



INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NOVEMBER 2013

ALTERNATIVE REPORT—BRENDAN SMYTH MLA

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Regional engagement should be a regular function of the ACT Government.

Unfortunately, over the last 12 years under ACT Labor, this has not been the case. In effect, successive ACT Labor Government policy have had the undesirable effect of retrograding regional engagements initiated as early as 1996 by the Canberra Liberals under the Carnell administration.

Groundwork to more directly engage with the ACT's regional partners have been traced back to as early as 16 years ago. An article in *Local Government Focus* in September 1998, entitled 'Moving forward in regional cooperation and community planning', noted the following:

In May 1996 sub-regional partners consisting of the ACT and NSW Governments, NSW councils of Yass, Yarrowlunla, Gunning, Queanbeyan and Cooma-Monaro, and the Commonwealth commenced a strategic planning project to develop a Framework for improved co-ordination of planning and provision of human services in the ACT and Sub-region.¹

Initiatives from the development of this initiative included:

...extensive consultation with consumers, government and non-government providers and the broader community. It documented the range of social and community services and programmes operating within the sub-region, brought together available information about levels of demand and access to services, and identified some existing needs and service gaps.

Importantly, it also documented the need to ensure that government boundaries and programme guidelines do not create barriers to the effective planning, delivery, management or access to services.²

¹ *Moving forward in regional cooperation and community planning*, Local Government Focus, 1998

² *Ibid.*

Key outcomes from this process included the following:

- Principles for service provision within the ACT and sub-region, which could be used as a basis for cross border protocols and agreements.
- Tools that assist the planning process and that are appropriate for local application.
- Processes for co-ordination and liaison to monitor and review service provision.
- Options and recommendations for future planning of social infrastructure and service delivery.³

The Carnell Administration on regional engagement was further emphasised in 1999. *Local Government Focus* reported the following:

Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, said that her Government is keen to promote the national capital in the context of the broader region. "We are committed to the sustainable development and management of the Australian Capital Region," she said.⁴

Ms Carnell elaborated on this by saying:

It has been interesting to watch the change as the Councils and the ACT Government began working together. Initial apprehension has now been replaced by mutual trust, with the ACT seen as a regional leader.

We have the resources to assist neighbouring Councils on a number of fronts, including telemedicine through the Canberra Hospital to assist local hospitals to have access to specialist treatment.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Regional Involvement, Local Government Focus, 1999.*

Economic development initiatives and job creation schemes, as well as environmental planning, are just some of the opportunities for cooperation on a regional basis.⁵

Key initiatives at the time included:

- A comprehensive review of road transport priorities in the Australian Capital Region (ACR).
- A Regional Telecommunications Development Strategy
- A Regional Leadership Program
- ACT Government submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the rural and regional impacts of competition policy.

At the time, under a Canberra Liberals Government, the ACT was ahead of the pack in Australia in relation to regional development. The Territory Government was the first in the country to have a regional environment report, which other jurisdictions were looking to follow.

GENERAL INQUIRY FINDINGS

This Select Committee's inquiry into regional development confirms the Opposition's position that much of what the present government is trying to achieve:

...a Liberal Government did all this before. It was one of the first things that the Kate Carbell Government did. It established it and got it working. It was successful; it was producing things. Labor got into government and got rid of it all. For the last 12 years they have been doing little, if anything, when it comes to regional development.⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Hansard, 28 February 2013, pg 926.

This sentiment is confirmed in the Government's recent *Growth Diversification and Jobs* business development strategy for the ACT, which makes reference to the ACR a mere 11 times with no mention of tangible action items for the region. It is best characterised in the report's own words:

Canberra is intrinsically connected to the South East Region of NSW through our transport hubs, education institutions, tertiary health services, retailing, research and knowledge-based institutions.

We recognise our role as a regional hub city to a broader population of around 600,000 people and the economic opportunity this regional connection also confers to Canberra. ...this strategy has been framed largely around the issues and opportunities of the businesses that are resident within our borders...⁷

The Government's position to frame its economic development strategy in this way leads to scenario's highlighted by Regional Development Australia ACT's submission that:

Venture further out from the ACT, and it becomes more apparent that communities—especially smaller communities—have access to lower levels of services, have smaller employment markets from which to obtain meaningful employment, and generally have reduced levels of income, education and social connectedness.⁸

In short, although there is much talk in engaging the regions, the Government's economic development blueprint is primarily a Canberra-centric strategy with the potential unintended consequence of '...sucking the life out of them (regional communities) by bringing everybody into Canberra.'⁹

⁷ *Growth, Diversification and Jobs: A Business Development Strategy for the ACT*, ACT Government, 2013, pg. 3.

⁸ RDA ACT, Submission No. 10, pg 11.

⁹ Mr Sloan, *Proof Transcript of Evidence*; 22 August 2013, pg. 70.

GOVERNMENT'S DUPLICATION OF REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

The Inquiry findings discussed in the prior section takes into account a broader spectrum of issues beyond economic development, but associated issues such as—but not limited to—transport, planning and provision of services, community development, and the environment.

When asked about the Chief Minister's intentions for the Inquiry and what she hopes to achieve through this process, she noted:

*It is a very genuine attempt to involve the Assembly in the regional discussion.*¹⁰

However, through this inquiry process, the Chief Minister also confirmed that the Government is working on the Greater Capital Region Strategy concurrent to this Select Committee inquiry, which is due to be finalised by the end of 2013.¹¹

Concern has been raised by some Members of this Select Committee on the genuineness of the Chief Minister's intentions to 'involve the Assembly in the regional discussion' with this inquiry when her Government is already involved in developing a regional strategy to be published regardless of the findings on this Committee.

No clear advice was provided by the Chief Minister on the interplay between the strategy being developed and this Committee's findings. When asked whether there is duplication of work, the Chief Minister responded with:

*You could say that about any committee inquiry into anything.*¹²

When asked whether this inquiry would address deficiencies in the development of the strategy being worked on, the Chief Minister replied that she was not aware of any such deficiencies.¹³

¹⁰ Ms Gallagher, *Proof Transcript of Evidence*, 29 May 2013, pg. 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Similar duplications were identified with regard to section 5 (d) of the *Resolution of Appointment* for:

...further cooperation at the local government level on environmental and conservation matters and building community resilience to deal with natural disasters, extreme weather events and climate change.

This matter is currently being handled in the Greater Capital Region Strategy and the ACT-NSW Land Use and Infrastructure Plan. When asked whether the Select Committee inquiry was addressing any deficiencies in the other two concurrent initiatives, the Chief Minister responded with:

*I do not think there is anything deficient.*¹⁴

The point remains that the Chief Minister could not articulate the purpose of this Committee's inquiry and how this process will add value to the Government's existing regional engagement initiatives, eg, the Greater Capital Region Strategy and the ACT-NSW Land Use and Infrastructure Plan.

This could also be applied to the Government's other regional initiatives, namely:

- Regional Development Australia ACT Committee
- Remaining elements of the ACT-NSW MoU for Regional Collaboration
- NSW Cross-Border Commissioner
- South East Regional Organisation of Councils
- Individual councils
- COAG Regional Australia Standing Council
- Canberra Urban and Regional Futures

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg.44.

NO PRODUCTIVE DEFINITION OF 'THE REGION'

The uncoordinated nature of the Government's approach to regional development is further exacerbated by the fact that the Government does not have a consistent definition of 'the region'. It advises:

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines this area as the Australian Capital Region (ACR1) taking in the ACT and surrounding 17 local government areas (LGAs) of the South Coast, south to the NSW-Victorian border, west to Tumbarumba and Gundagai and north to include the councils of Young, Boorowa, Upper Lachlan and Goulburn Mulwaree.

The ACT Government does not apply a single definition of 'the region' as the regional parameters change according to the issue being addressed. The tertiary health services within the ACT are accessed by people from as far west as Wagga Wagga and south to Bega. However, for education, infrastructure and land use planning purposes, the region is generally concentrated to those LGAs within an approximate one hour commute, referred to as the 'C Plus 1' region. This takes in Queanbeyan, Palerang, Yass, Goulburn Mulwaree, Cooma-Monaro and Upper Lachlan.¹⁵

Without a unified approach—as earlier discussed—the Government's lack of a clear definition for 'the region' further confirms its scatter-gun approach to regional development that lacks consistency.

This is even further illustrated in the Government's submission to this Select Committee inquiry, where it noted:

Consequently, the ACT-NSW Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for Regional Collaboration is deliberately silent in defining the region given the diversity of issues being progressed. The ACT's economic footprint brings into play a different set of interests.¹⁶

¹⁵ ACT Government Submission to the Select Committee on Regional Development, ACT Government, pg. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

As such, it is not unreasonable that this approach has led to the Government taking 12 years to initiate regional engagement on issues such as:

- The signing a MoU with NSW for regional collaboration.
- Acknowledging regional pressures on transport, road networks, service delivery in health and education.
- Looking into a coordinated catchment management approach across jurisdictions to improve water quality.
- Procurement and resource sharing.
- Emergency management and disaster recovery.
- Regional data collection and analysis.

CONCLUSION

Through the course of this Select Committee inquiry process uncovered the Government's mismanagement of the ACT regional engagements as a result of:

- Duplication of initiatives leading to inconsistent outcomes.
- Lack of a coherent definition of what the Government means by 'the region'.
- Delays on taking action to address known regional issues affecting service delivery in the ACT.

The result of this the Government's identified opportunities in its submission have yet to be achieved, namely:

- Enhancing and leveraging the world class education and training sector in the region, improving integration and connections within the region and more broadly.
- Positioning the region to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by the Asian Century.
- Driving regional economic transformation through leadership in renewable energy and green economy initiatives.

- Developing the region's export markets.
- Building and promoting the region's innovation, digital and ICT capabilities.
- Developing the region as a transport, freight and/or logistics hub.¹⁷

Considered through the proper context that it has taken the Government 12 years to initiative activity—the Government's regional development initiatives should be rightly viewed not so much as future opportunities, but opportunities lost.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pg 30:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Committee condemns the Government for its failure to properly engage with the surrounding region over the past 12 years.

Recommendation 2

The Committee condemns the Government for not having a clear definition of 'the region'.

Recommendation 3

The Committee condemns the Government for its confused and complicated approach to regional affairs.

Recommendation 4

The Committee condemns the Government for failing to have a regional development strategy over the past 12 years.

Recommendation 5

The Committee condemns the Chief Minister for failing to have a vision for the future of Canberra and its surrounding region.

Recommendation 6

The Committee condemns the Government for failing to capitalise on the economic opportunities that the region presents to the ACT.

Recommendation 7

The Committee condemns the Government for failing to deliver an appropriate, integrated infrastructure plan for the region.

Recommendation 8

The Committee condemns the Chief Minister for her failure to show leadership on behalf of the region since coming to office.

Recommendation 9

The Committee condemns the former Chief Minister for his patronising and dismissive attitude to the surrounding councils.