

Submission to the

Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

Inquiry into the Immigration Bridge Australia Proposal

By
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Summary

- The proposed immigration bridge, whatever its final design, would detract from the heritage values of Lake Burley Griffin and central Canberra by introducing an ill-suited and unnecessary structure into a much-loved landscape that is a key feature of the central national area.
- The concept is based on a laudable but, in this case, mistaken view of trying to stick to elements of Walter Burley Griffin's design despite the realities of an evolving city that have rendered the original concept irrelevant and inappropriate.
- Because of engineering and safety issues, the bridge would cost a huge amount to build and maintain. But its location and design means it would be used by few pedestrians and could be impractical for cyclists.
- The bridge would result in a loss of amenity for lake users, particularly sailors, for whom there would be considerable safety issues.
- If there is substantial support for commemorating immigrants in Canberra by paying for their names to be displayed publicly, there are better, cheaper and more appropriate ways.
- Even if an estimated \$30 million – or more - could be raised to build a bridge, as a privately financed venture that is not an inclusive national 'memorial' there would be serious concerns about the proponents' aim to make it a gift to the nation with its future maintenance costs transferred to taxpayers.

Heritage issues

The proposed structure with its tall pylons is not aesthetically pleasing. It would not harmonise with Commonwealth Avenue Bridge or other structures in the area, and would obstruct much-admired views in this area of the lake. Adding solar panels would block more of the views and give the whole thing a strange appearance, particularly as the panels would need hefty supports. Access towers and associated ramps at each end of the bridge would occupy considerable space and detract further from the overall appearance.

According to a report in *The Canberra Times* (31 May 2008), the National Capital Authority suggested a bridge to the proponents on the grounds that it would fulfil

Griffin's original concept. This is a misplaced attempt to adhere to the Griffin design. In this area of the lake, Griffin indicated a small road bridge helping to define West Basin as a nearly complete circle, part of Griffin's intended geometrical and symmetrical plan for the central part of the lake.

However, the lake turned out differently. East and West Basin are no longer part of a symmetrical design and shorelines are softer and more natural. What was originally to be a small bridge joining the southern shore to a finger of land jutting from the Acton shore would now have to cross a large expanse of water in a different location. Griffin's concept was for a low, elegant structure. A bridge built in its place today would have to be high, massive and inelegant as well as blocking views up, down and across the lake.

Design

The bridge proponents have not yet proceeded to a final design. The current proposal is for a 400-m long bridge about 12m above water level, supported by eight pylons at least 70 metres apart and having a 'roof' made of solar panels. An artist's impression of the bridge indicates a slim and light structure that seems unlikely to be achieved. The solar panels shown would need to be stronger and supported more frequently to withstand frequent strong westerly winds in this area of the lake. As a result, the walkway itself might need to be thicker and the pylons bigger.

A reasonable conclusion at this stage is that an eventual bridge would have a much greater visual impact than indicated in the drawing. If a bulkier structure was required it could also cost more.

However, a final design could incorporate many changes. At a briefing to the Institute of Engineers (Aust.) Civil/Structural Branch on 16 October 2008, Mr Graham French, a retired senior engineer and board member of Immigration Bridge Australia, said he would prepare a design brief for completion in 2009.¹

He spoke of his concerns about the aesthetics, design and cost of the current proposal. He thought pylons a minimum of 70 metres apart would be ugly and would aim for spans of up to 150 metres. He foresaw issues in separating pedestrians and cyclists and the need to provide ramps for disabled access that would be 260 metres long unless bridge height could be reduced towards each end.

Mr French also saw difficulties with access for emergency services. He said NCA wanted the bridge to give direct access to the museum at an upper level, which would require two entry/exit levels at that end.

Mr French's recognition of these major aesthetic, engineering and functional problems reinforces the view of this submission that an eventual bridge would be a massive, costly and complicated structure, degrading its surroundings and serving a very small purpose.

¹ Mr French's views are quoted, with thanks, from notes taken at the briefing by Mr Graham Giles, Commodore of Canberra Yacht Club.

Safety and amenity for lake users

To help address safety and amenity issues that concern sailors and other lake users, the National Capital Authority indicated (30 March 2007) general support for a request from the Lake Burley Griffin Users Group for a minimum height of 12 metres above water level, pylons at least 70 metres apart, soft collars where boats might collide with them and design features that would reduce wind turbulence.

If all these criteria were included in an eventual bridge, there would still be substantial reduction in the ability of sailing clubs to lay racing and training courses that would not be adversely affected by the structure, whatever the distance between pylons. In some weather conditions, the wide vicinity of the bridge would have to be avoided altogether. This would mean less flexibility in laying courses that would be safe and large enough for a good standard of competition. In turn, this would have a deleterious effect on the ability to continue to grow the sport in Canberra and to attract sailors from elsewhere for major events.

A final design incorporating fewer pylons would be an improvement in safety, but not if the minimum height of 12 metres is abandoned towards the ends. The danger there would be a yacht having its mast caught under the bridge, unable to break free and being swept onto the sea wall, particularly on the Lennox Gardens shore, which takes the full force of strong westerlies.

The lake is creating more interest as a site for national and even international sailing contests with growing interest from other sailing organisations. ACT clubs, particularly Canberra Yacht Club, are growing in their ability to host major events. Australian sailors training for Olympic and other international events could gain valuable experience on the lake. Here, weather conditions can be more akin to those in Europe and North America than at major sailing centres like Sydney and Melbourne. Now, there is just enough space on Lake Burley Griffin to suit requirements for major sailing fixtures. This would be lost if the safe area for competition sailing was significantly reduced by the proposed bridge.

For shore-bound lake users and tourists, including pedestrians, joggers, cyclists and family groups, access to the bridge would have constraints. If the towers at each end had only steps, many disabled people would be unable to use the bridge. It is understood that lifts are proposed at each end. While this would mostly overcome access issues, maintenance and operational costs would soar. As well, there would be major issues in guarding against vandalism and improper use.

The height above the water of the relatively narrow walkway would make many people nervous about crossing it, even without a strong wind blowing. Solar panels would not provide any useful protection from sun or rain.

Commemorating migrants

The Welcome Wall at the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney already displays the names of immigrants under a paying arrangement similar to the Immigration Bridge proposal. The Wall, like the Bridge, commemorates only those for whom money has been paid for the privilege. There is a good case for not extending such exclusiveness and incompleteness to the central area of the national capital. Memorials here are for all people of a certain description and, in some cases display

their names. We cannot imagine relatives of, say, police officers who died on duty having to pay to have their names included on the memorial in Central Basin.

Immigrants may be in a different class, but how should they be defined? Why start at 1788? Should we not commemorate the immigrants who arrived 50,000 or more years ago? Is the bridge to commemorate what immigration means to Australia? If so, why limit it to engraving the names of a tiny fraction of them?

If there is popular support for permanently commemorating in Canberra immigrants from 1788 by paying to publicly record their names, there is at least one much cheaper and better way to do it. This could be a handrail or other minimal structure along the lakeshore where many more people could see it. It could be between Lennox Gardens and Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, merging into the Australians of the Year plaques and other national symbols around Central Basin.

And the lake could be left as it is.

Will it ever be built?

How likely is the proposal to become reality? It has been around for some years, but at the time of writing this submission, the proponents have not submitted a development application or produced a final design. They have not revealed how much money has been raised through subscriptions or sponsorships. Immigration Bridge Australia is described as a not-for-profit organisation formed solely to build the bridge. On completion it would be a gift to the nation. This presumably means they would not fund any ongoing maintenance or insurance, both of which would be substantial. Given the private nature of the venture, and the non-inclusiveness or partial nature of its function as a 'memorial', these liabilities should not become a responsibility of the Commonwealth or ACT governments. Should the proponents proceed to a development application, this is probably the first question needing to be settled to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

Immigration Bridge Australia intends to raise \$20 million of the construction cost through about 200,000 subscriptions at \$115 for each name. The rest of the estimated \$30 million would be from sponsorship and in-kind support.

The only comparison we have is the Welcome Wall in Sydney. Names of immigrants can be recorded on it for \$105. According to a report in *The Canberra Times* (31 May 2008), the Wall, which opened in 1999, had 17,885 names. At the time of submission, the museum had not responded to a request for the current number.

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