

To:

Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services

Supplementary submission from:

Mr Geoff Pryor – resident Kambah ACT

This supplementary submission arises as a result of the Standing Committee Chair inviting those individuals who formed a panel to address the Standing committee on Wednesday March 12 2019. This document was prepared as a short presentation to the Standing Committee.

Begins -

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today but many friends and colleagues asked why I was bothering.

While steps may be taken to engage the community in planning decisions, mostly there is little evidence that community views or amenity inform government decisions and actions. The prevailing motivation for government decision-making appears to be primarily financial – nature counts for little except how it can be used to make money. Urban planning in the ACT appears to be handed over to developers.

Hopefully this Standing Committee Inquiry will influence how all governments proceed in the future and safe-guard what remains of Canberra’s nature and environment.

Although impacting massively on every other planetary species - and indeed on the future of the planet itself - humans are just one part of the natural world. The rest of the natural world is vital to our physical, mental and psychological health. Nature is critical to our wellbeing and urban planning should reflect this. Morally I think humans have a responsibility to nurture and to protect other species.

In my (original) written submission I highlighted the following points. I:

1. congratulated the committee on this investigation but doubted the real impact of its findings especially upon government actions
2. suggested the topic was potentially unclear and open to confusion – the definition of ‘natural environment’ is fraught, and underpinning theories of economics are hidden from view
3. stated that there are large conceptual issues to be addressed ,such as the concept of society based on human exceptionalism, a lack of vision and how best to truly deal with climate change
4. referred to growing public concern about government policies seemingly primarily based on the benefits to the powerful interest groups in the ACT; and

5. gave down-to-earth personal examples of how animals, birds and insects – currently at risk from government and opposition policies - are part of the local ecology where I live and are a powerful positive factor for me and so many others in living in Canberra.

I speak with conviction on this last point as in Kambah a local group called Save our Green Spaces is resisting an extraordinarily inappropriate push from a small group within the Murrumbidgee Country Club. The club is currently lobbying government to rezone concessionally leased recreational land so it can profit from its sale for housing, negatively impacting social amenity and natural habitat. This issue is a Canberra-wide matter because of the principles at stake and an issue of this Committee's work.

To the above points of my submission I now want to add a few more.

Firstly, there is no mention of how Aboriginal people feel about dispossession as far as I know.

Secondly, necessary Government infrastructure and personnel may be in place to consider community views, amenity and the environmental impact of development proposals, but these appear to have little impact on day to day and long term decision making.

There is much concern that democracy has been subverted because of the increasing influence of rich and powerful interest groups – it's the underlying values which are being ripped up.

Many people argue that the political system in the ACT is failing Canberrans. There is poor coordination among the tiers of government in Australia, and within the ACT government itself, poor transparency as to the processes in place and how they work reflecting the ability of the powerful to reach into and affect decision-making process at odds with wider community interests.

How might we redress this?

While the technical infrastructure may be available within government to theoretically look at issues of urban form, this is not the problem. The problem is how the qualitative and more diffuse community viewpoints are put to one side or fiercely undermined by private lobbying.

The transparency and effective functioning of Canberra's government planning processes urgently need upgrading. We need a commitment to genuinely consider community values and amenity, to realise the critical importance of nature to our city and make it a genuine bottom line in all planning decisions.

Discussion through processes based on learning and participation around values held dear by residents balanced with different urban design intelligence is required. I suggest the following:

1. Despite 20 years of destruction and with a deferred timetable, at a time when controversial developments are taking place, an assembly process such as this one could be effective
2. Joint Community Councils might be a good vehicle to consider provided they are not taken over by powerful private interests
3. An overarching, independent community-based arrangement of community members and groups to offset lobbyists
4. Social media processes are required to assist local residents become aware of the matters at issue here and to practically participate in discussion of the issues of this committee.

In conclusion, while I find many deeply disturbing factors in the way Canberra is being developed, I continue to live here because with some government vision and commitment, there still remains the potential for Canberra to be a place where some natural habitat can be protected so that humans can co-exist with native species. And in particular I am here today because I want the physical, social and ecological Canberra of my experience to be the option my generation has had for my daughter and her granddaughter.

And I leave a cartoon entitled "The awfulisers" by Leunig as a succinct statement.