

Gordon & Gillian Shannon

The Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the National
Capital and External Territories

Inquiry into the Immigration Bridge Australia Proposal

I welcome the Committee's initiative in undertaking this Inquiry because I believe there are questions which need to be answered about the process adopted by the IBA in this proposal. I have followed the progress by regular reference to the IBA website and I have become increasingly uncomfortable about the information provided, the assertions being made and the apparent presumption that the future approval processes are a foregone conclusion. My specific comments follow.

Community Project

The IBA is a not for profit organization undertaking a community project but there seems to be no opportunity for community involvement in the process other than through financial contributions. There is no evidence that the community has any participation in the election (selection) of persons involved in the administration of the project. Nor have I seen any published financial statements. I would have assumed that there would be an obligation to produce such documents and, if it is a genuine community project, then the community at large should be able to view them through the website. Persons subscribing to the project would expect to be informed about how their contributions are being used.

Soliciting Funds

It interests me that IBA is able to solicit funds for a project which, to the best of my knowledge, has no legal status and no formal legal agreement from approving authorities that the project can or will proceed. I believe the Committee should establish under what authority the IBA can solicit funds for a project for which there is no guarantee of approval.

Implementation of the Project

Notwithstanding my comment in the previous paragraph, the IBA asserts that "we are going to build a bridge across Lake Burley Griffin" and that "upon completion the Immigration Bridge will (be) presented as a gift to the Nation". (1)

Does this mean that, assuming approvals are forthcoming, the Government which owns and is responsible for Lake Burley Griffin will allow a private organization to undertake a major construction project spanning the lake in one of the most significant parts of the National Capital. The IBA is an organization with no demonstrated experience in work of this nature which is an inherently difficult and unpredictable engineering construction project. The risk of cost and time overruns must be very high and one must wonder how IBA would cope with such situations.

They state that “The cost has been put at \$30m. As a community project funded mainly by a combination of individual contributions (including the History Handrail Program), business sponsorships and income that will be generated as a result of the incorporation of a solar roof in the construction.” (2) This appears to be a dubious basis for handling a high risk construction project in which the estimated costs can at best be no more than approximate at this stage of the design process.

The Government should satisfy itself beyond all doubt that IBA can manage such an undertaking. Failure will inevitably lead to the Government having to pick up the pieces and accept the subsequent financial and contractual consequences. The logical way would be for the Government itself to undertake the construction, using the money raised by IBA, to ensure that the National Capital interests are protected and that the result meets the Government’s overall requirements for the planning and development of Canberra. I can think of no precedent for allowing a private organisation to undertake such a major construction in one of the most important parts of the National Capital.

Some comments on the bridge structure and design

The sketch of the bridge on the IBA website (3) seems to provide access to the bridge only by stairs or by elevator. It is rewarding to contemplate access by stairs. As the bridge will have water clearance of 12m. (say 11m from ground level), and assuming that the walkway structure will be about one metre deep the stair height will be 12m. Using a standard step riser of 15cm, the number of steps required will be 80. This would be a very strenuous effort for many people. By comparison the stairway at the southern end of Commonwealth Avenue Bridge from ground level to the bridge walkway contains 45 steps (6.75m)

At this location the provision of an elevator is no doubt attractive, even desirable. But what happens when the elevator breaks down or there is an emergency requiring evacuation of the bridge. It is obvious that a ramp is an essential addition to the design. (A ramp is shown on the display at Regatta Point). It should be acknowledged that, using standard gradients, a ramp would need to be nearly 100m long. This will require a very significant land take at each end of the bridge. At both points the available space is very limited and ramps will have a huge impact.

It is also reasonable to contemplate the parking needs if the bridge is built. It would seem probable that the majority of visitors to the bridge will want to access it from the nearest point and this could create serious difficulties at the Flynn Drive end. Who will pay to solve that problem?

Visual impact

The IBA, in its latest newsletter, says of the bridge “its elegant and unobtrusive design sympathetically frames the lakeside environment.” (4)

The height from water level to the walkway is 12m (see above) and add 2.5m to the top of the roof over the bridge, the total height of the bridge will be 14.5m. By comparison, the height from water level to the top of the handrail at the highest point of Commonwealth Avenue Bridge is 11.3m. (by my rather crude measuring method)

The IBA bridge will be higher than the centre of Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, by about 3m and, being flat, will be even higher above the ends of that bridge.

Those viewing from the picnic areas along Alexandrina Drive, from the Yacht Club, from the northern aspect of Lennox Gardens and on the north side of the Lake around Barrine Drive may be less inclined to use the term unobtrusive. I have no doubt that many would use a much stronger description.

The merits of the proposal

There are two elements to this project, viz. To commemorate the contribution of migrants to Australia,
To construct a bridge to provide pedestrian access to the
National Museum of Australia

The first of these is no doubt worthy of support. The second is debatable to say the least. IBA tells us that “after discussions with NCA it was decided that this should take the form of a pedestrian bridge spanning Lake Burley Griffin..” (5)

There is no evidence that I have seen of consideration of other ways of achieving the first component. Nor have I seen any argument which concludes that the commemoration of migrant contributions must be on a pedestrian bridge. Why were other options not considered? As examples the recent development of the RG Menzies Walk and the display celebrating Australia’s Citizens of the Year Awards are excellent, sensitive, readily accessible examples of what can be achieved without the enormous costs involved in the IBA proposals.

There is, to my knowledge, no published analysis of the need for a pedestrian bridge in the location proposed. It is stated that it “will fulfil the recreational plans of the original designer of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin, in joining Acton Peninsula, home of the National Museum of Australia with the Parliamentary Triangle”. (6) I have no basis to dispute this so-called objective of Griffin but the only Griffin plan which I can find which has a link from the Triangle to the Acton Peninsula does not include a bridge. At that time, his design of the Lake enabled a road to follow the edge of the Lake to link with the Acton Peninsula. Moreover this was clearly intended to be a road bridge – not a pedestrian bridge as now proposed – and it would have been at ground level, not 12 metres above the water level to the underside of the bridge as in the IBA proposal.

It would appear that the NCA and IBA feel able to translate this into a pedestrian bridge over the Lake at another location. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to contemplate what Griffin would have done had he known the actual shape of the Lake and the location of the Museum. While there may be some superficial attraction to enable pedestrians to access the Museum in this way it would be useful to see the results of studies about need, usage and value for money of such an expensive solution, particularly as the majority of persons who will use the bridge will also have to return on it, thus doubling the length of the walk.

It must be a cause for concern for those examining “the process” to learn that there is already a “decision” between NCA and IBA for this proposal. Does this mean that there will now be no reasonable opportunity for genuine discussion about the merits of the proposal? This view could be supported given that NCA has already amended the National Capital Plan to include the bridge.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I make no secret of my opposition to this proposal but my greater concern is that this project may receive approval without full, expert and public consideration of all the implications for this precious part of Canberra of which so many are so proud.

Gordon Shannon
12 March 2009

Annexure

Quotations used in this submission are all sourced from

Immigration Bridge Australia website

- (1) Learn More about Immigration Bridge: Q and A Is this a Government project or initiative?
- (2) Learn More about Immigration Bridge: Q and A How much will it cost and how is it to be funded?
- (3) Home page
- (4) Learn More about Immigration Bridge: Q and A Has the design been sympathetic to the original intentions of the Griffin Legacy?
- (5) Newsletter Number 20 January 2008 Q and A How did the Immigration Bridge project come about?
- (6) News Q and A What is the Immigration Bridge?