

Op-Ed piece on Canberra and the NCA

The Government has still to announce its response to the Joint Standing Committee's report into the National Capital Authority and Canberra's planning future. I am not privy to the decision, but we can reasonably bet that the NCA, or something like it, will be continued, with similar or varied functions. The reason is straightforward: the Commonwealth is the landlord of the entire Australian Capital Territory, and Canberra is its seat of government. Whether successive Australian governments like it or not, they are committed to Canberra, and to a continuing investment, now nearly a century old, in its development.

The Joint Standing Committee's Report, *The Way Forward*, contains 22 recommendations, many of them to do with the structure of the Authority. But throughout the Report is strong sense of the special quality of Canberra as a city, and of the need to preserve and enhance that quality. As the acting Chair of the Authority I share that sense of purpose, and set out some of the considerations that will guide me over the term of my appointment.

Canberra's special quality What is that quality? Visitors are usually alert to it at once, but are not always sure what it is. It is not enough to say that Canberra is a planned city; so, in a much reduced sense, are all the Australian capital cities. To me the essential quality is that in our city human beings in their buildings and the site and environment they have chosen exist in a special harmony. Consider Manhattan or Hong Kong. There human structures dominate, almost oppressively. Hobbiton, of *The Lord of the Rings*, is at the other end of the spectrum: there hobbits dig out burrows in banks and hills, and there are few buildings. Nature dominates. Burley Griffin, alert to the Garden City concept of the

late 19th century, and given a site where nature is powerful, designed the shape of the city to sit comfortably within its environment. Ever since, we have done our best to keep that spirit: no buildings on hills, no skyscrapers, no giant neon signs, plenty of open space. It works.

I would add a second item: Canberra is always unfinished business. As a boy living in Reid in the 1940s, I was conscious of suburban blocks between Civic and where we lived that were formed with gravel roads, but empty of houses. Ah, they were for later, I was told. For Canberra there will always be a 'later', and that is both the outcome and the stimulus for good planning. It is one of the roles of the NCA. Canberra has a future as well as a past, and the NCA's job is to ensure that in fifty years' time Canberra residents will be as proud of their city as we are of ours, and that it still has the same magic quality.

Canberra's future

Population projections are essential but they are awkward things. Canberra has experienced both rapid and slow rates of growth. But at 340,000 it has passed the point at which its population is likely to decline. By 2030 we could have between 400,000 (low end) and 500,000 people (high end) people living here. The great virtue of a planned city is that you can work out, fairly well, where the additional folk will live, work and shop, where their kids will go to school, where they will play sport, and so on. You have to make some educated guesses about the rate of growth, and family formation (what proportion will live in single-person dwellings?) but you can still put much of the infrastructure in before people arrive, rather than — at huge expense and inconvenience to everybody — after they have come.

Again, ensuring that happens is a role for the NCA. If Canberra were to reach half a million by 2030 that increase would be one of

fifty per cent on today's population. Where is everyone to go? We have run out of easily usable suburban land in the ACT. Should the Commonwealth try to acquire more from New South Wales? Where will everyone work? What sort of transport system should we have? Civic can't help being a kind of focus, and it presently attracts tens of thousands of workers every day, plus a lot of shoppers as well. A reasonable guess is that any increase in Canberra's population will be amplified proportionately in Civic, and that is one of the reasons that made the Constitution Avenue development so important. We needed to have the infrastructure developed before the population pressure is too great, and forces short-term solutions that are not the best.

Consultation and communication

All of us are stakeholders in the future Canberra, and all of us are beneficiaries of past decisions. It will be my responsibility to ensure that the widest communication occurs within the ACT about the pressures, considerations and planning issues that come before the NCA, so that, at least in principle, everyone knows what we are doing and why. The ACT Government has a most important role in planning, too, and I will do my best to make sure that relations between the NCA and the ACT Government are those of an excellent partnership.

Consultation is not, however, a process of seeking public approval. In some issues there will never be wide agreement, because people will quite naturally want different outcomes. Sir John Overall, one of Canberra's most important shapers, was adamant about that. You will always have critics, and you need to communicate to them and to everyone else. Ultimately, however, a decision has to be made. Make it!

My belief is that it should always be made in the best interests of the future Canberra, built on the spirit of Burley Griffin's

imaginative creation. In world terms Canberra is a unique work of human creativity — a gift of the Australian imagination. Let us keep it that way!

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