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STATEMENT BY A COMMITTEE OF THE

Australian Planning Institute

for

The Senate Select Committee
on the Development of Canberra

SEPTEMBER 1955

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CANBERRA
A STATEMENT BY A COMMITTEE OF THE AUSTRALIAN
PLANNING INSTITUTE

This statement has been prepared for the Senate Committee on the Development of Canberra. It represents the results of a study of the evidence submitted to the Senate Committee and of the present state of the National Capital.

The members of the Institute Committee were as follows:

Walter Ralston Bunning, Architect and Town Planning Consultant;
Chairman, New South Wales Town and Country Planning
Advisory Committee.

Roderick David Lovat Fraser, Chief County Planner, Cumberland
County Council, Sydney.

Peter Firman Harrison, Senior Lecturer in Town and Country
Planning, University of Sydney.

assisted by Mr. Walter Geoffrey Faithfull, Officer in Charge
of Planning, Cumberland County Council, as executive
secretary.

The statement is divided into four parts:

- PART I - The National Capital - The Purpose of Canberra.
 - PART II - The National Capital Plan - Failure to Materialise.
 - PART III - Present Administrative Machinery - Lack of Direction
and Co-ordination in Planning and Design.
 - PART IV - Proposals.
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PART I - THE NATIONAL CAPITAL - THE PURPOSE OF CANBERRA

The function of Canberra has been described in the constitution as the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth. The interpretation of this simple statement given in the conditions of the International Competition for the planning of Canberra was -

"The Federal Capital City will be the permanent seat of Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, the place at which the Federal Parliament will meet, where all Commonwealth legislation will be enacted, and where the Governor-General will have his residence.

The city will, therefore, be primarily the official and social centre of Australia."

Since then, Australia has taken its place as one of the foremost nations of the world. In two world wars it has built an Australian tradition based on the qualities of courage, leadership and initiative. In peace, it has distinguished itself in world trade and international relations and in the fields of art, science and sport.

In a Commonwealth of sovereign states, strong and independent, no more fitting means of expressing national unity and spirit exists than in the National Capital. The City of Canberra, built according to the principles conceived by Walter Burley Griffin, will be capable of demonstrating Australia's stature as a nation - to Australia's citizens and to visitors from other countries.

The building of the City of Canberra is therefore a project of great magnitude and significance. It is a national development project requiring the utmost skill and vision in planning and administration and is the direct responsibility of the Federal Government, representative of the citizens of the Commonwealth.

The Federal House of Parliament and the residence of the Governor-General as the nation's first link with the British Crown, are the key points of the National Capital. These together with the Embassies, the Australian National University and the Australian War Memorial are institutions which truly express its purpose. The Capitol, a National Art Gallery, Library, Theatre, Museum and similar institutions serving as repositories of Australian achievements in the different fields of the Nation's activity must in time be added. The planning, architecture and development of the City and its buildings including the houses, shops, schools and other domestic establishments must be exemplary of the high quality of Australian materials, skill and craftsmanship.

All Australian citizens, regardless of their place of residence, whether it be Canberra or Camooweal, are of equal status in their responsibility for the development of the National Capital.

The development of Canberra according to its function as the National Capital is a single objective. Any other function the City assumes by reason of its geographical position in relation to an important region of New South Wales or which is given it to secure social and economic balance, must be supplementary to this function and be fostered and controlled accordingly.

* "Centrally located, the Capitol is (on) an extensive hill park and has a function, either for popular reception and ceremonial, or for archives and commemorating Australian achievements rather than for deliberation or counsel; at any rate representing the sentimental and spiritual head, if not the actual working mechanism of government."

Griffin's Explanatory Report, October 1913.

PART II - THE NATIONAL CAPITAL PLAN - FAILURE TO MATERIALISE

Griffin's Plan of 1912 won the international competition because it embodied, above all others, a central idea in civic design which would express in the finest possible way the heart of the new nation.

This idea was derived from a close study of the site formation and a deep sympathy with the national and aesthetic aspirations of the founders of the Commonwealth.

Griffin came to Australia in 1913 and until 1920 was Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction, during which time he made a closer study of the site. While it resulted in many modifications to the domestic areas of the Plan, this study strongly confirmed the national features. Indeed, nearly half a century of planning experience since can add nothing to its quality.

It is a theme, simple yet grand, which owes little to its historic antecedents at Versailles and Washington. The design of the Capital as Griffin conceived it was based on the major axis from Capital Hill to Mount Ainslie bisecting a triangle formed by Commonwealth, Kings and Constitution Avenues containing the formal water feature of Molonglo Basin.

This is the central theme which placed the Griffin Plan above all others, the grand idea without which the Plan of Canberra has no meaning.

This is the dramatic essay in civic design which alone distinguishes the Canberra Plan and places it in the first rank of world capitals, a brilliant combination of mountain and lake, axis and avenue to form a noble composition. It embodies the heart, the brain and the spirit of the Nation, the most important area of land in the 3,000,000 square miles of the Commonwealth.

But after 40 years of development let the Nation's citizens stand at any of the four key points and try to find the magnificent vistas promised by the Plan, try to travel the broad avenues with the grand-sounding names They may well ask "Where is the National Capital?"

Yet this should be the visual expression which all citizens might hope to see and remember; instead there is the great anti-climax of grazing and paddocks and desolation.

Clearly, there has been serious neglect of the National property because the development of the Capital has been more concerned with domestic requirements of a rapidly growing population.

The arrangements proposed by Griffin for the domestic parts of Canberra were, even for 1912, of somewhat doubtful validity. The geometric formality of the central idea, when extended to the residential suburbs becomes absurdly extravagant but, except for minor modifications, strenuous efforts have been made to preserve or respect these relatively unimportant features of the Plan, even at the expense of sound planning.

The residential requirements of Canberra are not greatly different from those of any Australian city. Housing development under the ideal conditions of the Australian Capital Territory should afford an opportunity to show, by example, how residential areas can and should be built. Their value as examples, however, depends on keeping costs at least comparable with those of ordinary suburbs. In this respect they fail.

On the other hand, the standards of housing and living area amenity enjoyed by Canberra residents are better than those of any city in Australia because, it seems, finance for development is not subject to the severe limitations which restrict local government activities elsewhere.

This may be justifiable in the National Capital as long as a proper balance between national and domestic features is maintained. For instance, the new swimming pool will cost over £300,000. Little more than one-fourth of this cost applied to landscaping could make the national features of the Plan intelligible.

PART III - ADMINISTRATIVE MACHINERY - LACK OF
PLANNING DIRECTION AND CO-ORDINATION

The unbalanced growth of Canberra is an example of the common misconception of town planning - that the plan is an end in itself. A town plan cannot materialise successfully unless it includes a programme of work and is kept under constant review although the ultimate aim may remain unchanged. In the development of the National Capital, the process of review and supervision should be maintained at all times and at all levels, from the broadest considerations of the overall plan down to the smallest details of tree planting, paving and sign-posting.

The gazettal of the Canberra Plan in 1925 was obviously intended to give it legal backing. The Gazetted Plan is, however, not a plan but merely a pattern of roads and avenues. It gives no hint of how, or in what sequence, it should be built-up. It has the grave disadvantage of giving the impression that Canberra is planned for all time, and that no further planning design is necessary. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There has in fact been no review of the Plan since Griffin's final revision in 1918. That is to say that after nearly 40 years there is no person or group in a position to take the view and exercise the executive power that was required of Griffin.

The development taking place is the work of a number of different sections of different departments, each carrying out its

own responsibilities in its own particular way with little sense of the contribution it should be making to a properly designed development of the Capital.

The various officials responsible for the subdivisions, buildings, roads, services, landscape and street furnishings, carry out their work more or less independently; there is no complete planned design or sequence of operations for the Capital as a whole, neither does it seem to be the responsibility of anyone to formulate such a scheme.

Never since the adoption of the Griffin plan has there been sufficiently close and skilled supervision of the growth of the city. The Federal Capital Commission came closest to the ideal, but even this body did not have continuous and responsible skilled assistance.

After the abolition of the Commission in 1930, Canberra had no planning advice whatsoever until the National Capital Planning and Development Committee was set up in 1938 with the express purpose of safeguarding the plan. This Committee has insufficient authority. The Departments of Works and Interior can submit matters to it, but are not bound by its recommendations. Evidence has been given to show that the Committee, in spite of its composition and its laudable purpose, has been by-passed and ignored in some important matters such as the West Lake decision.

A small secretariat between the departments has been established to co-ordinate development. But, in spite of secretariats or inter-departmental committees, there will inevitably be difficulties in divided authority in planning and design. It is quite impractical for architecture and building design in one department to be independent of planning design in another.

This is not to say that the Departments of Works and

Interior are failing in their respective domestic tasks in the Territory. Indeed, as far as construction and administration are concerned, there is little to criticise. The defect lies in the failure to give overall planning and design sufficient importance in the development of the Capital.

It is clear that the failure of the National Capital Plan to materialise after 40 years is due to lack of balance in development with too much emphasis on relatively unimportant domestic features. This lack of balance in turn is due to lack of appreciation of the national features of Canberra and the need for properly co-ordinated priorities in development.

PART IV - PROPOSALS

The development of Canberra, because of the City's importance as a symbol of a country's unity, strength and character, places it in the front rank of national responsibilities.

Parliament itself should be directly responsible; not through any department whose functions extend beyond Federal Capital Territory, but through a Parliamentary Standing Committee whose sole task should be to control the development of the National Capital.

This Committee should have and exercise the authority necessary to ensure that all aspects of developmental policy, planning and design are properly considered and related before being dispersed as tasks among the various departments and sections of departments responsible for their execution.

The exercise of this authority would encroach very little if at all upon the main responsibilities of the present departments concerned with the Australian Capital Territory. Develop-

ment is at present mainly carried out by the Departments of Interior (Administration) and Works (Construction). Neither Department is, by its very nature, equipped to concern itself with all those aspects of the design and development of the Capital which are so necessary if it is to fulfil its rightful destiny.

The constitution of the Committee should primarily aim to provide effective representation of national interests but, at the same time, allow representation of the departmental instrumentalities most concerned. For these reasons it is suggested that a Chairman and four members be drawn from the Senate with the Ministers for Works and the Interior and also the Member for the Australian Capital Territory to form a Committee of eight.

The Committee should be required to take the best advice available on all matters relating to the Capital. Specialists in such subjects as regional development, town planning, civic art, architecture, surveying, sculpture, landscape and traffic engineering should be consulted as required irrespective of whether they are Commonwealth or State officers or private practitioners. In certain cases competitions might be conducted.

Initially the Committee should be required to engage at least one **consultant of the highest qualifications in Civic Design**, if necessary from overseas, to assist in the establishment of a policy from which the Committee and its staff could continue their work. It should have as its principal executive a fulltime Director of Planning and Design assisted by a highly qualified technical and administrative staff.

The Director of Planning and Design would be responsible for carrying out a continuous review of the Plan in general and in detail and with his staff would form the permanent nucleus upon which the departmental and other consultants would rely

for the collection of necessary information and the definition of particular problems which they may be called upon to solve.

This statement has not dealt with the many details of design and development which have been mentioned critically by witnesses before the Senate Committee. Our review of the evidence and our knowledge of the situation has brought us to the conclusion that the unsatisfactory state of Canberra's development is due primarily to present inadequacies in organisation. It is clear that control by an authority representative of the nation and acting on the best available advice is essential to achieve the best results.

This may not mean that every aspect of the Capital will be beyond criticism, but it will ensure that the finest skill and effort will be devoted to the building of the Nation's capital city.