



**Legislative Assembly** for the  
**Australian Capital Territory**

Standing Committee on Transport  
and City Services

# Submission Cover Sheet

## Inquiry into the provision of municipal services in Canberra

Submission number: 030

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**From:** purcell john

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**To:** LA Committee - Transport <LACommitteeTransport@parliament.act.gov.au>

**Subject:** The ACT Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Transport and City Services -Inquiry to examine the Effectiveness, efficiency, and condition of municipal services.

Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Mr Andrew Braddock MLA

Mr Taimus Werner-Gibbings MLA

Attention: James Bunce

I make this submission as a long-standing supporter of ACT self-government and as someone who played a direct role in its establishment in 1988. Over a fifty-three-year public service career, I worked extensively on the Territory's transition into the Commonwealth-state financial framework, ensuring the ACT could participate fully in the intergovernmental processes that underpin Australia's federal system. My commitment to self-government remains firm. However, after more than three decades of experience with the model, and observing the state of Canberra today, it is clear that structural weaknesses in the governance framework have produced chronic failures in municipal service delivery. These failures are now visible in every suburb of Canberra. This submission outlines those structural problems, explains how they arose, and proposes a practical pathway for reform that remains fully compatible with the existing 25-member Legislative Assembly. I commend the Inquiry for undertaking this important work and welcome the opportunity to contribute to a process that has significant implications for the future effectiveness of governance in the ACT. Thank you for considering this submission.

Yours sincerely

John D. Purcell PSM *MIPA IFA*.

*Justice of the Peace*

## **Executive Summary**

*This submission addresses longstanding concerns regarding the effectiveness of the ACT's governance and service-delivery arrangements at the local government level. After more than 35 years of self-government, community feedback indicates that the current model is struggling to meet contemporary expectations for accountability, suburban maintenance, regulatory enforcement, and coordinated service delivery. Recent policy initiatives have highlighted the limitations of short-term expenditure programs in resolving systemic issues.*

*Residents across the Territory are calling for a structured, transparent review of the ACT's governance framework. This includes examining administrative efficiency, agency responsibilities, regulatory mechanisms, and the alignment between institutional structures and community needs. A comprehensive review would provide an opportunity to modernise governance settings, strengthen public confidence, and ensure the ACT is equipped to manage future challenges.*

*The submission recommends initiating a formal review of the self-government model, commissioning preliminary scoping work to identify reform options, and establishing a multi-stage community engagement process. It also identifies specific priorities including suburban renewal initiatives, strengthened lease-maintenance enforcement, and a revised water-charging framework to support improved environmental and maintenance outcomes.*

*These recommendations aim to support the Inquiry's objective of improving governance performance and ensuring that Canberra's unique model of self-government continues to evolve in the public interest.*

## **Introduction**

The quality, consistency, and strategic coordination of municipal services are fundamental to the ACT's social, environmental, and economic well being. While the current Terms of Reference identify important service areas, they remain too narrow to address the underlying structural issues affecting municipal service delivery. The existing governance and operational framework is no longer fit for purpose; it is fragmented, reactive, and unable to meet the expectations of a growing and increasingly diverse community. Substantive reform is required, and this inquiry must adopt a broader scope that examines not only service outputs but the systemic, organisational, and legislative settings that shape them. Only a more expansive and rigorous review will enable the ACT to deliver municipal services that are coordinated, equitable, and resilient. As a consequence, I make this submission as a long-standing supporter of ACT self-government and as someone who played a direct role in its establishment in 1988. Over a fifty-three-year public service career, I worked extensively on the Territory's transition into the Commonwealth–state financial framework, ensuring the ACT could

participate fully in the intergovernmental processes that underpin Australia’s federal system.

## **1. The Decline of Canberra’s Suburbs**

Despite annual increases in household rates, the physical condition of Canberra’s suburbs has deteriorated to a level that is now widely acknowledged by residents. In my own suburb of Kambah—and indeed across the Territory—the decline is stark.

Residents consistently report:

- inadequate mowing and edging of public spaces
- dead and dying trees left unattended
- weed infestations in stormwater drains, verges, and traffic islands
- broken and uneven footpaths
- neglected landscaping and abandoned beautification projects
- deteriorating kangaroo fencing along major roads
- potholes and degraded road surfaces
- infrequent street cleaning, with gutters clogged by debris
- damaged street lighting and road signage
- litter accumulation, particularly around shopping centres and arterial roads

These issues are not isolated or recent. They reflect a long-term pattern of neglect and a system that has no effective mechanism for accountability.

## **2. Why the Current System Cannot Deliver Municipal Services Effectively**

### *2.1 A Structural Accountability Failure*

The ACT’s city-state model places both state-level and municipal-level responsibilities within a single legislature. However, the Assembly operates almost entirely as a state-style parliament, dominated by ministerial portfolios and party-political dynamics. This has created a fundamental accountability gap:

- No MLA is directly responsible for the condition of their electorate’s suburbs.
- Opposition MLAs have no meaningful influence over service levels.
- Municipal issues are overshadowed by state-type responsibilities such as health, education, and justice.

After more than twenty years in opposition, it is striking that the opposition’s 2024 “Putting Your Suburb First” policy offered only a \$100 million cash injection—essentially

a political gimmick—rather than any structural reform. It did not address the underlying causes of suburban decline, nor did it acknowledge that all 25 MLAs share responsibility for the state of Canberra’s suburbs.

## *2.2 How the Structural Problem Arose — and the Legacies It Left*

The governance challenges facing the ACT today cannot be understood without examining the profound shift in Commonwealth policy during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Canberra was originally conceived as a monumental national capital—a city built to embody Australia’s identity, with expansive open spaces, grand boulevards, generous green belts, and a suburban layout unlike any other in the country. These planning decisions created a city of exceptional amenity, but also one with exceptionally high long-term maintenance costs.

## *2.3 The Commonwealth’s Shift in Vision*

By the early 1980s, the Commonwealth’s priorities had changed dramatically. The era of nation-building had given way to a new policy environment dominated by:

- economic rationalism
- user-pays principles
- managerialism
- cost-containment and administrative downsizing

Under this new philosophy, Canberra was no longer viewed as a national monument requiring ongoing Commonwealth stewardship. Instead, it was increasingly seen as **simply the seat of government**—a functional administrative centre whose local services and suburban maintenance were no longer considered a federal responsibility.

This shift was pivotal. It meant that the Commonwealth sought to **withdraw from the day-to-day governance and financing of the city**, transferring responsibility to the local community through self-government.

## *2.4 A Monumental City Without Monumental Funding*

The problem, however, was that Canberra’s physical form—its vast open spaces, extensive road networks, large suburban footprints, and generous public realm—remained intact. These features were the product of decades of Commonwealth planning decisions, but the Commonwealth did not provide a governance or funding model capable of sustaining them.

In effect, the Commonwealth handed the ACT:

- a city designed on a monumental scale,
- with municipal responsibilities far larger than any comparable jurisdiction,

- but without the financial mechanisms or institutional structures that local governments elsewhere rely on to maintain such assets.

### *2.5 The Creation of the ACT Fiscus and Its Consequences*

The establishment of the ACT fiscus in 1988 was intended to integrate the Territory into the Commonwealth–state financial system. This allowed the ACT to participate in federal funding arrangements, but only for **state-type functions** such as health, education, and justice.

Crucially:

- local government functions were excluded from the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s remit
- no municipal funding framework was created
- no mechanism was provided to recognise the ACT’s unusually large municipal asset base

This left the ACT with a structural mismatch:

- state-level funding,
- state-style governance,
- but municipal responsibilities on a scale far exceeding those of any local council in Australia.

### *2.6 The Financial Legacies Still Felt Today*

The consequences of this policy shift remain visible and financially burdensome:

- The ACT must maintain thousands of hectares of open space originally designed for a national capital.
- It must fund long road networks and extensive suburban infrastructure without the revenue tools available to local governments.
- It must manage large-scale landscaping, tree assets, stormwater systems, and recreational areas that were never intended to be maintained by a small local population.
- It must do all this without access to municipal-specific federal funding, and without a governance structure designed for local service delivery.

In short, the Commonwealth shifted Canberra from a monumental capital model to a seat-of-government model, but left the ACT community to carry the financial and administrative legacies of the former without the structural support needed to manage them.

## *2.7 A Model Designed for Federal Convenience, Not Local Sustainability*

The governance system imposed on the ACT was shaped by federal political considerations, not by the needs of a city with a unique planning heritage and a disproportionately large municipal asset base. The result is a system that:

- functions well for state-type responsibilities,
- but is structurally incapable of delivering municipal services effectively,
- because it was never designed to do so.

This is the core structural flaw that continues to undermine suburban maintenance and local service delivery across Canberra today.

### **3. Additional Factors Contributing to Suburban Decline**

Several long-term issues have exacerbated the structural weaknesses:

#### *3.1 The Millennium Drought (2001–2009)*

The prolonged drought led many residents to abandon maintenance of their nature strips. High water prices—among the highest in Australia—discouraged reinstatement of previous standards.

#### *3.2 Failure to Enforce Leasehold Obligations*

The ACT's leasehold system includes provisions requiring lessees to maintain nature strips. These provisions have not been enforced for decades, resulting in widespread neglect.

#### *3.3 Lack of Public Education and Community Engagement*

There has never been a sustained public campaign to restore suburban standards. Other jurisdictions run ongoing community engagement programs; the ACT has relied instead on complaint-driven systems.

#### *3.4 Absence of a Municipal Reporting Framework*

Before self-government, the ACT maintained separate municipal accounts audited by the Commonwealth Auditor-General. Today, rates notices provide almost no detail, and the blending of state-type and municipal-type expenditures obscures accountability.

### **4. A Pathway for Reform**

The ACT's self-government framework was always intended to be adaptable. After 36 years, it is appropriate to review the model to ensure it meets contemporary community needs.

I propose reforms that **do not create a third tier of government**, but instead embed municipal accountability within the existing Assembly structure.

#### *4.1 Establish Electorate-Based Subcommittees*

Each electorate—Brindabella, Ginninderra, Kurrajong, Murrumbidgee, and Yerrabi—would be overseen by a subcommittee comprising its five elected MLAs.

These subcommittees would be responsible for:

- municipal service oversight
- contract negotiation and monitoring
- planning and leasehold compliance
- asset management
- local budget formulation

This would ensure that **every MLA is accountable** for the condition of their electorate.

#### *4.2 Introduce Municipal Accounts and Budgets*

Within the existing ACT financial framework, establish:

- separate municipal accounts for each electorate
- publicly reported municipal budgets
- clear hypothecation of rates revenue to municipal services

This would restore transparency and allow residents to understand how their rates are being used.

#### *4.3 Enable Differential Rating Between Electorates*

Differential rating already exists between land categories. Extending this to electorates would allow communities to:

- set service levels above a defined core standard
- determine their own rate-in-the-dollar
- tailor services to local needs

This would introduce flexibility, fairness, and genuine local choice.

To support such a constructive and future-focused reform process, the following actions are recommended:

- Initiate a formal review of the ACT's self-government model, examining structural, administrative, and service-delivery implications, with opportunities for public participation.
- Commission preliminary scoping work to outline reform options, identify barriers to effective suburban management, and propose modernised governance arrangements.
- Develop a transparent community engagement process to ensure residents can contribute meaningfully to discussions about the Territory's future governance settings.
- Prioritise long-term solutions over short-term expenditure, ensuring policy responses address underlying causes of community dissatisfaction rather than surface-level symptoms.

These steps would demonstrate a commitment to strengthening the ACT's governance foundations and improving the alignment between institutional structures and community expectations.

## **Conclusion**

Canberra's suburban decline is not the result of isolated administrative failures. It is the predictable outcome of a governance model that lacks a municipal tier, lacks local accountability, and lacks transparency in the use of rates revenue.

The reforms proposed in this submission offer a practical, achievable pathway to:

- restore accountability
- improve service delivery
- strengthen community engagement
- revitalise Canberra's suburbs

These changes can be implemented within the existing 25-member Assembly and would honour the original intent of ACT self-government: a system capable of evolving to meet the needs of its community.