

To:

Committee Secretary

Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal

Submission from:

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## Submission to the Inquiry into Billboards Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal

*I am happy for this submission to be made public.*

### *Response to terms of reference 1 and 2*

The ACT is striking for the low level of outdoor advertising in public spaces. As a new resident to Canberra, this is a positive and welcome change from other cities in Australia.

I presume and hope that the rationale for the existing restrictions is recognition of the fact that private advertising significantly diminishes the social, economic and environmental value of public space; and is completely at odds with the visual aesthetic and lived experience that Canberra was designed to create.

Further, as the national capital and seat of federal parliament, it is critical that Canberra maintains a unique character. This would be reduced by the presence of billboard advertising, as ads by their very nature are designed to reinforce brand recognition through mass use of the same images. In considering other jurisdictional approaches, a main consideration should be the priority of preserving Canberra's unique character as the nation's capital so that its public spaces and cityscape does not emulate other cities with ubiquitous billboards.

This inquiry is therefore an opportunity to revisit the rationale for the existing restrictions and take them further to reduce the encroachment of outdoor advertising on Canberra's public spaces. There are other cities around the world that have taken the lead in reducing or banning outdoor advertising, and instead placing an emphasis on enriching public space with art and creating dynamic

and inclusive spaces. Such an approach would be far more in keeping with Canberra's original design and welcome prevalence of greenspace.

Surely before the Assembly looks to make any changes to the amount of billboard advertising in the ACT, it should survey residents. Anecdotally, advertising is unpopular and resented as an unavoidable intrusion into daily life. Outdoor advertising is particularly unavoidable for commuters or anyone wishing to use public space, a strong reason for restricting it.

There are good reasons for people to hate advertising. Advertising is after all specifically designed to make us feel we are unhappy unless we purchase a particular item<sup>1</sup>. Advertising is also used to weld and reinforce brand loyalty, and often particularly aimed at children with detrimental effects<sup>2</sup>. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights found that human cultural identity and expression are increasingly threatened by the omnipresence of marketing and advertising<sup>3</sup>.

As the nation's capital it is difficult to imagine Canberra residents enjoying billboards being used for political advertising, in a city already saturated in politics, and that sometimes struggles to establish a sense of cultural identity separate from parliamentary politics.

#### *Response to terms of reference 3 and 4*

Businesses already have a plethora of pathways available to them for advertising to potential customers. Importantly these other methods involve user choice - a person can switch off the TV, change the radio station, turn the page, or close an internet browser window or install an adblocker if they don't want to see advertising. Outdoor advertising including billboards therefore should be restricted if not outright banned on the basis that there is no ability for people to avoid it, and this is an unacceptable breach of the principles of choice in a market economy.

The current rules don't prevent businesses and others from identifying their storefronts or advertising spot specials; and as businesses and community groups in Canberra have clearly been flourishing without billboards there is little reason to see why billboards should be allowed.

In terms of "enlivening urban areas", the principles of inclusive public space must be held paramount. Public art, useable spaces and changing interactive experiences are what enlivens public space by drawing people into them. Further, advertising through its focus on repetition is not enlivening but the opposite. Its ubiquity has a deadening in effect as it removes difference and dynamism.

Therefore any consideration of regulation of billboard advertising should come from the principles of protecting public space, and extending the existing restrictions on outdoor advertising in general.

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<sup>1</sup> *No Logo* (1999) by Naomi Klein contains a wealth of information on the psychological basis and approach of the advertising industry.

<sup>2</sup> See for example <http://healthland.time.com/2010/11/08/study-fast-food-ads-target-kids-with-unhealthy-food-and-it-works/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scenic.org/component/content/article/204/204>