



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Chair), Miss Candice Burch MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr James Milligan MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into a Territory Coat of Arms

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Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Inquiry into Territory Coat of Arms

Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution on this topic. I write as a long-term Canberra resident and local rate-payer as well as someone with an interest in heraldry, which is the art and science of armorial bearings, commonly referred to as “coats of arms”. To summarise my reflections on the questions put forward by the Standing Committee:

1. I do not believe there should be a Coat of Arms for the Australian Capital Territory
 - A. The existing arms granted to the “City of Canberra” by the English King of Arms are synonymous with the ACT as a polity. Furthermore, the entry marking the insertion of the “Armorial Bearings of the City of Canberra” document into the ACT Heritage Objects Register made it clear that in 1982 “legal advice indicated that ownership [of the Coat of Arms] was vested in the Commonwealth as successors to the FCC”. The Committee is yet to make public what the latest legal advice was on the status of the “Armorial Bearings of the City of Canberra” and why this explicitly excludes the Australian Capital Territory. Whilst I cannot access it online, there was a Canberra Times article published on July 2 2013 stating “Federal government transfers custody of the documents authorising the use of Canberra's coat of arms to the territory.” This needs further clarification.
 - B. Seeking to create a new “coat of arms” for the ACT seems predicated on the idea that the existing symbolism is no longer relevant to the culture and identity of Territorians: a review of the existing submissions to this inquiry published on your website shows that this argument is mainly based on the republican leanings of a number of Canberrans. Whilst I might be sympathetic to these arguments, attempts to relegate symbolic references to the origins of Canberra as a seat of power is neglectful of history and potentially disrespectful to the Queen who remains Queen of Australia, her Governor-General or the federal government. Perhaps this exercise might be best delayed until Canberra is the seat of government of an Australian republic.
 - C. In the same vein of the arguments against using monarchical or British symbolism to represent the ACT, it might be said that heraldry as an artform in modern Australia is anachronistic: it was the preserve of nobles and kings and in the modern era is sometimes conflated with pretensions to elitism which seems contrary to the egalitarian and patriotic ideals of Canberrans. For this reason, I think it would be better not to try and design a new “coat of arms” at all, but seek to create a different new visual representation for the ACT, such as a logo, that is going to be more palatable to those who seek to disavow the older symbolism of the armorial bearings of Canberra.
 - D. It is not the job of heraldry to be a “visual curriculum vitae” or somehow encapsulate all the ideas, aspirations, identities and geographic details that make up the Territory. An

attempt to appease everyone this way is eminently impractical and will lead to an unattractive design. This is why we have a variety of different symbols and emblems, including logos (for the Legislative Assembly, for example) and floral and faunal emblems. Whether people feel it represents them personally or not is irrelevant when discussing a coat of arms for a government or institution that has many members, many faces, and a history that precedes the prevailing culture of a particular day.

- E. The nature of good heraldry, and particularly the methods and principles underpinning its design, is that it has timeless artistic and symbolic appeal. I believe the existing arms used for the City of Canberra is an example of good heraldry and should be kept as representative of the ACT as well until such time as there are significant changes to the government of the ACT to mandate exclusion of particular symbols (ie. crowns.)
- F. If despite all this, the ACT Government does undertake a design competition or process, which by the nature of the media reports around the topic seems a foregone conclusion, the ACT Government should adopt the new design, and should not involve any foreign government (ie. the British government) or any agents of a foreign monarch (ie. the British College of Arms.)

The historical process for receiving a coat of arms is that it was a gift or honour bestowed by a monarch, such as the Queen of England. The authority to enact that process in the modern age in England is the College of Arms which is a private corporation and business that allows people and institutions to “petition” the Queen’s heraldic officials to “grant” or bestow arms on her behalf. Media reports suggest that discussion has already commenced with the English College of Arms: on the Riot-ACT website, committee chair Suzanne Orr MLA is quoted saying, “we have written to the Royal College of Arms in the UK to receive some guidelines.”

The English College of Arms is not the competent body to bestow arms on Australian people or institutions because it is an agency empowered from its authority from the ‘fons honorum’ of the Queen of England. The Queen in right of Australia is a different legal person and has not explicitly empowered the College of Arms to exercise Her royal prerogative to bestow arms on Australia. For this reason, Australian people and institutions are free to adopt or assume personal coats of arms without the need for an authorisation. This was affirmed by then Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in response to Questions in writing as found in the Hansard of February 7, 2018 Question No. 806 (<http://bit.ly/HansardHeraldry>):

“There is nothing preventing any person or organisation from commissioning a local artist, graphics studio or heraldry specialist to design and produce a coat of arms or identifying symbol. Those arms would have the same standing and authority in Australia as arms prepared by the College of Arms in England.”

Given that a grant of arms from the College of Arms costs in excess of GBP10,000 this is taxpayers’ money that can be better spent on commissioning local artists and exercising our own independent capacity to adopt symbols rather than requesting they be bestowed by a foreign monarch. Better still, we can stick with the existing rich symbolism and timeless design in the coat of arms of Canberra and enact the necessary legislation to adopt it for the ACT as well.

Thank you for your attention and interest. I make myself available for further comment if invited.

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