

**SUBMISSION BY ENGINEERS AUSTRALIA
TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF
THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AUTHORITY: 30 MAY 2003**



1. Introduction

This is a submission by Engineers Australia into the Inquiry by the Joint Committee on National Capital and External Territories. Engineers Australia is the professional association of Australian engineers and has over 70,000 members.

Engineers are involved in the planning, development, operation and maintenance of the National Capital. Indeed, engineers have provided leadership and made major contributions to the National Capital since its inception. The association is therefore well placed to provide a soundly based and comprehensive view.

2. Summary of Key Background Issues

- (a) The National Capital Authority and the self-governing Territory government have been in operation for about fourteen years. During that period, a number of major changes have taken place including:
- a very low population growth rate (now around 330,000 people) compared with earlier periods of high growth;
 - a significant decline in Commonwealth funding (now on the same basis as other states and territory);
 - the maturing of the local political system and a desire by the community to decide local issues, service standards and priorities through its Territory government; and
 - a significant program of selling off properties, by the Commonwealth (in stark contrast to prolonged and substantial Commonwealth investment in the previous thirty years).
- (b) Canberra is fundamentally reliant on the Commonwealth Government. The modest growth in the private sector in recent years is primarily in service industries servicing government.
- (c) Across Australia and particularly in the ACT, land use planning and related issues provoke strong and often opposing views in sections of the community. These debates are often influenced by resident, industry and other lobby groups. In Canberra, these groups tend to be well organised and skilled in influencing governments and using the media to promote their views.

Despite Canberra being a planned city and the high level of planning activity that has taken place over the years, contentious planning issues regularly arise. The Territory government, like all governments, has difficulty in reaching decisions that will receive widespread support. To put the subject of this Inquiry into perspective, it

should be noted that only a proportion of these contentious issues, involve areas where NCA or the National Capital Plan are involved.

3. Summary of Effectiveness of Current Arrangements Relating to Planning

In the first fourteen years, the NCA and the Territory government have achieved a great deal. Despite this, there are a number of problem areas and difficulties, including:

- some difficulties in the relationship between the NCA and the Territory government;
- a perception of two separate, poorly coordinated planning systems;
- a lack of clarity in some aspects of the National Capital Plan, which can lead to differences in interpretations;
- claims by the Territory government that its policies (on which it was elected) cannot be implemented because the NCA can override it;
- a lack of certainty on some planning and development matters, where the NCA has a role;
- claims of additional costs and delays for proponents and a loss of organisational efficiency in planning management and administration;
- the Canberra community regularly hears the views of the Territory government and Legislative members, forcibly put, through the local media. In contrast, the views of the NCA are rarely heard. This could lead to a situation where blame and criticism could be allocated unfairly to the NCA, should a Territory government, present or future, choose to do so.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- (a) The planning structures and arrangements must take into account and strike an appropriate balance between the National Capital role of Canberra and the aspirations of its residents.
- (b) The NCA and its role in general should be retained to ensure that it can achieve its functional objectives, particularly representing the Parliament and the people of Australia.
- (c) The concept and role of the National Capital Plan should be retained and improved (subject to (d) below). The Plan should be reviewed so that it is a more effective instrument, and provides greater clarity and specific requirements (eg. providing descriptive standards and benchmarks to define expressions such as “of national significance”).
- (d) The National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan should be fully coordinated.

- (e) Where appropriate, elements of the National Capital Plan, particularly at the detailed level, should be administered by the Territory through the Territory Plan.
- (f) The planning arrangements and processes of the NCA and the Territory government should be better coordinated, including in regard to procurement practices.
- (g) Consideration should be given to how better to disseminate information on the role and function of the NCA to the Canberra community.