



ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Billboards

Submission from the No Airport Arms Ads campaign (NAAA) of the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)


The No Airport Arms Ads campaign was launched in 2015 with the goal of the removal of weapons advertising from Canberra Airport. The campaign continues, on behalf of the many Canberrans and others who regard the advertising of war profiteers as offensive.

The campaign faces the challenge that advertising at the airport - the only local airport for Canberrans to use - is beyond the jurisdiction of the ACT Government and therefore beyond the reach of any democratic process. This is deeply regrettable and underscores the important role of government in determining the ambience of our city.

NAAA's experience is relevant to the issue of advertising more generally in the ACT.

This submission addresses primarily the following Terms of Reference:

- 2. Community views on placement and construction of billboards, and**
- 5. Any other relevant matter**

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Advertising misleads consumers

Advertising works by subliminal messaging. In the case of weapons advertising, the messages to be absorbed are that big weapons budgets firstly, keep us safe, and secondly, provide jobs. Both these messages are highly misleading. The possibility of a regional arms race triggered by large weapons purchases is disregarded, as is the number of jobs lost by the diversion of funds from non-military to military budgets.

The airport advertisements act to sanitise weapons and war for the financial benefit of those who profit from warfare; they bear no resemblance to the reality when the advertised products are actually used. This is standard for advertising - it is about image, not reality.

While this is not to argue against all advertising, the intrusion of advertising into public space, where consumers have no choice as to whether they are exposed to false or misleading information or not, is particularly objectionable. Many Canberrans find it objectionable that they have no choice in their exposure to offensive promotions by war profiteers when they fly. For a city such as Canberra, an even greater intrusion of corporate profiteering with all its false promises, would be a major step backwards.

Advertising marginalises community concerns in favour of profits

In late 2015, the NAAA campaign collected over 1,500 signatures from people urging the Canberra Airport to remove weapons advertising. However the ads remain, in defiance of significant community opposition to them. They are not there because they enhance the airport or provide important information to guide Australian government weapons

decisions, but simply because money talks, even when - as in this case - the money comes from the profits of death and destruction.

NAAA's understanding from discussing this matter with the Canberra Airport Group is that they accept advertising from weapons manufacturers because not many industries can match the weapons makers' capacity to pay the large sums that prime locations such as an airport can charge for advertising space. Advertising space generally goes to the highest bidder.

This raises the question as to who might advertise if the ACT were to allow billboard advertising. Assuming advertising fees are set according to what the market will bear, it is unlikely that it will be small Canberra businesses who advertise their local wares and services, but rather large corporations. It is quite possible, perhaps likely, that there would arise pressure to allow the advertising of products and services such as weapons, gambling, fossil fuels and alcohol.

In the event of any such socially harmful products being advertised, there is the possibility of citizens taking action to deface the ads - a tactic that proved very successful with the "Bugger Up" campaign (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions) against tobacco and its promotion. While billboards are regarded by many people as ugly visual intrusions into our landscape, billboards that have had their key message turned on its head are not much better visually.

Advertising often promotes an unhealthy society

Many products advertised on mass media promote unhealthy living, for example through the consumption of junk foods. In addition, while many advertised products are not necessarily damaging in a direct way, the promotion of a culture of consumerism, where the possession of certain products becomes very subtly linked with self-esteem and status, is not in the best interests of a healthy and contented society.

Community consultation

Advertising is a subject on which the local community's views should be heeded, simply because advertising is a very "in your face" presence in the community.

Therefore it is disturbing to note that there seems very little awareness in the Canberra community that billboards for the ACT are even being considered. This is a serious breach of trust.

Billboards would drastically alter the face of our unique city and remove one of its most endearing features, which is the absence of the visual pollution of consumerism. Any such change demands full consultation with the people of Canberra, with as long a timeframe as that needs.

Recommendations

NAAA recommends that:

1. All weapons advertising be strictly prohibited in the ACT, on both public and private property;
2. As an interim step, strong pressure be exerted by the ACT Government for the removal of weapons advertisements that exist on private land, particularly those at Canberra Airport;
3. Billboard advertising does not proceed in the ACT;
4. There be a far more inclusive process of discussing any proposal for expanded advertising in the ACT.