

A Tale of Two Cities

By Don Aitkin

Like many other Canberra residents, I sometimes act as a tourist guide for friends and acquaintances from out of town. If they too are Australian I manage to say at the beginning, 'Welcome to your city!' For it is their city, the capital city of their nation, and they all have ownership of it.

In fact, an Australian nation without Canberra is hard to imagine. For Canberra's existence is part of the original deal that got all the colonies to federate. There was no chance that New South Wales would have accepted Melbourne (then the largest and wealthiest city in the country) as the capital, any more than that Victorians would accept Sydney.

As for the other colonies, they were united in agreeing that there had to be a new capital city — they didn't want either Sydney or Melbourne, and recognised that Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Perth would never get the guernsey.

It is hard to know what Australians a hundred years thought about the likely size of their capital. Walter Burley Griffin himself imagined it as having eventually 25,000 inhabitants, fitting comfortably into the area between Mount Ainslie, Black Mountain and Red Hill.

Today it is eight times larger than Griffin's imagined maximum, and it covers a much larger area than what some now call 'Old Canberra'. And it is two cities: the national capital of a country of 21 million people, a member of the world's 20 largest nations, and at the same time a self-governing city-state of 350,000 people that is growing rapidly and may pass half a million around 2030.

There is a natural tension in the fact of these two cities. Our city-state is not truly self-governing, and in fact the nation, through the Commonwealth Government, owns every square metre of it. At the same time, all Australian governments since 1988 have been inclined to see the problems of the national capital as having most to do with the elected government of the Australian Capital Territory.

The National Capital Authority is the Commonwealth's agent in the planning, and to a small degree, the maintenance of the national capital, and the tension of two cities is a daily issue for us. Our job is to ensure that the unique and splendid qualities of the national capital are retained for future generations.

Some of that job involves planning, some of it is maintenance, some of it is negotiation, and some of it is regulation. For us to do our job properly we have to engage the citizens of the city in a consideration of the future of the National Capital. It is plain, for example, that we cannot keep on building a suburban Canberra based on the single-family dwelling.

Why? First, that is only of the desired forms of occupation that today's Canberra residents want. Second, we have virtually run out of useful land within the ACT borders. The new mega-suburb of Molonglo is probably our last shot at a substantial set of family neighbourhoods, and even it will have a lot of apartments.

The future Canberra will have many more apartments, and the kind of residential concentration they bring make mass transit systems more efficient and more affordable. Lots of people want mass transit, but we need higher population density to provide that. But lots of people — not necessarily the same ones — don't want high population densities. In fact there is considerable diversity about the kind of Canberra people who live here want, let alone about the kind of Canberra of the future they want.

The NCA has to advise the Australian government on Canberra's future. We need to know what people think about all these issues, and we will be providing opportunities to make that possible. One of them is a public forum where those who are interested can tell us what they want — and argue with one another as well!

We will listen hard, and where we hear compelling reasons, for example, to reduce the height of a proposed building, or prevent a certain kind of development on a given parcel of land, we will do that. But ultimately, our guide is the National Capital Plan, a document that is now twenty years old and probably in need of a review. Every person in Canberra ought to be interested in the Plan, and the assumptions and values that are built into it.

And the light on the hill, for those of us in the NCA, is the need to ensure that future generations of Australians take pride in their national capital, and think what a good place it would be to live in. Canberra will always be a work in progress — today, tomorrow and in twenty years' time. But all of us who live here can play a part in that work. After all, it concerns us all!

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