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Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital
and External Territories

Inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority

One of Canberra's greatest assets is its planning, and the beauty, convenience and distinctiveness that good planning brings with it. I, and many other Canberrans, are concerned that, in the years since self-government, Canberra's development has lost its way, and as a result the city's planning heritage is in jeopardy.

There are many reasons for this situation. They include poor governance by successive ACT governments, a lack of planning capacity at both Commonwealth and Territory levels, and also the decision by the Commonwealth to outsource office accommodation for government departments.

In too many instances, commercial imperatives have overcome other values. It is difficult, for example, to think of a single new office building of distinction that has been erected in the past 15 years in Canberra City or in Woden. Community amenity and space are neglected. As new developments are authorised and built, time after time, the voice of the Canberra community is either ignored or deflected.

While the planning performance of the ACT government is beyond the scope of this inquiry, the National Capital Authority has done little to improve the situation, and in some respects, has exacerbated it. The ill-advised Griffin Legacy plans, for example, were drawn up with virtually no community input – the 'consultation' process was intended to gain endorsement for a direction already decided upon by the Authority.

Need for improved governance of the NCA

As matters stand, the NCA is wholly a creature of the executive government of the day. The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital may inquire into its activities, and Parliament may disallow amendments to the National Capital Plan, but parliamentary oversight is necessarily limited.

While the NCA is formally accountable to the relevant Minister (and through him or her to the Parliament), the NCA's statute (the ACT Planning and Land Management Act) gives the Authority significant operational powers. In turn, these powers may be delegated to the Chief Executive of the agency. While members of the Authority are formally appointed by the Governor-General, (indicating a perceived need for an authorisation that is beyond politics), there is no requirement in the Act for non-

executive members to have any background in planning or architecture or to have any connection with the Canberra community. There is provision for advisory committees, but there appear to be none in operation at the current time.

In practice, therefore, the Chief Executive controls (and is intended to control) the activities of the Authority. The Authority is required to consult with the ACT government and with the public on proposed amendments to the National Capital Plan, but it would be fair to say that the culture of the Authority is far from consultative. Moreover, its executive has little feel for, or understanding of, the Canberra community, as the debacle of the Albert Hall consultative process demonstrated.

Both the NCA and ACTPLA seem loath to take the Canberra public into their confidence when it comes to major planning decisions. Yet the public is well-informed, has a good deal of expertise and experience (often more so than those within government), and a passion for Canberra. There is widespread disappointment and apprehension at the extent to which current processes, and the culture of the relevant planning bodies, seem to facilitate access to the development industry, while denying it to citizens.

Suggestions for change

The problem, in my view, is not primarily one of a lack of coordination between ACTPLA and the NCA. The Planning and Land Management Act provides for consultation between the two bodies when changes to their respective Plans are proposed, and given the complexity of planning questions, each should act as a check or balance on the other.

The problem is, rather, one of governance. Both the Commonwealth and Territory governments have failed to find ways of involving the community and the professional bodies in the development of the city. Planning is disjointed, secretive and, often, incompetent.

Two avenues of reform should be investigated:

1. Amend the Act to require at least four additional members of the NCA, two from the planning and architectural professions, and two from the Canberra community; and
2. Set up a National Capital Advisory Council which must be consulted by the NCA on key decisions. The Council would also focus attention on the kind of city Canberra is to be, by holding a series of forums on the future of the city as a whole. The Council would have representatives of the Parliament and the ACT assembly, the ACT community, and other interested bodies.

Yours sincerely

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