 the ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of planning system.**

Canberra is a unique Australian city, the product of Australia's Federation, having a unique design and planning history, for its landscape setting and for its national functions. Being unique and the National Capital it requires a different form of government administration to other Australian cities particularly as all its land tenure was ceded to the Commonwealth for it to be a truly special national capital place.

The particular unique historic and national characteristics are primarily contained within the Designated Areas of Canberra. The Designated Areas¹ embodies the physical expression of our national democratic framework and is the landscape core of our nation. The Designated Areas is of national significance. The value of this landscape treasure has been suggested for World Heritage and acclaimed by numerous experts in published papers and books (such as Taylor 2007², Reid 2002³).

During the 20th Century Canberra developed as model city that followed Griffin's direction and conveyed his vision. By the end of the 20th Century it had become a remarkably sophisticated city with a large population well catered for in terms of social infrastructure. Although the Territory Government established

¹ The Designated Areas contain and are contained by ridges of naturally vegetated hills that form the immediate setting of central Canberra. The geometric framework of the city as laid out by Walter Burely Griffin is a cruciform of two axes the land axis from Mt Bimberi to Mt Ainslie and water axis from Black Mountain through Lake Burley Griffin. Lake Burley Griffin provides the central water setting of the city. Central to the Designated Areas and straddling the lake is the Parliamentary Triangle physically set between three low hills that form the vertices of the triangle and containing major national buildings of high architectural merit in a parkland setting. The Designated Areas also includes the diplomatic area, the major avenues that direct traffic into and out of the national capital, Commonwealth government offices, and national institutions such as CSIRO, the Australian War Memorial and the Australian National University.

² Taylor, K (2007) *Canberra, City in the Landscape*. Halstead Press and the Australian Government National Capital Authority.

³ Reid, P (2002) *Canberra Following Griffin, A design history of Australia's National Capital*. The National Archives of Australia.

in 1989 deals well with servicing the population needs it does not have the ability to service the national interests.

The difficulty that is arising with duplication and red tape and balancing duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of the ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of planning system appears to be where there is overlap between the area of national functions and the area of city municipal functions particularly within the Designated Areas.

The Designated Areas are the critical land and water mass of national (or possibly World Heritage) significance and although much of the land has been transferred to the ACT government for their administration some lands (National Lands) remain under Commonwealth administration. This creates a piecemeal planning and management arrangement of the Designated Areas with the ACT government administering part of the foreshore parklands of the lake, Civic, approximately a third of land facing Constitution Avenue within the all important Parliamentary Triangle as well as other segments of land on the southern side of the lake that are critical to the national image of Canberra.

The NCA manages its share of the Designated Areas for national purposes while the Territory Government is managing its land in the Designated Areas for local and municipal purposes and that includes business development. As there is a shortage of office space in Canberra, it appears that the Territory Government is trying to include as much office block development as possible within the Designated Areas.

To reduce the duplication and red tape, the nationally significant Designated Areas should be managed and administered in their entirety as an integral unit by the Commonwealth. The area is important to all Australians and not just the Canberra citizenry and requires a body of visionary planners that can plan for Australia's future national needs within that area.

A visionary plan for Canberra's Designated Area is needed that safeguards the national concerns set out the National Capital, incorporates Canberra acquired heritage and plans for the future of the national interests. A moratorium on all planned business development for Parliamentary Triangle and its adjacent areas should be implemented until this revised planning of this strategic area is undertaken.

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.

The governance arrangements for the NCA are similar to other statutory authorities with a Board and a body of experts responsible for decisions and advice. The role and functions of the NCA are currently set by the National Capital Plan and by legislation. Over the last decade criticisms of development proposals, inadequate community consultation, a lack of respect for heritage qualities, and in recent years there has been criticism of the NCA Board as having a bias towards business development.

The Designated Areas have a high level of heritage places entered in heritage lists, the National Heritage List, the Commonwealth Heritage List, the Register of the National Estate and the ACT Heritage Register. The focus on the protection of heritage values of the places is far more important as a national function than it was 30 years ago. If Central Canberra is nominated to the World Heritage List, protection of heritage values will direct management and planning.

These and other issues could be rectified by changes to the legislation to ensure Board members are planning experts and include heritage experts. A revised legislation could also include a review program. An upgraded plan backed by the amended legislation could include clauses that implement a more open consultation process.

The Authority must be adequately funded by the Commonwealth and given the growing heritage interests of Canberra, perhaps it would be more appropriately placed as a statutory authority within the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

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

The highest standards in design are essential in managing the core of the national capital (the Designated Areas) to retain its national significance. The Commonwealth body tasked with planning and management of the Designated Areas should be a team of skilled planners, architects, landscape architects, social and economic planners and heritage experts. It should have adequate staffing. The Board or Council must also have a high level of planning, design skills and experience. They should be the best in the nation and responsible for all planning and development and decisions in the Designated Areas. The Board should be independent of the influence of business developers.

The Board or Council should be tasked with developing a visionary plan for the Designated Areas of Canberra. The Griffin Legacy Plan (2004) should have provided this but appears to have been strongly influenced by the business development lobby. While some of the Griffin Legacy Plan⁴ offered good future planning solutions other aspects had serious short-comings and the plan which covered the Designated Areas needs to be reviewed.

Since the brilliant achievement of Parliament House much of Central Canberra's architectural development has not been of high standard and as well, not supported by adequate infrastructure. The Designated Areas have been degraded by developments, incremental inappropriate development and will be further degraded by proposed developments (as proposed in the Griffin Legacy Plan). Some of these concerns are as follows.

⁴ Australian Government National Capital Authority (2004) The Griffin Legacy. National Capital Authority.

- At one time all the approaches to Civic were stunningly attractive with vistas to City Hill through a tree-lined avenue but now, when approaching the city from Ainslie Avenue, the vista to Civic Hill is blocked and Civic presents as a fortress of parking lots.
 - The planned high-rise development around City Hill as presented in the Griffin Legacy Plan, will mean that City Hill will no longer be a visible vertex of the Parliamentary Triangle that was a significant feature of the Griffin legacy and Canberra's planning heritage.
 - On West Civic there is an array of new very ordinary modern building with no landscaped court yards or pedestrian plazas – it is a bleak concrete environment, rapidly becoming crowded with buildings that are well below the standard one sees in major capital cities in the world today. The only substantial landscaping (other than a few token street trees) is in the older developments of the Law Courts area and ANU campus.
 - Despite Canberra being known as a garden city its central Civic area has very few accessible parks or pocket parks for city workers. Central Sydney has far more open space.
 - The addition of the ACT library into Civic Square has ruined what was once a balanced well designed public plaza. Civic Square was entered in the Register of the National Estate for its design qualities. These qualities have been lost by the addition of the library blocking the spatial visual continuity to City Hill. The library is also inconveniently located for those seeking to use the library services.
 - The Central Canberra area is being burdened by business office space that could be located in Canberra's other urban centres such as Woden, Belconnen and Tuggeranong that have a far better town form to cope with high rise office development and parking.
 - Amendments to the Territory Plan in 2007 allow business development in areas along Constitution Avenue within the Parliamentary Triangle, areas that should be reserved for future national institution expansions such as our national Galleries, museums, and theatres. The Parliamentary Triangle of Griffin's plan was greatly reduced in its capacity to take national institutions by the addition of Parkes Way but there appears to be no planning in place to reserve land in the Parliamentary Triangle for accommodating the expansion of national institutions in the future yet it is a given that the National Museum of Australia will need additional units in the future (like the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC). Canberra of the future may like a national theatre or opera house.
- 4. Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increased engagement with the Canberra community.**

As stated under Item 2, the requirements for a more open consultation with the Canberra community must be established by legislation. Although unsatisfactory for much of the Canberra community, the process of consultation undertaken by the NCA for has been set by the existing legislation/planning instruments. Increased engagement with the Canberra community could perhaps be by way of a small panel of Canberra community representatives that could include the Chair of ACT Heritage. The panel could be formally established by revised legislation or regulations. The panel could have a set number of meetings per year with the NCA Board (or its equivalent).

In order to ensure cooperation, a formal arrangement between administrative bodies of the Commonwealth's planning authority (currently the NCA) and the ACT planning authority must be negotiated and established under a Memorandum of Understanding. There are good models of cooperative administrative arrangements between State/Territory Governments and the Commonwealth such as the Australian Alps cooperative management program of which includes the ACT, NSW, Victorian and the Commonwealth governments.

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.

A revised plan for Canberra must include infrastructure projects. A short-coming of the Griffin Legacy Plan was that it promoted development without adequate infrastructure planning. The traffic gridlock now being experienced at peak hour in Canberra and the acute parking problems in Civic are a testimony to inadequate infrastructure planning in place prior to suburban and business developments.

The ACT Government and the NCA appear to have worked well in managing both national and local events. Some have become well recognised nationally such as the annual Floriade, the multicultural festival, the national folk festival, Summernats and Australia Day celebrations. Exhibitions such as those at the National Gallery of Australia, Old Parliament House, and the Museum of Australia bring interstate visitors to Canberra.

Developing the distinctive character of Canberra requires safeguarding the great things Canberra already has already – particularly the Designated Areas with its estate of fine buildings and their landscape settings, Lake Burley Griffin and its foreshore parklands, the naturally vegetated hills, the central geometry of the Parliamentary Triangle and water and land axis. Beyond the Designated Areas, safeguarding the estates of garden suburbs and matrix of tree lined streets and pocket parks, the natural hills, the Y plan structure and Canberra's leasehold system of tenure. It also requires visionary future planning as discussed under Items 1 and 2.

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9 April 2008

