
KILLING CANBERRA – coping with an incompetent and corrupt ACT Government

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1. Let me state at the outset that I am not referring to ‘malfeasance’ on the part of the Barr Government, but ‘corruption of due process’ in the manner that I expressed in my public lecture to the Canberra University IGPA (27.4.17), and I quote:
“The secretive manner in which the Gungahlin-to-Civic tramway has been investigated (including the withholding of development cost information), the fact that it has been committed to construction despite a negative assessment by Infrastructure Australia, the fact also that it is a response to a political threat by the Greens that might have caused a change of government in the Legislative Assembly, and is not a response to valid transport needs, when taken together, in my view, constitutes a corruption of due process and is contrary to good government.”
2. My choice of the title ‘Killing Canberra’ is a nod in the direction of the Heather Henderson (the late Prime Minister Robert Menzies daughter) Canberra Times letter (6.10.17): *“If we keep going, Canberra will end up looking like any other city”*. She goes on to state: *“It is sad, distressing, agonising (no word is too strong) to be a witness to the destruction of Canberra”*.
3. The first and most important point that I want to make is that, all of the community associations in the ACT, like yours, are prone to **‘good manners’**, while failing to recognise that they have been drawn into an overwhelmingly political environment. The need, accordingly, is to be well-informed, frank, forceful when necessary and to not shirk from highlighting the expedient self-serving attitudes to which Assembly members are prone. This is a situation that doesn’t occur in the States where such matters are the responsibility of local councils in which their planning committees debate and make decisions on both the setting of planning regulations and the approval of development applications, at public meetings.
4. There is a particular need to **target the ACT Planning and Land Authority**, especially the Director (Ben Ponton) where appropriate, on the grounds that ACTPLA doesn’t carry out necessary investigations into the community needs to be served, the likelihood of adverse environmental impacts, the compounding effects of multiple development approvals in residential and suburban shopping areas and the provision of public transport and public parking availability. The need for this is more pressing because ACTPLA has in recent times adopted an inappropriate attitude of blindly adopting zoning changes determined by the Land Development Agency, which is likely to carry over to both the new Suburban Land Agency and the City Renewal Authority.
5. I think that **the above direct action would be more effective if it was orchestrated by the Inner South Community Council (ISCCC)**, but not in such a manner that the members of the component community group won’t still make the running of face-to-face activity with ACTPLA, the Assembly Planning Committee, Assembly Members, the press and so forth.
6. There is also **a need to put pressure on the National Capital Authority and on the four local Members of Parliament**, on the grounds that the NCA is abrogating its

statutory obligations to protect the role of Canberra as the National Capital, by transferring planning and administrative responsibility for parts of the National Capital Open Space System, such as West Basin and the Murrumbidgee River Corridor at Ginninderra in order to support the joint venture residential development project by LDA/Suburban Land Agency and the Corkhill Brothers quarry company. Even worse are the NCA proposals for, (a) Acton Peninsula to facilitate the sale of national land on the Acton Peninsula by the federal Department of Finance and, (b) the removal of Canberra Avenue interchange ramps in order to create saleable properties fronting the Avenue and in order to also supplement consolidated revenue income for the Commonwealth Government.

7. The incompetence of the Barr Government is indicated by:-

- (a) With regard to the **Gungahlin-to-Civic light rail project**, the dishonesty, secrecy, political blackmail, massive cost blowout, two billion dollar budget pay back and cancellation of bus services in order to force passengers to use the tram in the Gungahlin/Civic corridor, and likely to be repeated if the Civic/Woden stage ever comes to fruition.
- (b) It took three years to **reconstruct 1 kilometre (4 city blocks) of Constitution Avenue** in Civic and decorate it with a 'dead grass clumps and basalt rocks' streetscape design.
- (c) Andrew Barr states that he will not grant tax relief to the owners of **empty B and C class buildings in the town centres** on the grounds that to do so would be lining the pockets of wealthy property owners and developers at the expense of rate-paying residents, and so they all just sit there.
- (d) The Government has '**gamed**' its '**land release programs**' in order to maximise profit and force home owners into high rise apartment buildings, then it has jacked up the rates to be closer to single detached housing prices thereby making them less affordable as an option for young house seekers.
- (e) **Canberra is becoming more and more expensive** as a place to live in because of the Chief Minister's stated belief that most people can afford the Government's unrestricted increased fees and charges policies.
- (d) **Civic is a shambles** of liquor establishments with clumsy, ugly pinewood extensions across the footpath to the kerb, that only come alive with customers every Friday and Saturday evenings in a frenzy of drunkenness, violence, injury and occasional deaths, and hospital overloads as well.
- (e) **Every one of the town centre and Civic malls are in a state of incipient decline** as a consequence of the rise of internet retail. The only way that this might be alleviated is for the Government to reduce property rates to zero.
- (f) **ACTPLA is unable to draw up master plans** for the revival of the Woden town centre, nor for Civic, nor for Belconnen, in fact ACTPLA has no town planning capability, all it can do is process development applications, which it manages poorly. What is needed is a planning organisation with a core of professional staff of the order of 100, civil engineers, transport planners, town and regional planners, architects, landscape planners and designers, economists, sociologists, project development managers, writers, publishers and public relations managers so as to be in a state of constant engagement with the local community, business and trade interests, and thus dispense with the current practice of heavy reliance on external consultants which is largely unreliable and inefficient.

8. The corruptive tendencies of the Barr Government can be exemplified in the following terms:-
- (a) The **manipulation of the Land Development Agency** by the Chief Minister's office in relation to the withdrawal of the Telopea Park High School tennis courts as a means of obtaining ownership of the United Services Club land adjoining Manuka Oval, transferring the club to the ground floor of a 12-storey apartment building to be built by the Defence Housing Authority on land zoned with a three-story height limit adjacent to the Manuka shopping mall, and sending the Manuka Occasional Child Care Centre packing.
 - (b) A repeat of the same device whereby the LDA assisted the Greater Western Sydney AFL club to put together a so-called 'uninvited proposal' to the Government to **enclose the Manuka Oval with a ring of 11-storey apartments**, an underground car park and a supermarket, that would yield \$200 million for GWS and for the Government more grandstand capacity for the Oval.
 - (c) The indication is that this *modus operandi* is about to be repeated in relation to the **Chief Minister's control over the City Renewal Authority**.
 - (d) The involvement of the Chief Minister's office in **land acquisition transactions by the LDA in relation to Glebe Park and Canberra Casino interests** and the questionable acquisition payments identified by the Auditor General.
 - (e) The **abuse of technical amendments to the Territory Plan** in order to facilitate more profitable land sales.
 - (f) Giving the **Transport Workers Union the right to veto operations of the bus system** that are accordingly detrimental to the delivery of efficient and convenient services to the public and which are 30% higher than private bus operators can deliver.
 - (g) There is a growing tendency on the part of the Government to **block requests for information on its financial transactions**, on the spurious grounds of 'commercial-in-confidence' and other dubious devices, which is certainly not healthy.
9. And **the potentially destructive operations of the National Capital Authority** in relation to Commonwealth Avenue and West Basin land and transport issues and the abrogation of its statutory obligation to plan and protect the integrity of the planned national capital, are also matters of concern.
10. And last but not least, in my May 25th IGPA (University of Canberra) public lecture, I stated that there is a widespread **public apathy** on the part of my children's generation to become involved in town planning and social issues generally, and consequently there is a need for them to give more consideration to the effectiveness of political parties at election time because it is leading to the rise of the 'professional politician', which is not a good thing.