

Submission to the
Joint Standing Committee for
National Capital and External Territories
On the Future of the National Capital Authority

Canberra is unique in that it has been described as “the only planned City that works”

I say this as both a surveyor and a former municipal councillor (City of Caulfield, Victoria), where I had first hand experience of town planning that, in some regrettable instances, did not work. There was even an unintended change in the demographic of that City, leaving it with the highest percentage of welfare recipients of any Melbourne municipality. I hasten to add that was all before my time on the council.

No other city in Australia, with the possible exception of Elizabeth (SA), shares this attribute. I believe that no other world capitals, including the planned cities of New Delhi, Brasilia or, Washington DC now share it either.

Town planning decisions are very long-term. Once made they determine the form and function of the town for at least a century, if not “forever”. In my experience that is outside the understanding of politicians. The saying that “a week is a long time in politics” is certainly borne out by my experience in town planning.

Canberra is, therefore, unique in the world.

It is important to maintain this attribute both because of its uniqueness and the benefits it gives to residents and visitors.

It is appropriate that a National Capital has a certain “grandeur” which is inherent in the areas that the National Capital Authority (“NCA”) currently controls. The designer, Walter Burley Griffin, built “grandeur” into his design for the Parliamentary area. It includes the immediate precinct and the way it fits into the major geographical features, the hills and mountains and the Lake which surveyor Scrivener foresaw.

In my experience such long term planning and community benefits can be lost where politicians, having limited historical, planning or demographic knowledge or training, have control of planning issues which they do not understand. As I have said, such decisions are to all intents permanent—bad town planning, for example Sydney (NSW) congested CBD streets can never be corrected for financial and physical reasons.

An example of long-term planning amelioration is the widening of the “Little” streets in the Melbourne (Victoria) CBD. Here the planning authority, Melbourne City Council, has mandated set-backs of new buildings for some decades now. However, it is unlikely this will flow-through to the full length of those streets for a century or more, as many existing buildings there are over a century old.

One way of avoiding those problems is to put planning in the hands of professionals rather than politicians. Town planners are trained to take the long-term view of their decisions.

Consequently I recommend that the National Capital Authority retain its current town planning control of the Parliamentary Area, the Lake foreshores and their major approaches.

Anthony Hordern
MIS Aust, MSIS, AFAIM
1 April 2008