

## **A Communications Strategy for the NCA**

*[An early task for me at the NCA was to think how it might better present itself to the people of Canberra. What follows is a working paper I wrote to work through the issues. Much of what follows was adopted, and put into practice.]*

The NCA has, it seems to me, a somewhat chequered presence in Canberra. A substantial section of the community is highly supportive. That section is well informed and well connected. It includes the Property Council, the professional associations and the various levels of government, both Commonwealth and ACT. But elsewhere the NCA is often slammed for things it hasn't done, for faults that are not of its own making, and for delays which are not its own responsibility. Sometimes, if only because we are human, we have made errors, and the fault is ours.

Since complaints of any kind result in adverse publicity, the faster they are dealt with the better. Complaints can be public — on television or in the print media — or initially private, in letters to MPs or to the Minister. If the complainer is insistent enough, the complaint will finish on the Minister's table, or come as a question in parliament, or arise at a public meeting. The fewer the complaints, and the faster they are dealt with, the more stable our operations will be, and the more harmonious our relations with the Minister and other stakeholders.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our principal audience consists of the people of Canberra. They are the complainers, and often what they are complaining about is not our responsibility, or it is a matter where responsibility is shared between the NCA, the ACT government and other interests. In any case, the people of Canberra have a legitimate interest in what is happening in their city, because it will affect them. It follows that the NCA ought, wherever possible, to make public what it is doing, and why it is doing it. I call that going on the front foot: letting people know what the issues are, accepting that the Authority does not have all the answers, but that sooner or later it has to make decisions or recommendations. In doing so, we implicitly accept that the people of Canberra are intelligent and competent, and that their contributions could well have an effect on our thinking.

There are other good reasons for going down this path: it is 'fresh start' time, it allows for some excitement in the building of the future Canberra, it gets us into frequent contact with the Canberra community, and the outcomes are likely to be more harmonious, which will give the Minister some wins.

### **How Might We Proceed?**

Five proposals follow. They are inter-connected.

#### ***1. Managing the Media***

- (i) Journalists are usually generalists who move from area to area. Someone given the responsibility for 'urban issues' will typically know little or nothing about the domain. We in the NCA should note who the reporters are, get to know them, give them briefings, be available for questions, encourage them to ask us for background, and so on.
- (ii) The J. K. Galbraith rule about letters to the editor should be followed: the NCA only ever writes to newspapers to correct errors of fact. Otherwise, any letter that is of a complaining kind should be dealt with at once, and a reply sent to the writer's home address. The letter should come from the Chairman, or the Chief Executive, or from the appropriate officer, and be agreed at the highest level before being sent.
- (iii) The NCA might explore the possibility of writing a regular (weekly, monthly) column in the major newspaper, as other organisations like the Property Council) have done.

## ***2. The Pipeline***

We know what is likely to be our own agenda in the short term, and to a degree in the long term. The long term consists mostly of issues and problems, but it is important that the Canberra community recognises that the future consists of issues and options, not of smoothly articulated and omnicompetent plans. We could invent something called 'the Pipeline', which we update from time to time. We would not place in that pipeline anything that was commercial in confidence or that government had not decided on.

## ***3. An Interactive Website***

The current website is excellent, but it is passive. We can place material for the Pipeline on it now, but it would be a great improvement if people could comment on what they read, and receive a reply quickly.

## ***4. Issues Papers***

For the next year or two, I think that the NCA could profitably release an issues paper every three or four months. They would be short but punchy, and cover areas like the likely population growth of Canberra and its implications, what the NCA and doesn't do, the costs of the city (which are considerable and beyond its revenues), the 80:20 open: built ratio in the city (the way we use land), what Canberra in 2030 might look like with a population of 500,000, and so on. These papers could be put, after issue, on the Pipeline and appear on the website.

## ***5. The Seminar***

What follows is an adaptation of a technique used by John Stone when Secretary of the Treasury. Every month (the last Friday, for example) the NCA would host a seminar to

which the major stakeholders would be invited. An NCA staff member would give a short (5-10 minute) paper. It could be an early version of an issues paper. The rules would be a version of Chatham House (no attribution with respect to material or speaker), and there would be no hierarchy: all views, in principle, would be of equal value. My guess is that the group would settle down in time to between 30 or 40. We would benefit from informed debate at an early stage, and from emphasising that we are prepared to seek contributions from the community.

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