

## National Capital Authority needs to rethink its purpose

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Published: February 23, 2017 - 12:15AM

The National Capital Authority is at a crossroads. For it to maintain a legitimate oversight and governance role in Canberra, it needs to step up and become a strong voice for local residents and the ACT government within the federal government.

With the Commonwealth seeking to move even more government agencies to rural and regional areas, we haven't seen such blatant disregard for the ACT residents since the federal government [strong-armed the ACT into a poor land-swap deal in 1995](#) to obtain the site for the National Museum of Australia.

At the time of that controversy, an ACT government committee recommended the "urgent" establishment of principles that had "as their highest priority the due protection of the interests of the Canberra community in not being disadvantaged by Commonwealth planning initiatives".

Yet here we are again, with agencies like the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority being moved out of Canberra for no conceivable national benefit.

As a territory without constitutionally protected state rights, it's crucial that the ACT has a strong, non-partisan voice inside the federal government. As an independent advocate, the NCA should undertake evidence-based planning and policy research about how to use the combined resources of the federal and ACT governments to deliver the best possible outcomes for the nation's capital.

The NCA must accept that its modern role includes working co-operatively with the ACT government to seek extra funding and better recognition, from federal ministers and departments, for activities that are in the nation's interest.

But more than anything, the NCA must recognise that the success of Canberra as the nation's capital is about more than just building promenades, monuments and national institutions. Canberra will remain a capital that all Australians can be proud of if the NCA listens to and respects the voices of the citizens who live here.

The NCA should fight for the money to build a new national convention centre. It should push back against moves to shift agencies like the pesticides authority out of Canberra for political reasons. It should lobby for a balanced approach to the location of government departments in all town centres, to minimise traffic and pollution. It should emphasise the importance of fully widening the Barton Highway, hold the federal government to account for the roll-out of the national broadband network as promised, and secure extra funds for the next phase of light rail to Woden.

At the same time, the NCA should no longer have the right to bypass the ACT government's authority entirely on planning matters relating to national land. Most notably, the NCA is continuing to support development of up to 10,000 houses on the 701-hectare CSIRO Ginninderra Field Station despite the written and verbal objections of the elected ACT government.

The NCA also recently unilaterally approved the demolition of Bruce Hall with no right of review. The current planning arrangements are half-pregnant; a historical oddity hanging over from the first days of self-government. They serve no one well.

At a minimum, there should be a clear understanding that the federal government won't abuse its position of privilege with national land to override the autonomy of the ACT as a self-governing territory. Ideally, the Self-Government Act should be amended to clearly specify that the Commonwealth must relinquish national land status as soon as it no longer uses it for Commonwealth purposes.

This new bargain with the ACT government would give the NCA the opportunity to set a new, modern course that would ensure its future relevance.

On the other hand, if the NCA has no interest in such "petty" Canberra affairs, a new agreement must be negotiated where the NCA's role of protecting the image of the Commonwealth is limited to areas of legitimate national interest. This would mean giving the ACT government control over all planning and development activities, while restricting the NCA's review and approval role to areas within the parliamentary triangle, as well as embassy and defence sites.

In short: if the NCA wants to do what's best for Canberra, it needs to seek and respect the views of our elected ACT government.

**Kim Fischer was an Labor candidate for the seat of Ginninderra at the 2016 ACT election.**

*This story was found at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/national-capital-authority-needs-to-rethink-its-purpose-20170222-guih01.html>*