

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories Inquiry into Commonwealth and Parliamentary approvals for the proposed stage 2 of the ACT light rail project

by Mark Dando

15 June 2018

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The terms of reference provide for the inquiry to consider the 'impacts' of the proposed stage 2 of Canberra's light rail system. Unfortunately, 'impacts' have generally been seen in negative rather than positive terms. Similarly, the focus of the other directly relevant federal entity, the National Capital Authority (NCA), appears to be that of gatekeeper rather than facilitator.

I believe this is a mistake. Instead of focusing on whether or not the project should be allowed to proceed, this inquiry provides an opportunity for Parliament and government agencies to actively facilitate and invest in light rail (on the basis that it could drive the revitalisation of the currently under-used central national area, including providing better access for residents and visitors).

Light rail through the Parliamentary Triangle has enormous potential as an enabler of positive change that could integrate the national with the civic spheres, facilitate investment in the central national area and strengthen the relevance of Canberra to the nation.

The Parliamentary Triangle is under used

The Parliamentary Triangle has failed to keep up as Canberra matures as an increasingly self-sustaining and urbane mini-metropolis that functions as both the national capital and an important regional centre.

This is reflected in a succession of reviews including the NCA's Parliamentary Zone Review of 2000, the 2004 Griffin Legacy, and more recent studies by the NCA.

The Parliamentary Zone Review¹ commented that:

'Various surveys over the past ten years clearly indicate that many Australians see Canberra as an isolated, elitist place that lacks a heart.' (p. 6)

'Contemporary buildings, which were sited in conformity with earlier masterplans, do not have a strong relationship to one another or to their surroundings. It is hard to get around on foot. Pathways often fail to connect obvious destinations, and are generally uninspiring. Orientation is difficult for visitors. Landmarks, identifiers or memorable places are underdeveloped or are not publicly recognisable. Signage is fragmented and interpretative information is limited.'

¹ National Capital Authority, Parliamentary Zone Review Outcomes, March 2000

'The landscape spaces have both quality and beauty, and include a number of discrete places such as the National Rose Garden, and yet there is little to draw people to these special places. (p. 7)

'Many Australians, however, find the formal and intensively maintained parkland character unfamiliar and hard to reconcile with their own landscape and urban experiences.' (p. 8)

'Historically, roads and carparks have so dominated development planning in the Parliamentary Zone that they now form the visual setting for most of the buildings.

The buildings themselves have been placed in widely separate locations resulting in a sense of isolation, a loss of unity, poor connections between buildings and ill-defined entrances.

Road systems have been developed with function rather than spatial quality in mind, and public spaces have never been linked to each other, particularly in the area north of King Edward Terrace.

Queen Victoria Terrace isolates Parliament House and Federation Mall from Old Parliament House. King Edward Terrace has become a major through-road, creating a potentially hazardous division between the northern and southern parts of the Zone. Visual access from Commonwealth and Kings Avenues is obscured and carparks and extensive road networks (dating from the period when new Parliament House was to be sited north of Capital Hill) mar the area.' (p. 9)

Almost 20 years later, few of the desired outcomes of that review have been achieved, and the formerly 'intensively maintained parkland character' is showing the effect of a lack of maintenance let alone investment. The proposed campuses, intended as sites for integrated development, remain as car parks.

While the lake shore is the most successful zone, the Commonwealth Place amphitheatre and trenched walkway up to Reconciliation Place are decaying through lack of maintenance. Reconciliation Place provides an east-west pathway south of King Edward Terrace but isn't connected to the areas north of that roadway.

The potential role of light rail in transforming the Triangle

Stage 2 of the light rail adds the 'string of pearls' largely missing from stage 1 – not just the national institutions but the growing employment and residential area of Barton, and on to the employment and residential centre of Woden.

While the Triangle is currently under-used, a light rail service would enable development of this largely empty Commonwealth-owned area (with its vast expanses of surface car parking). On the zoning side, more flexibility is likely given the potential value of the land (and this is demonstrated by the recent sale of the National Archives building with approval for adaptation as a hotel).

Light rail is ideally suited to the central national area. It is quiet and non-polluting and ideal for hop-on, hop-off transport. Stops can be spaced more widely than bus stops, because people will walk further to visible, comfortable and reliable stops – reliability in terms of 'I can

be confident that the service won't skip this stop, won't deviate on weekends, and is likely to be reasonably frequent' – unlike Canberra's bus system.

The route

The route of the light rail line through the Triangle should be based on function rather than form – that is, it should provide the best possible service at the lowest possible cost.

The proposed route published by the ACT Government follows Commonwealth Avenue to King George Terrace where it makes a sharp turn followed by a sharp right turn into Kings Avenue on the other side of the Triangle. This isn't necessarily the optimum route in terms of service or cost, but appears driven by the NCA's plan to impose a new east-west axis on the Triangle.

The existing alignment of roads within the Triangle provides a potentially more suitable alignment for light rail. Routing the light rail via King Edward Terrace, Langton Terrace and then onto King George Terrace would be more direct, allow a more useful stop for the western side of the triangle than the proposed stop on Commonwealth Ave near the Albert Hall, and avoid the need to remove trees in the Commonwealth Avenue median.

It isn't reasonable for the National Capital Authority to insist on an unnecessarily complex (and therefore slower than necessary) and expensive route purely on the basis of abstract geometry.

Funding

Light rail will significantly increase the value of the Commonwealth's land holding, enabling it to make better economic use of the vast areas currently devoted to surface car parking. Given this, the Commonwealth should be prepared to make a significant financial investment in stage 2 – over and above the additional costs being imposed by the NCA's insistence on underground power, which should be met entirely out of its budget.

As I understand it, stages 1 and 2 of the Gold Coast light rail received \$460m in federal funding (around 33% of the total project cost) while stage 1 of the Canberra light rail has received \$67m, less than 10% of the project cost.