

Inquiry into the Role of the National Capital
Authority (NCA)

Submission

from:

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** I will be uncontactable from 5 April-12 May 2008, travelling
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hearing on Wednesday, 14 May 2008.

Brief

Summary

1. The Background

- **Canberra's Grand Narrative**—Joint Standing Committee members should be familiar with Canberra's 'grand', if still hidden set of narratives (see **Appendix A**).
- **The NCA, 'Trustee of the Nation's Interest'**—a resurgent NCA is an imperative for Canberra, the Australian Government and the nation.
- The issue in 2008 is not the need for a trustee body with the necessary clout and funding, it is the performance of the NCA in recent years.

2. Terms of Reference

- a. Duplication and red tape can be avoided through one seamless plan, with the responsibilities of the two planning bodies clearly articulated.
- b. Seven areas of concern with the NCA performance are discussed, and solutions proposed.
- c. The NCA needs to attract, once again, elite professional planning staff—and clarify the key terms of the National Capital Plan: 'national significance' and 'designated areas'.
- d. Four major opportunities for Commonwealth/NCA co-operation with the ACT Government/ACTPLA/local community are identified—and four possible landmark cultural projects to facilitate them.
- e. The NCA's 'national promotion' within its 'Outreach and Events' area *must* obtain adequate funding to address effectively Canberra's 'symbolic role'. The

Commonwealth and ACT Governments can work collaboratively in this area to obtain better results, especially during the key Canberra Centenary years, 2008-13.

THE BACKGROUND

Canberra's Grand Narratives

A few years ago, a professor in the University of Michigan's College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Scott D. Campbell, initiated a major capital cities project which focused on the 'changing role and identity of capital cities in the global era'. His summary begins with a plain statement: 'Capital cities are an easily defined but poorly understood class of cities'. While the Australian nation's grasp of, and affection for its capital city has strengthened in recent years, there is still a way to go. Canberra is not yet the 'people's capital' that the new Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Bob Debus MP, would like to see. Yes, the old chestnuts of Canberra as the 'cemetery with lights' and 'the ruin of a good sheep station' have mercifully lapsed, but the fact that (former) Prime Minister Howard did not officially reside in Canberra during his terms in office reflects the nub of an ongoing challenge to those interested in the development of the capital.

A proper appreciation of Canberra's unique attributes has not been helped by the decline in the numbers of young Australians doing history at school and university, or by the near-collapse of curriculum-driven investigation of Australian history across the states and territories. Australian newspaper journalist Paul Kelly was right to say in 2001, at the time of the Centenary of Federation, that we are at present 'a nation consumed by amnesia'. We are not the only nation, but we are undeniably one.

This 'amnesia' has impacted upon Canberra's image – which is unfortunate because the nation's capital genuinely boasts a 'grand', if largely hidden, set of narratives. Like the members of the 'Select Committee Appointed to Enquire into and Report upon the Development of Canberra', chaired by Senator J.A. McCallum, which produced the ground-breaking September 1955 *Report*, the 2008 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories needs at least a working knowledge of Canberra's compelling history to this point. An accurate and productive assessment of the National Capital Authority (NCA), at this important time, demands it.

A selection of Canberra's narratives is included at **Appendix A**.

The NCA, 'Trustee of the Nation's Interest'

It was refreshing to read in the *Canberra Times*, in a mid-February 2008, the comments of the Minister for Home Affairs that his party was no longer interested in the 'blame game' where the nation capital was concerned. When I was interviewed by ABC 666 radio's Ross Solly, the week before the Minister made his statement, Solly introduced our segment with the suggestion that we were about 'to pick over the bones' of the NCA.

Put simply, any suggestion that the NCA's broad roles should be erased in a stroke is naïve at best, culpably ignorant at worst. These roles – to plan, promote, enhance and maintain the capital – are the ongoing, essential province of the Federal Government's custodian body. They are Commonwealth jobs. The Authority's vision, mission and goals, as stated in the *Corporate Plan 2005-10*, are aspirations forged over years of consultation, media commentary and community discussion. They should not, and must not, be substantially tampered with. As Romaldo Giurgola suggested in a *Canberra Times* piece in late March 2008: 'If we did not have an NCA, we would have to reinvent one'. A resurgent NCA is an imperative for Federal leadership at this time.

The professional organisations, including the Planning Institute of Australia and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, as with their predecessor organisations at the 1901 Congress, are acutely aware of, and publicly in support of, a national planning organisation – as is the Canberra Business Council, Property Council and, for that matter, the ACT Government itself. A respected national planning body is a vital bulwark against vested interests and local pressures. The Chair of this Joint Standing Committee Enquiry, Sen. Kate Lundy, acknowledged this fact when she was quoted in the *Canberra Times* on 19 February 2008 in support of the NCA's 'very important roles in expressing, administering and managing aspects of the national capital on behalf of the Commonwealth'.

Reality suggests that a local government, no matter how efficiently run, will be dealing on a day-to-day basis with an often turbulent and aggressive local constituency, one well-skilled in the nuances of media pressure. The grandeur of the Griffin Plan, the central elements of the Nation Capital Plan and the high potential of the *Griffin Legacy* strategic initiatives, need protection. As Jack Waterford, a long-time Canberra resident himself, states: '...bodies like the NCA exist in part to frustrate the short-term political impulses of local members, or of the undue effect on policy of development and industrial interests by

local government. Canberra is not only our city, but also Australia's city, and the function of the NCA is to be trustee of the nation's interest, long and short term...'

No-one with any genuine credentials in national capital development disputes Waterford's point. The issue, clearly, is not the need for a trustee body with the necessary powers and funding, it is the performance in recent years of the organisation as it is presently constituted. This performance, and the governance structure and present planning arrangements that have affected it, need close attention. This is where changes need to be made; the Inquiry's clear Terms of Reference make suggestions for effective change possible.

INQUIRY INTO ROLE OF NCA—TERMS OF REFERENCE

Terms of Reference A Red Tape and Duplication

Minister Debus voiced the sentiments of virtually all Canberra watchers when he said that this Inquiry should be, in part, ‘an exercise in “unscrambling” planning responsibility between the NCA and the ACT Government... the relationships between them are unnecessarily complex’. A review ‘with teeth’, determined to reduce ‘red tape’ and the ‘duplication’ inherent in a regime rooted in 1960s preoccupations and priorities, is long overdue.

It is worth briefly recalling the relevant recent planning history. The American Alan Vorhees’ mid-1960s recommendations for Canberra resulted in the NCDC’s 1970 Y-Plan – a freeway plan typical of its time in giving top priority to the car. The NCDC reviewed and reaffirmed this road pattern in 1984, five years before the onset of self-government, and ultimately these 1984 principles were simply dropped wholesale into the 1990s *National Capital Plan*. There they stayed. Both the NCA and ACT planning have tried to address the problems, separately and together, but each effort has collapsed under the weight of political and bureaucratic complications. The weight of red tape. Fatigue (and changes of government and ministers) has always set in.

The two parties have different agendas, cogently summed up several years ago by Bruce Wright, former NCA Director of Corporate Relations: ‘With federal capitals, the national government always seeks space, vistas, settings for national symbols and grand avenues. The state or local government always seeks economic growth, efficient and effective transport systems to the far suburbs, activity and a structure which minimises expenditure on public infrastructure’. Compatibility is difficult, but not impossible.

How to address this impasse? First, identify the specific problems. There are four: duplication of planning approval responsibilities (the ‘checks and balances’ dual approval is seen as overly bureaucratic); a perceived excessive federal intervention in local affairs (where the hierarchy of ‘national significance’ over standard planning considerations is neither understood nor appreciated);

perceived excessively high standards ('gold-plated' infrastructure) required by the Commonwealth for territory land, which is rarely matched by federal funding – and thus often regarded as too expensive for local government; and Commonwealth decision-making often disparaged as unrepresentative, or not sufficiently representative.

To many territorians and local politicians, the Commonwealth has 'all power and no responsibility'. On top of this, ACT planning has matured over the years; it has, to use Sen. Lundy's phrase, grown into its 'planning boots'. Thus, the perceived barriers created by the Commonwealth, with respect to particular high-profile projects, have caused increasing anger and frustration. These controversial projects include: the vetoes that delayed the building of the ACT Magistrates Court; the blocking of proposals for the Acton Peninsula hospice; the politics of the Kingston Towers proposal; the bitter Gungahlin Drive Extension debate; the Pierces Creek settlement debate; and the Epicentre conflict. Most of these were flatly viewed by the local population and its elected politicians as well outside an acceptable geographical jurisdiction of the Commonwealth in the national capital. As the *Canberra Times*' Public Service reporter, Paul Malone, put it in January 2008: 'Why should the NCA get involved in a shopping centre at Fyshwick, a road at Belconnen or a village in the bush outside Canberra?' In these instances, the local government has been seen as unnecessarily and unacceptably constrained by Big Brother.

What the ACT needs, like anywhere else in Australia, is a planning regime that delivers certainty, consistency, geographical logic, clarity and administrative efficiency. But how to get them?

One possible solution is to produce one plan, where the responsibilities of the two planning bodies are clearly articulated and seamlessly integrated. For this to occur, there must be a properly funded assessment of the Commonwealth stake in Canberra on the basis of the specific problems encountered, and practical experience gained, over the last twenty-odd years. The starting point for the Commonwealth must be clarification of what constitutes 'nation significance' – arguably the focal point of the present *National Capital Plan*, and yet a term which is elusive in the document and never properly defined (see Terms of Reference C) – and what constitutes a 'Designated Area', those 'areas of land that have the special characteristics of the national capital'. Sen. Lundy was right, in mid-February, to point to the fact that the last Inquiry into the NCA did not resolve what she called 'the always-controversial control of "designated areas" of national significance'. It was a fundamental

failure because a proper understanding of concepts such as ‘national significance’, ‘special characteristics of the nation capital’ and ‘interests of the national capital’ underpins both the *National Capital Plan* and the geographical boundaries – Commonwealth and local – that it established.

Terms of Reference B Governance and Accountability

During the terms in office of the present NCA Chief Executive, Annabelle Pegrum (1998-2008), there is no doubt that the organisation has often performed with distinction. It has, with limited federal funding, established until recently a high and generally positive public profile; it has also established a list of quality achievements, ranging from the construction of significant national memorials, to successful community projects such as the Old Parliament House Gardens refurbishment, to the *Parliamentary Zone Review – Outcomes* (2000) and acclaimed *Griffin Legacy* project. By any criteria of performance for a small statutory authority, the NCA has ‘punched above its weight’.

Why, then, is it so unpopular in many quarters in 2008? The reasons lie in the erratic performance of the organisation over approximately the last two years. I will comment on seven areas of concern.

PROBLEMS

1. There is now an established scholarly and media literature documenting the erosion of the Australian Public Service, its values and culture, under the government of (former) Prime Minister John Howard. In the past – under prime ministers such as Curtin and Menzies, for example – politicians routinely protected and defended their public servants and the democratic institutions they represented. A week after he came to office, Howard sacked six of the Public Service’s eighteen departmental secretaries. A letter from the Prime Minister to his ministers, of 29 November 1996, was leaked to the media in early 1997. In part it stated that PM & C intended to review how ‘to make greater use of provisions enabling the Government to direct statutory authorities... in the performance of their functions’.

While there is no evidence to suggest that there was any overt ‘greater use’ made of the NCA, there is ample evidence of a pall that gradually enveloped the organisation.

The systematic silencing of political dissent in a number of public service departments and authorities, the supporting documentation of which is now readily available, affected the NCA in at least an *indirect* way, either through officers self-censoring or – more commonly – producing documents shaped by the perceived beliefs and priorities of the government minister /office to whom the correspondence was directed.

While the NCA obviously was not implicated in any of the major public controversies of other profiled departments and authorities (such as the ‘children overboard’ affair, the decision to go to war in Iraq, the destroying of the Commonwealth Employment Service and Employment National, and the Australia Wheat Board kickbacks scandal), these controversies – and the message disseminated by the experience of those public servants who suffered through speaking out – exerted a powerful effect. Timidity was often the behavior of the day; and sycophancy the *modus operandi*. Amidst much excellent work by dedicated NCA professionals, advice was on many occasions ignored by upper management. The workplace soured.

In this, the NCA was no different, I suspect, to any other department or authority. Acquiescence emerged as the only way to obtain acceptable funding and ensure a viable program of projects. As Christine Wallace, long-time Canberra journalist and biographer, wrote a year or so ago: ‘Frank and fearless advice is now something Canberra public servants read about in textbook histories of bureaucratic practice rather than practise or observe in real life’. A resurgent NCA, post-Inquiry, needs to rediscover the ability to give frank and fearless advice, and to act courageously and objectively for the betterment of the city. The national capital is too important a subject to be left solely to the politicians and to the bureaucrats that they have in recent times readily influenced.

2. The stick for systematic silencing was the Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA). For an employee to adopt a stance on a controversial issue, in opposition to the Government’s position (and/or the position of the Chief Executive) was to incur the threat of loss of AWA bonus money. ‘This is a performance issue’ was the catch-phrase that increased sharply in frequency over the last twelve to eighteen months. The system, of course, created the weapon of threat to be used – and at the NCA, it was.

3. A 'culture of blame' took root, driven as much by the unforgiving era and prevailing Public Service culture as by any individual determination to cajole and coerce.

4. The perception that the NCA board was, to use *Canberra Times* letter writer Jack Kershaw's word, 'chummy', complacent and effectively representative of one side of politics—in a word, stacked. Ironically, the best board the NCA has had since the year 2000, the present one, contains the two most overt political appointments: Neil Andrew and Kathryn Greiner. This issue was systemic under the last Federal Government. A Labor Federal Government, committed to reinvesting in a forthright Public Service and transparent appointments, has stated its determination to address it. It desperately needs to.

5. The drift of the NCA, over the last couple of years, into becoming an organisation top-heavy with executive salaries, particularly at SES level. The establishment of a 'Management Committee', in 2006, intensified the trend – one which resulted, in my observation, in the Chief Executive losing any feel for the 'grass roots' of the organisation.

6. The damaging public perception that the NCA had a cavalier attitude to heritage. This impression has eased, through the conscientious efforts of the NCA landscape architect presently in charge of the heritage agenda, but it will take some time for the NCA to recover from the National Library poplars issue and, much more damagingly, the Albert Hall issue. The first two public meetings convened by the NCA on the Albert Hall will not be forgotten in a hurry. The organisation appeared to be ill-prepared, arrogant and dismissive.

7. The steady bleed of many of the NCA's most accomplished staff over the last twelve to eighteen months, for a range of reasons: some driven out, some taking packages, some gone as a result of the cuts of the new Labor Government, some glad to escape the pervasive 'culture of blame', some seeing the writing on the wall, some disgusted by a litany of questionable actions and poor policy implementation, and some just glad to be gone. The sheer numbers are an indictment. Many of the departed, passionate about the capital and the nature of the work, would return to a resurgent NCA.

SOLUTIONS

1. Establish a new and more genuinely representative board, one less susceptible to unprincipled political manoeuvring: comprising the ACT Chief Minister (or his/her representative), the ACTPLA Chief Planning

Executive, a representative of the design professions (PIA, RAIA and AILA), a representative of the cultural /social sciences professions, the Chief Executive of the Property Council, the Chief Executive of the NCA, and two members appointed by the Minister. In short, we need a board comprising representatives of non-aligned national bodies and independent experts, linked to the governments of the day, local and national.

2. Establish what might be called a 'National Capital Development Corporation' (a land development corporation under the NCA), a self-funding planning and development entity able to provide a return to government, as well as dividends to the Canberra community. This new NCDC would develop the Central National Area in accordance with 'national significance' guidelines.

Models for such a corporation exist in the states (VicUrban, Docklands Landcom, East Perth Authority and Brisbane Southbank Corporation). These development corporations generate major economic benefits: jobs, dollars and major urban infrastructure. They can more effectively deliver the balance of design excellence, housing affordability, environmental sustainability, community well-being and commercial success than random private sector development can. In the national capital context, land authorities can produce significant public domain improvements such as parks, street trees, shopping and restaurant strips, cultural buildings and public art. In public finance terms, they are highly bankable. In private sector terms, they provide stability and certainty through government underwriting of infrastructure investment.

Such a new and desperately needed NCDC would:

** vest all undeveloped land and Territory land within the Central National Area

** provide a return to the ACT and the Australian Government in proportion to their respective land areas

** invest proceeds from land sales into infrastructure, and

** establish a board with representatives from the ACT and the Australian Government, as well as leaders from the property sector.

The unique advantage, in Central Canberra's case, is that the land is all government-owned and superbly positioned. The expensive and prohibitive process of land acquisition and amalgamation that ordinary cities deal with does not exist. This is what vesting land in the Commonwealth (and the leasehold system)

was designed for, when the city began. Indeed, this is the chance to realise the legacy of the land-planning vision of many of the Federation founders.

It is vitally important to get development out of the hands of those who have the power at the moment, and no expertise: namely, Defence and DOFA. The new NCDC would complement the work of the NCA, and run along the lines of extremely successful equivalents. It would mean that plans in the future would not be undermined by naïve and disinterested bean-counters. ASIO, for example, would be unlikely to get a centrally located plot of land – as the public record indicates it now has.

3. Appoint an expert committee (of no more than six members) to provide appropriate historic/cultural/social advice to the NCA—which is used and acted upon. The last few years have exposed the NCA in this area. Senior staff has listened only to the government of the day, or to no-one at all. The appointment of such a committee could be the vehicle for the NCA to be (through widespread public consultation) proactive at last, where national commemoration is concerned. Contrary to popular belief, Canberra does not have a developed commemorative fabric, beyond the imposing defence/war portrayal. Whole areas of Australian achievement and endeavour are ignored entirely. For good reasons, obviously, war and sacrifice are well covered, but not one other cultural area is represented effectively in the public spaces of the capital.

4. Spill all NCA positions at EL2 and above. Fresh blood at the top is now desperately required, as it was in 1998.

Terms of Reference C High Design Standards/National Significance

PROBLEMS

1. The departure of quality staff over the last two years or so has left the NCA understaffed and ill-equipped. Enormous expertise, corporate knowledge and the memory for organisational history has walked out the door – many former employees going to the ACT Government, some to another federal department, some to private practice and some to retirement. Oversight of the ‘highest standards of

design' needs a team of quality, experienced staff. This is simply not possible with the present staff roster and drastically reduced numbers.

2. The terms central to the National Capital Plan – 'national significance' and 'designated areas' – need to be closely interrogated and understood. Until this is done, and their meaning(s) clarified, pursuing the highest standards in 'areas of national significance' will founder because of a failure to address, first, philosophy, history and contemporary cultural mores. After the latest round of cuts, the NCA Chief Executive announced her own range of responses. One has been to box up the NCA library. Such a course of action will undermine the future pursuit of excellence in 'areas of national significance'. High standards are achieved through an understanding of those in the past who themselves pursued just such high standards. The NCA needs an influx of staff committed to excellence, able to have at their fingertips the knowledge and achievements of the past; it hardly needs to take another step in the process of 'dumbing down' the work and workplace. The NCA must have an elite professional planning staff.

3. In the last two years, a number of projects have reflected this politicising or dumbing down of the NCA's core work – among them:

- Albert Hall
- The central site selected for the ASIO and Office of National Assessments building
- The failure to generate community discussion on the ANU Crawford School's proposed linking of Old Canberra House with the W.E.H Stanner building
- Paralysis over Siev X
- Paralysis over the Aboriginal Tent Embassy
- Ugly 'bomb shelter' kiosks sited on the prestige real estate of Commonwealth Place

SOLUTIONS

1. Provide appropriate funding of the NCA, and hire a substantially new, energised brigade of high-quality staff at the leadership level

2. Use, as a starting point for clarification of 'national significance', the material about the term and its context available in, for example:

- *Landscape in the Central National Area, Canberra* – the proceedings of a seminar held by the NCPA in 1991;

- *Design Dialogue – Central National Area Design Study (1995);*
- *The Symbolic Role of the National Capital – from Colonial Argument to 21st Century Ideals (2003)*

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The NCA Library can serve as a catalyst for clarification through an understanding of, and engagement with, the past.

3. The Australian Government, when contemplating the highest standards of design in nationally significant areas of the capital, might well learn from the ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope. He reserved 1% of capital works funding for public art in the ACT, despite criticism from many quarters. The *prima facie* case for hospitals and schools over art and city enhancement will never disappear. Remarkable capital cities demand remarkable courage from those who would create them. Enough remains of the Griffins’ grand ‘ideal city’ plan to mount the case, during Canberra’s series of centenary years building up to 2013, for world heritage listing for Australia’s national capital.

Terms of Reference D Co-Operation with ACT Planning/Local Community

OPPORTUNITIES

1. THE GRIFFIN LEGACY

When *The Griffin Legacy* was launched, in December 2004, the public response was immediate and overwhelmingly supportive. Among these advocates were the ACT Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, and the ACTPLA Chief Planning Executive, Neil Savery, who praised ‘a truly wonderful piece of work’. It was no surprise, then, that when the Rudd Government announced a significant cut in the funding allocated to the project by the Howard Government, that the Chief Minister was not happy. In fact, he publicly stated that the Commonwealth had reneged on an agreement: ‘I am very disappointed that the vision of Walter Burley Griffin for the national capital will now apparently be put on hold’. It does not have to be. The 2009-10 federal budget round can be the vehicle for restoring this preeminent opportunity for Commonwealth/ACT co-operation.

2. THE CENTENARIES OF CANBERRA (2008-13)

In his Canberra Day Oration, the Minister for Home Affairs flagged the forthcoming period as an 'exciting opportunity'. We know that the ACT Government has already signalled its intention (in 2006) to commit to a busy program of centenary activities, events and publications. A unit in the Chief Minister's Department has been created and has begun work. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth and ACT Governments, signed at an appropriate anniversary date in late 2008, could be the first concrete step in a close, mutually beneficial collaborative relationship, 2009-13.

3. A SUB-REGION STRATEGIC PLAN

An overarching strategic plan for the sub-region should be generated (applied to an integrated transport and land use plan, sustainable water plan, health/education, an economic plan, an environmental plan and an infrastructure and settlement plan). Such a plan would enable Canberra to more credibly advertise its planning credentials.

4. WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

A push by the NCA began in September 2007 for Canberra to be nominated to the National Heritage List. If it succeeds, Canberra would be the first city and surrounds on the register. Such a listing would undoubtedly be used by a growing lobby of Canberra scholars and Canberra watchers to seek world heritage status. One strong advocate of this course, Prof. Ken Taylor, has clarified that 'the historic heart of Canberra' meets three primary criteria of 'outstanding universal value for the inclusion of cultural properties in the World Heritage list'.

The central heritage precinct also meets the description of a category of 'cultural landscapes' adopted by the World Heritage Committee: namely, a 'clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man'. A resurgent NCA, able to think expansively, could work in collaboration with the ACT Government on this project. It might be the centenary's most enduring and prestigious legacy.

These four major proposals for Commonwealth/ACT Government co-operation have the capacity to transform the city. University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor, Glyn Davis, has expressed a wish to see Canberra a busy, sprawling democracy at work. Minister Debus had something similar in mind when he spoke recently of a 'true people's capital' unfolding in Canberra, and Canberra as a 'great centre for thinking' and 'a place of pilgrimage'. The Minister also said that the Australian Government 'aims to

create a culture of national political co-operation and collaboration'. The big projects are there to be implemented; all we need is the political and community will.

Four landmark cultural projects for the capital, strongly advocated in recent months, would help to facilitate the above proposals:

- 1/ The Australian Centre for Dialogue
- 2/ The Griffin Institute (see *Griffin Legacy*, p.191)
- 3/ A Territory Archives Repository
- 4/ The Donald Horne Institute for Australian Culture Heritage

I am happy to expand on these initiatives if the opportunity presents itself.

Terms of Reference E National Promotion

THE BACKGROUND

The *National Capital Plan* specifies five roles that the city of Canberra performs as the national capital. The first four contain no surprises (Seat of Government, and location for the parliament, national administration and national institutions), but the fifth – ‘symbol of Australian national life’ – is, according to the *Plan*, ‘one of the most important but also most intangible roles that the city will be called on to play’.

As is carefully documented (pp.167-92) in *The Symbolic Role of the National Capital* (2003), after self-government the Commonwealth custodian organisation, the National Capital Planning Authority/NCA, began to take the symbolic role seriously. The conferences and seminars of the early to mid-1990s, driven in the first instance by NCPA Chair, Bob Landsdown, and the Chief Executive Lyndsay Neilson, gave way to intent and action in the later 1990s. NCA Chief Executive Annabelle Pegrum was determined ‘to rebuild [Canberra] emotionally’. Outreach and Events (O&E) in the first years of the new century became a growth area in the NCA to considerable public approval. The dedication of the National Vietnam Memorial

in 1992, and the 'Peoplescape' (Federation) project in 2001, might be regarded as early examples of the 'symbolic role' idea successfully nurtured in the capital.

The Property Council's Catherine Carter wrote a couple of months ago that running a national capital must be about more than 'urban management' – and the NCA's busy O & E program demonstrated this impressively in 2001-7 with events such as United Nations Day, 'Discover Your National Capital', Tropfest, Sunday by the Lake, Summer and Winter in the Capital, and, of course, the stunningly successful Australia Day Concert. The publication program, too, has added real meaning to the capital as symbol of Australian life.

The range of the NCA's offerings, and the quality, are indisputable. So much so that ACT Tourism Minister, Andrew Barr, is adamant in wanting the NCA to continue its Canberra promotional function. The NCA must take the lead on identifiably 'national' events such as Australia Day Live. It is, he says, a 'primary role'. A core function. The events programs of the NCA and the ACT Government have evolved sensibly and successfully, but a closer relationship would not only reduce 'red tape', it would more effectively promote the capital.

THE ISSUE

Despite being grossly understaffed and under-funded, the NCA's O & E area established an outstanding record in recent years. It did not receive the support within the NCA that is deserved, yet is still performed very well. Unfortunately, a difficult situation became untenable after the Rudd Government announced funding cuts to the organisation. For mystifying reasons, the internal application of the cuts reduced the O & E team to a skeleton. There appears to have been little diminution in the number of those at SES level.

With grassroots nationalism on the rise, and with sister-capitals such as Washington and Ottawa paying close (and extremely well-funded) attention to their suite of outreach programs and events, the NCA needs appropriate funding to reinvigorate its O & E area. The present situation is as debilitating locally as it is embarrassing internationally. The ill-considered cuts of the Australian Government (action should have followed review) have been exacerbated by a knee-jerk response within the organisation. The nation's capital is the short-term loser here.

A reversion to common sense would help. The forthcoming Inquiry recommendations must reflect just such common sense, wedded to a vision for Canberra in the 21st century based on the exemplary program laid out in *The Griffin Legacy*. The scholarship is done; it's time to implement.

Appendix A

A Selection of Canberra Narratives

- A) The 19th century background story, when increasingly wealthy Australian colonists (like their 21st century descendants) demonstrated an intense appetite for new technology and new ideas. They were keen to connect with the world. It is a surprising but virtually unknown fact that in the glamorous series of global trade expositions in the second half of the 19th century (beginning with the famous Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace in 1851), no less than four consecutive international exhibitions took place in Australia between 1879 and 1888. It was no accident that Australian politicians, design professionals and an engaged citizenry wanted their capital to be the best. They knew what this entailed.
- B) The global climate of ideas that became a catalyst and inspiration for those in Australia creating their capital. The Griffins, themselves busy and eclectic readers, were well aware that the nation of 'bold democrats' for whom they were designing a unique city was avidly consuming the works of social progressives, visionaries and utopians such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Herbert Spencer, Ebenezer Howard, Frederick Olmsted, Walt Whitman, William Morris and Henry David Thoreau.
- C) The seminal 'Garden City' and 'City Beautiful' ideas that drove the brash new 'science' of town planning.
- D) The McMillan Commission implementation in Washington (under the guidance of the celebrated Daniel Burnham) commenced in 1901, the same time as the Australian nation announced itself to the world; and the 'Congress of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia, 1901', which took place in Melbourne over two weeks in May to coincide exactly with the opening of the first Australian Commonwealth Parliament. The design professionals of the new nation felt that the planning and structure of their future capital was far too important a task to be left solely to the politicians. The Congress was an extraordinary gathering. Water supply emerged as an integral part of the discussion, as was the necessity of producing a 'City Beautiful' by utilising the leading ideas of the era. Years later, in 1909, surveyor

Charles Scrivener was instructed by Minister Hugh Mahon, in the Fisher Labor Government, to 'bear in mind that the Federal Capital should be a beautiful city... [based on] a design worthy of the object, not only for the present, but for all time...'

- E) The International Competition to design the Australian capital city, won by the stunning entry (undoubtedly the best entry of 137) of Chicago's Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. The world entered the competition, but Chicago's newly-won reputation as a centre of design excellence served the Griffins well. They, in turn, were inspired by Australia's growing reputation in the early twentieth century as the 'social laboratory' of the world. Progressive social welfare legislation had provided the infant nation with a big reputation. The Griffins responded with a design that Walter memorably described as 'not like any other city in the world... an ideal city – a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future'.
- F) The decades (1930s, '40s and '50s) when war, economic depression, political expediency and a lack of cultural confidence led to the near-disappearance of the Griffin Plan. Fortunately, just enough courageous public servants and progressive politicians, against the odds and despite strong opposition, committed the city – and the nation – to the broad fundamentals of the Griffin Plan.
- G) The key interventionist role of Prime Minister Robert Menzies, by his own admission someone who in the 1930s 'hated' Canberra but who knew a national commitment had to be made. He instigated the McCallum Select Committee, the illuminating report of which led to the formation of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), for its first sixteen years under the guidance of (Sir) John Overall. The NCDC in effect built the city we know today.
- H) The steady transformation, extension and interpretation of the Griffin Plan into a metropolitan plan able to accommodate 500,000 people. The Y-Plan of separate 'towns' – Belconnen, Woden, Tuggeranong and Gungahlin – placed each town in adjoining valleys, separated by intervening ridges and hilltops, consolidating the irreplaceable legacy of the Nation Capital Open Space System.

The importance of this evolutionary stage in the history of the city, based on a plan both to interpret the Griffin vision and provide an amenable and efficient living environment for a large population, cannot be overestimated. As a result, Canberra has emerged as a model planned city, a compelling 'work-in-progress'. Tony Powell, head of the NCDC from 1975-84, states the case: '...Canberra's linear form achieves a more satisfactory relationship between "town and country"

because it facilitates ready access to metropolitan and regional space'. It preserves the bush of the Bush Capital. Jack Waterford, *Canberra Times* editor-at-large, is more expansive: 'This city [Canberra] is one of the most distinctly Australian of cities, and most egalitarian, and not least because of its location and its affinity with the bush'.

The primary reason why Canberra has emerged as a 21st century planning exemplar is largely because of the foresight of the Federation founders in making the land of the ACT 'leasehold'. The city is a direct result of the public ownership of the ACT, and the subsequent planning responsibility assumed by the NCA and its predecessor custodian organisations. As Prof. Max Neutze suggested a couple of decades ago: 'Without public ownership, it is inconceivable that the natural topography would have been conserved to provide the landscape setting for the city and the Nation Capital Open Space System'.

It is precisely because of the splendor of the original Griffin Plan, and the organic relationship of town and country within the national capital, that Canberra has in recent decades attracted the attention of some of the world's leading town planners, architects and scholars: Edmund Bacon, former Executive Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, labelled Canberra 'among the greatest creations man...the most undersold work of architecture I know of'; Emeritus Prof. John Reps has called Canberra 'an extraordinary achievement deserving recognition and protection as one of the treasures, not only of Australia, but of the entire urban world'; while the Design Architect of Parliament House, Romaldo Giurgola (who has become an Australian citizen and permanent Canberra resident), alerted us in 2004 to the timely and significant 'new assessment' of Canberra taking place, which he described as 'a seed for a realistic and vigorous growth based on principles set at the city's beginnings. Canberra remains among the nation's greatest achievements'. To what 'new assessment' did he refer?

1) *The Griffin Legacy*. Amidst the momentum created by increasing world recognition of Canberra, the NCA in 2002-4 conducted detailed research for, and in December 2004 launched, *The Griffin Legacy* volume. The study is no blueprint fixing a rigid planning future for Canberra, but a liberating, flexible plan addressing 'the big picture', a framework able to respond to emerging needs and opportunities. Since publication, *The Griffin Legacy* has dominated planning discussion in and about Canberra. The winner of two national awards and virtually universal acclaim, the

Legacy project, according to Robert Freestone in his book *Designing Australian Cities* (2001), 'captures exceptionally well how earlier moves toward healthy, convenient and beautiful cities can be reinserted and adapted into new preoccupations with sustainable, productive and liveable ones'.

As project co-ordinator, editor and co-writer of *The Griffin Legacy*, I can only view the controversy surrounding the delayed implementation of stage one of the *Legacy* as further evidence of capital cities being, first and foremost, exercises in political and community will. Capitals demand of politicians to have the courage to go the distance and be bi-partisan, displaying the wisdom to view these special urban creations as more than cities-- indeed, they can be symbols 'of the ideals, dreams, aspirations, achievements, culture and history of the nation'. They can help to represent the nation to itself and to the world.