

**Ken Taylor Heritage & Landscape Planning Consultant**

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Mr Stephen Boyd  
Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital & External Territories  
Parliament House  
Canberra

**INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AUTHORITY**

Dear Mr Boyd,

Following are comments I wish to make regarding the above inquiry. I am happy to appear before the committee to enlarge on these if invited. I have combined some of the points together for the purposes of commentary.

1/2/3. The fundamental *raison d'être* of planned capitals is their primary function as the national seat of government. Inevitably as a planned capital city grows, local interests increasingly come into play alongside foundational and continuing national interests, particularly in the planning of the city. Inevitably also this duo will focus on the question of what is the best planning path for the city. It is for this reason that Ottawa, Washington, Brasilia – like Canberra – have some form of national planning body. It was why in 1988 Garry Punch of the Hawke government set in place a two-agency [planning] system to ensure both the interests of all Australians in the National Capital and the interests of Canberrans in good quality local planning and development are protected. In this regard it is my opinion that the suggestion that there needs to be more emphasis on the reduction of so called red tape and duplication of municipal/local planning functions is more imagined and politically driven than real when one understands how the two planning agencies have in fact collaborated. For a planned city of international repute any further moves to reduce planning consideration of proposals which would affect the nationally significant areas would be imprudent and prone to favour developer driven interests.

Any national planning body like the NCA must be primarily responsible to the people of Australia, with a main purpose of maintaining the role and meaning of the national capital. The continued determination of a nationally significant land area, such as the national triangle, Lake Burley Griffin **and** the designated area is critical for the national capital as is its continued management by a national agency. This stems from the special nature of Canberra and its landscape setting: ie the very thing that makes it a city not like

any other, in particular the National Capital Open Space System (NCOSS) with the inner hills and ridges segment a vital part of the designated area. Criticism of the NCA's decisions relating to the NCOSS in connection with local proposals has been unfortunate and too often misinformed.

What the appropriate level of oversight for highest standards of design in national areas may be is a difficult issue. But one highly relevant example is the Griffin Legacy. The document produced was as I wrote in *The Canberra Times* 10 December 2004 a visionary assessment and proposal for the future reflecting the Griffin vision and the Spatial Plan, but that the immediate task was then to work out the details. This has not been done and is devolving down to developers to propose urban design form. This is entirely inappropriate. Broad policy plans like the Griffin Legacy need to be accompanied by development plans that spell out what buildings should look like, their height restrictions and so on. Whilst the NCA did announce a review of building heights in Canberra and whether the current height restriction for national areas (height of War Memorial) should be lifted, it failed to produce a major policy discussion paper addressing strategic planning matters including reasons for exiting height restrictions in relation to the planning history of the city and comparisons with other world cities that for historical reasons have maintained strict height embargo, eg Paris. The fact that developers have been pressing for height restrictions to be lifted is no cogent reason for a planning authority to have a review. To some extent NCA has been forced into this by the system of land auction sales where high prices result in pressure to relax restrictions. Section 63 reflects this when an NCA representative said (*The Canberra Times* 29 August 2007 'we will be looking for something really outstanding.' Poring cold water on this in response, one representative of a national firm of valuers reflected that 'If the government expect too much from the site in terms of architectural significance that would add to the developer's costs ... There may be a conflict in what the NCA wants and getting the best revenue for the ACT.' What price good design when land sale priorities dominate planning?

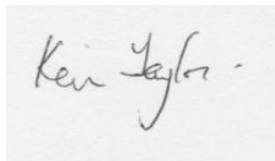
A general observation would be that the NCA has concentrated on narrow urban design matters in a confined central area at the expense of producing comprehensive strategic planning documentation for all nationally significant areas. This poses the question of whether in future such action could be integrated with the Canberra Spatial Plan. It has also taken an unnecessarily narrow approach and poor understanding of heritage matters, too easily passing matters over to the now DEWHA when wider planning deliberations should have been given consideration as part of a heritage site. One question that needs addressing is whether in field operation the approach to protection of heritage significance of commonwealth places in the ACT is less strict or open to scrutiny as with local ACT heritage protocol: one current example is the proposal for a substantial building in the garden of Old Canberra House and to change the building significantly in spite of the precinct's listing in the Commonwealth heritage list because of its significance as the administrative beginning of the federal capital: a unique national site where, it is understood, the NCA questioned only a few minor aspects of this proposal and failed to require a conservation management plan as is a clear requirement of the NCA for heritage areas.

4. One area of poor performance by the NCA has consistently been in public participation, this does not mean simply public consultation, but full engagement with the community. This was a matter raised at a previous inquiry into the NCA's operation.

There appears to be mounting support for there to be one plan for Canberra incorporating the Territory Plan and the National Capital Plan. If this becomes a recommendation from the inquiry it is imperative for the integrity of the city as national capital that the significance of designated land including the NCOSS is maintained as an inalienable part of the national significance of the city with clearly defined national planning objectives.

Nevertheless the question remains as to whether the dual plan system has or has not worked. No irrefutable evidence that a national plan alongside a local plan has not worked has been clearly articulated except by those whose ambitions have been thwarted by the NCP. The coalescing of the two plans could create administrative and political difficulties and it may be more prudent to examine any deficiencies and act accordingly.

It also makes sense to maintain a national planning body as exists for example in Ottawa and Washington to protect national interests.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature reads "Ken Taylor" in a cursive, slightly slanted script. There is a small dash or period at the end of the name.

Professor Ken Taylor