



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE ACT

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CHANGE,
ENVIRONMENT AND WATER**

Inquiry into Ecological Carrying Capacity of the ACT and Region

I wish to make the following recommendations for the committee's consideration in relation to several of the terms of reference:

- a) When assessing the resources available to the ACT in terms of water, energy and food sourced from within the ACT, the opportunity for producing these in backyards should be taken into consideration. Many people grow vegetables and fruit trees and keep hens for eggs. Excess produce is traded with neighbours in transactions that never reach the statisticians but nevertheless reduce the need for food which has been transported over long distances. Many homes also have large tanks to collect rainwater, with the potential for solar panels on roofs, if not overshadowed by neighbouring buildings or large trees. Both of these reduce demand on the central systems.
- c) i) In comparing the ACT's footprints with national averages and similar-sized cities globally, efforts should be made for genuine comparison by taking into consideration significant differences affecting footprints, for instance,
 - Nationally, all other large cities are located along the coast. This means that their daily and annual temperature ranges are moderated by the ocean. Canberra, in contrast, is located 100 kilometres inland and suffers from the continental effect of more extreme ranges in both daily and annual temperatures. Additionally, all other large cities are located at sea level, whereas Canberra is 565 metres above sealevel around the central area and up to 650 metres above sealevel in Belconnen. This difference of around 2,000 feet in altitude makes Canberra sub-alpine and significantly colder in winter. Inevitably, Canberra will use more energy for heating than coastal locations.
 - Secondly, all other large Australian cities are located on coastal plains, whereas Canberra is in the Southern Tablelands. Canberra's flat areas are

relatively small and separated by lakes and large hills. Furthermore, local rivers are incised, creating areas not suitable for building. These features all severely impact on transport routes. Sydney, for instance, is located on the Cumberland Plain with plateaux to the north and south. It is divided by the harbour and the Georges River and bounded by Port Hacking in the south and the Hawkesbury River in the north but the level areas in between are quite large, so the impact on transport systems is not so great. Sydney's rivers are also drowned valleys, so the surrounds are quite different from those in the ACT.

- Globally, Australia is a large country with a small population dispersed along the eastern and southern coasts because the central two-thirds are either arid or semi-arid. This necessarily increases transport costs for personal travel and for distribution of food and other goods. The committee should consider whether it is fair to compare Canberra's footprints with cities located on large flat areas, such as Europe and North America which were eroded by a continental ice sheet in the last Ice Age, and with climatic conditions that allow heavy density of population.

- f) Effective measures for reducing the ACT's ecological footprint must include changing business culture which, over recent decades has reduced operating costs by selling pre-packaged items in a self-service environment so that staff can be dispensed with. This creates huge amounts of unnecessary waste in packaging, much of which is not recyclable.

Secondly, the advertising industry has become exceedingly adept at enticing people to buy unnecessary items by using psychological techniques that include shaming and making people feel inadequate if they do not purchase the advertised product. There is no point in considering ways to reduce consumption if these two commercial behaviours are not changed.

Thirdly, the ACT's footprint will grow with population. Most immigrants are of child-bearing age, so they will increase the natural birth-rate above what it would be without immigration. Ensuring that existing residents have the skills needed in the workforce will be more sustainable than importing those skills.

- h) In assessing the role of the ACT in the region in relation to population and resource use, the committee should acknowledge that Canberra's growth directly affects the nearby region. The ACT border is an administrative artifact that does not affect where people choose to live. If Canberra's population can safely increase to the level the Government and business community desire, then densification will force out those who prefer a leafy backyard in which they can be productive and relax from the demands of the workplace. This will increase the need for an ecologically sustainable form of rapid transport. People are already commuting to work in Canberra from Yass, Gunning, Goulburn, Braidwood and Cooma. This is not desirable in terms of fuel usage and serious thought needs to be given to innovative forms of transport that do not sacrifice flexibility and time. A complete change in mindset is required away from the old medieval cities with a dense centre and Victorian-era forms of transport if we are to survive this century.

i) Relevant infrastructure issues

- For a city fragmented by landform, Canberra's plan for major employment in satellite towns was ideal. While not all workers would necessarily live in the town area where they worked, enough would do so to make a significant difference in transport needs. Recent concentration of employment in the city centre has been sapping the town centres, making people travel longer distances to work and creating congestion in the city. Such concentration is appropriate only where landform permits an even spread of residential areas around the centre.
- The claim that densification of the city makes better use of existing infrastructure may have some accuracy in relation to roads but is doubtful where water supply, sewers and stormwater systems are concerned. The implication is that these were installed with capacity to handle a much larger load than was envisaged when the area was developed. Major repairs to old systems in established areas are much more expensive than installation of new systems in greenfields areas. If population growth was encouraged in existing settlements along the Canberra to Goulburn railway line, they could incorporate self-sufficient systems such as modern composting toilets. The technology is there, it just needs imagination to make it work well. The perceived disadvantages of urban sprawl can be overcome to allow a more sustainable urban environment than a concrete, people-unfriendly dense city. These issues should be included in assessing the carrying capacity of the ACT and region.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to look past the rhetoric that is currently being used to support the destruction of our carefully-planned modern city and to replace it with the undesirable characteristics of the old cities of the world. We can do better and we must.

Yours sincerely,

Robyn Coghlan