

Senator Kate Lundy,
Chair,
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories,
c/- Department of the House of Representatives,
PO Box 6021,
Parliament House,
Canberra,
ACT
2600

Dear Senator,

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority. As I understand it the suggestion was prompted by my *Christening Canberra* article published in the *National Library News* in January 2008.

Fine tuning the respective roles of the NCA and the ACT government in the future planning of Canberra is not an area in which I claim expertise. So I have limited my comments to some aspects that weigh with me as a Canberra citizen and to issues where my recent research into the history of national capital site selection and the early history of Canberra-the-capital may have relevance to the Committee's work.

A National Capital

Personally I am concerned at what I regard as an erosion of the idea of a national capital. Notwithstanding the lapse of 100 years or so the considerations that prompted Canberra's establishment haven't disappeared and, periodically, Australians would benefit from being reminded of them. The forthcoming Centenary offers a good opportunity to do so.

As Committee's members know, Australia's founders pursued the idea of having a national capital and seat of government, separate from any existing State capital, for layered reasons. In part the objective was to ensure that the Commonwealth Parliament focussed nationally and was not unduly swayed by proximity by any one state's preoccupations and interests. In part the aim was to make a practical and symbolic statement about the new, federated (but not fully unified) Australia. In part the idea reflected defence concerns, avoiding a vulnerable coastal locale as capital. The lapse of a century or so hasn't eliminated the first two of considerations; the third now seems far fetched.

Symbols matter. As Australia's founding fathers and the likes of Walter Burley Griffin well understood, the national capital should be a statement both to and about the Australian people: that this was now one country, expressing and achieving high values and aspirations, equipped with outstanding creativity and capacities. While Australians tend to discount "Canberra", and load all ills upon it, this city has gone a long way to fulfilling those ideals. By any standard it's an outstanding example of civic planning and public architecture: its national collections and research capacities continue to grow in status: it's a city that showcases Australia to the world.

Canberra-the-capital belongs to all Australians. On their behalf the ultimate custodians of Canberra must necessarily be the Commonwealth Government and Commonwealth Parliament, which hopefully, will continue to maintain as close an involvement and interest in the city's evolution as in times past.

One key element contributing to the erosion of the national capital concept has recently been addressed. Our political system, at least in public perception, is increasingly seen as presidential. The domicile of the Prime Minister, both symbolically and in practice, becomes a powerful statement to which the country responds. Prime Minister Howard's predilection for Kirribilli discounted Canberra and the national capital concept.

In practical terms, a Prime Minister residing out of the national capital reduces the immediacy of interaction between the executive and the legislature and between the cabinet and the bureaucracy. However, for me, the negative consequences of Kirribilli become most manifest when worthy Melbourne citizens begin to explore the possibilities of purchasing a prime ministerial residence in Melbourne. Reach this point and Australia as a whole is clearly the worse off. Leave aside the likelihood that the Commonwealth would sooner or later be saddled with the cost, implicit was a sense that their State's interests were being discounted by Prime Ministerial location, and that their individual, and Victoria's interests generally, would be better advanced by close proximity. What is felt by one state will be felt by others. They suspect an absence of even-handedness and fear that the Commonwealth isn't taking a truly national approach. The concerns that prompted the establishment of a separate national capital in the first place re-emerge.

Another factor that risks eroding the standing of Canberra is Canberra itself. It is as though the ACT Government, on behalf of this local community, has begun to view the ACT as self fulfilling and self justified and that it should have the authority to manage the national capital on behalf of Canberrans. The "local preoccupations and interests" that are now starting to encroach on the national capital are Canberra's own. The idea that Canberra is the national capital, the province and property of all Australians, is being lost.

If any adjustment is envisaged to the respective roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth and ACT Governments it is critical that the national capital continue to be sensibly but actively overseen by the Federal Parliament. Besides all else, the Commonwealth needs to be able to directly protect Canberra's nationally important historic heritage, particularly the key public buildings, public spaces, and the angles and vistas that are the main essence of Burley Griffin's plan. The Commonwealth also needs

to be able to be able to sway and sustain its vision this city as Canberra now gives signs of having reached, possibly exceeded, it's environmentally prudent limits.

The NCA.

Frustration with the NCA's approach to some issues in recent years is understandable. In my view, as a local citizen, it unnecessarily involved itself for no obvious reason in the post bushfire reconstruction of Pearce's Creek Forest Settlement and in a number of other of highly marginal planning issues. Doing so was gratuitous. I suspect that such situations can be rectified by a sensible approach by the Minister without requiring formal change to the relative responsibilities reflected in the National Capital and the Territory plans.

Of more concern, in both the short and longer term, is Canberra airport. This has evolved as a separate mini-state, a law unto itself. Its commercially motivated development proceeds without meaningful interaction with, or regard for, the wider interests of this community. This is a situation that needs to be rectified and can only be addressed by the Commonwealth.

Acknowledging Pioneers.

In the main, the accounts of national capital site selection and of Canberra's early days as the national capital have been written by Federal parliamentarians and by those who came to work in Canberra. They anointed their own. The often significant contribution made by others, particularly those who worked for the New South Wales Government of the day and continued to do so, has often, though not always, been ignored.

Most of the cabinet ministers who were central in the early years of Federation, including those most influential in decisions on the national capital, have gradually been acknowledged as Canberra has evolved. Suburb names like Barton, Deakin, Watson, Fisher, Reid, Forrest, (assuming the name relates to both Forrest brothers) Hughes, O'Malley, Cook, Pearce, and Chapman, are examples. Some Cabinet Ministers who played an important role haven't yet qualified or have only fleeting recognition. Hugh Mahon has a street named after him but he and W H Kelly are two I'd put in this category. Others working on the capital's development early on, eg Burley Griffin, Weston, Scrivener, Vernon, Owen, Corin, have also been acknowledged by one means or another.

A copy of the *Christening Canberra* article is attached. It endeavours to explain, successfully I hope, just who it was who caused Canberra to (re) enter serious contention as the national capital site; who it was prompted the Commonwealth Parliament to look positively at this region. It fills a gap in earlier accounts.

The evidence indicates that the initiative came not from within the Commonwealth ambit, (during the critical period the Commonwealth was running dead on the issue), but from professional engineers and surveyors working within the New South Wales Government of the day. Two in particular were central. Arthur Lloyd was the Chief Surveyor

working for the New South Wales Public Works Department. His colleague, Leslie A B Wade, was the principal engineer responsible for water and irrigation. Wade, the principal advocate of Burrinjuck Dam and the MIA, was the brother of the then NSW Attorney General, later New South Wales Premier, Charles Gregory Wade. The evidence suggests it was LAB Wade who first attached the name *Canberra* to this national capital site, a name ultimately confirmed by Lady Denman on 12 March 1913. Lest that seem an obvious and forgone decision there were in fact innumerable other naming options. Both warrant acknowledgement.

As do others. Possibly top of my list is NSW Premier C G Wade. Whereas his predecessor, Joseph Carruthers, had gone out of his way to thwart the Commonwealth government's decision in favour of a national capital site at Dalgety, Charles Gregory Wade did everything reasonably possible to accommodate the Commonwealth requests and facilitate settlement of the Federal Territory issue. Again Wade has a street named in his honour in the Canberra suburb of Watson but in my view he warrants rather more. A suburb perhaps, catching up both brothers?

Others who warrant mention are the likes of Alexander Oliver who undertook the initial NSW Royal Commission into potential capital sites, David Miller who was the Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs for many years and the first Administrator of the Federal Capital Territory, and A. H. Chesterman. Like Charles Scrivener, Chesterman was employed by the Commonwealth to assess and survey alternative sites of interest to the Federal government. Scrivener was lucky: he was closely associated with the Canberra site and has been generously acknowledged. Chesterman, whose assigned focus was Tumut region sites wasn't, and has been ignored.

The Centenary.

I hope the Commonwealth Government chooses to actively commemorate the Centenary of the establishment of the national capital. As indicated above, one aspect worth reminding Australians-all is that there is logic in having a national capital. Australia has a pretty good one. I also would hope that some of those who played a significant part in site selection and Canberra's development, and who haven't had due recognition so far, might receive it in the Centenary context.

In terms of dates and events, the ACT's focus seems to be on celebrating 12 March 1913, the date when the so-called foundation stone of Canberra was laid, and the name formally announced. That's a critical event. However, I'd argue, particularly from a Commonwealth perspective, that an equally important date occurred two years earlier, on 1 January 1911, the date on which the Federal Territory was transferred from New South Wales to Federal sovereignty. I would encourage the Commonwealth both to fully participate in the Centenary commemoration and to mark that date in addition to any others.

In summary the Commonwealth must continue to retain primary responsibility for framing and sustaining the vision of Canberra as the national capital, and in the planning judgements that result from this responsibility.

Yours sincerely

Greg Wood