A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?


GLOBALISATION AND CITIES RESEARCH PROGRAM

ANZSOG INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
A Missed Opportunity?

The Failed Expansion of the ACT in the 1960s and 1970s

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ISBN 9781740883924

Globalisation and Cities Research Program

ANZSOG Institute for Governance at the University of Canberra

April 2014
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study aims to understand:

- The proposed realignment of ACT border and cross borderer development in the Y-plan in the 1960s and 1970s during the NCDC period;
- The inter-governmental attempts to realign ACT border during the Whitlam government;
- The reasons these attempts failed; and
- Recent planning and development trends in the ACT and its surrounding region.

This historical narrative combines information from different sources to capture a holistic understanding. It builds upon both primary and secondary data collected from the literature, archives, media coverage, and interviews.

The pursuit of expanding the ACT across the border into NSW in the 1960’s and 1970’s represents a significant part of Canberra’s planning history. Authorities within the ACT advocated large-scale border expansion as the best way to ensure the efficient and long-term growth of Canberra’s urban area. The drivers included:

- Rapid population growth;
- Subsequent forecasts for sustained population increases; and
- Plans for where these additional residents would be housed.

While some willingness had been expressed toward the idea on both sides of the border, leading factors in the border expansion not taking place were:

- Political changes;
- A lack of inter-governmental coordination; and
- Concerns over infrastructure costs.

Planning and development trends that have emerged during and since the border expansion proposal have also influenced and altered the pattern of development in the ACT and its surrounds, making such a large scale border expansion difficult, if not undesirable or impossible in today’s context. However, as the ACT and surrounding region’s population continues to rise, the espoused benefits of border expansion coupled with increased development close to the ACT-NSW border are already beginning to re-invigorate the border expansion debate. As such, there may be opportunities for small-scale incursions of Canberra’s urban area, and possibly the border, into NSW in the future.
INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth authorities came to the conclusion that expanding the ACT border was the best way to accommodate an expanding Canberra urban area...

The Canberra urban area has expanded considerably since its declaration as Australia’s capital city in 1913. From a collection of sheep paddocks, it has transformed into a city of more than 350,000 people – or more than 400,000 with the populations of Queanbeyan, Bungendore and Yass added. However, rapid growth in the ACT after World War II led to estimates that the Canberra urban area could have been home to as many as 800,000 people by the year 2000, of which it was considered only 550,000 could reasonably fit within the existing ACT border (NCDC, 1975a). Commonwealth authorities came to the conclusion that expanding the ACT border was the best way to accommodate an expanding Canberra urban area, by allowing it room to grow and be planned under the one administrative system.

This report explores how the ACT border was initially drawn, the slow early progress of Canberra’s development, and rapid post-war expansion under the Prime Ministership of Sir Robert Menzies. It also canvasses the plans and projections made for Canberra’s population, cross-border relations between Commonwealth and NSW authorities, and how both of these factors contributed to the downfall of proposals to expand the ACT border. Finally, it looks at trends that have emerged or strengthened since the failed border expansion proposal, and their potential impacts on border expansion into the future.

METHODOLOGY

This report relies on historical information gathered from a wide range of government and media publications, as well as interviews of former National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) officials, in addition to a comprehensive literature search. This includes an analysis of more than 100 newspaper clippings of cross-border relations at the time of the border expansion proposal (gathered through the online research portal Trove), which helped provide a rich canvas of information for this research, and the first-hand experiences of NCDC staff employed during and after the years of the border expansion debate.

BACKGROUND

The push for a large-scale expansion of the ACT came and went within 70 years of Canberra first being declared the site of Australia’s capital city. In this time alone Canberra had transformed from a collection of sheep paddocks, to a fast growing city that was also the largest inland city in Australia:

SURVEYING THE ACT BORDER

The borders of the then Federal Capital Territory - so named until 1938 - were surveyed between 1910 and 1915 (ACT Government, 2013a; Higgins, 2013). A large part of the border was drawn along ridgelines to retain water catchments, where possible, within the Capital Territory (Higgins, 2013). A team of surveyors, led by Charles Scrivener, surveyed the border with the intention of capturing the Cotter, Naas and Gudgenby River catchments, to secure the future capital’s water supply. The Naas and Gudgenby catchments had been offered in exchange for the upper Queanbeyan and Molonglo River catchments, which NSW did not wish to relinquish as they contained the town of Queanbeyan and a number of pastoral properties (Fischer, 1984; ACT Government, 2013a; Higgins, 2013). NSW did, however, offer the Capital Territory water rights to the upper Queanbeyan and Molonglo catchments, culminating in the siting of Googong Dam to add to the Canberra region’s water reserves (Higgins, 2013).
Figure 1: Early Map of the Federal Capital Territory, 1920

This map acknowledges the origin of Gooromon Ponds Creek in NSW and the extension of Ginninderra Creek out of the ACT, but does not show the sources of the Coree and Swamp Creeks extending into NSW.

(Source: National Library of Australia)
The first part of the border to be drawn was the straight line from Mt Coree to One Tree Hill in 1910 (ACT Government, 2013a), which can be seen on the top left of Figure 1 and in closer detail in figure 2. However this part of the border, which separates the present day areas of Hall, West Belconnen and Uriarra from NSW, cuts off a number of waterways (as shown in Figure 2). This includes a small portion of the upper Cotter Catchment, presumably because local maps drawn before the border survey (Higgins, 2013) and soon after it (as shown in Figure 1) suggested the catchment did not extend north or west of Mt Coree. A later survey realised this error, however the border was not re-drawn (Higgins, 2013). This section of the Cotter catchment is now protected by it being part of the Brindabella State Conservation Area and National Park (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2013).

As the straight line extends further north to One Tree Hill, it cuts two other watercourses that start in NSW before flowing into the ACT. These include Swamp Creek, which crosses the border three times before flowing into the Murrumbidgee River near Uriarra Crossing; and Gooromon Ponds Creek, which starts around 10km north of Hall before crossing the border at West Macgregor and flowing into the Ginninderra Creek. This straight section of border also cuts off a small parcel of land between the border itself, the Ginninderra Creek and the Murrumbidgee River. Although this small parcel of land lies in NSW, there is no direct public road access to this area within NSW.

Figure 2: Map Showing the Northwest Border of the ACT

The green arrow shows where the Gooromon Ponds Creek crosses the ACT-NSW border, the red arrows the crossings of Swamp Creek, and the blue arrows denotes the parcel of land cut off by the border, Ginninderra Creek and the Murrumbidgee River.
(Source: Google Maps, 2014, reworked)
If the Gooromon Ponds, Ginninderra, and Swamp Creek catchments were taken into greater consideration, the northwest border of the ACT could have looked like the boundary in Figure 3, used as part of the Canberra national water account region (Bureau of Meteorology, 2011). Other parts of the border surveyed between 1910 and 1915 were done largely on the basis of ridges between water catchments, and the Sydney to Queanbeyan and Queanbeyan to Cooma railway lines.

![Figure 3: Part of Canberra's National Water Account Region](image)

The solid dark brown line denotes the border of the water account region, the broken orange-brown line the ACT-NSW border.
(Source: Bureau of Meteorology, 2011)

EARLY CANBERRA AND GROWTH IN THE MENZIES YEARS

The growth and development of Canberra as a national capital after World War II can be largely attributable to the support of former Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies.

The early years after Canberra’s appointment as the national capital were subject to slow progress. Sentiments of Canberra as “a cemetery with lights”, “the ruin of a good sheep station” and “six suburbs in search of a city” (National Capital Authority, 2011) suggest the area was lacking many qualities required of a major city. World Wars I and II, and the Great Depression affected the fledgling capital’s progress and population growth; as did scathing media coverage about Canberra that made many public servants in Melbourne reluctant to relocate to Canberra (Sparke, 1988, p.81). By the time of the 1947 Australian Census, the ACT (including Jervis Bay) still had a population of less than 17,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1947).

The growth and development of Canberra as a national capital after World War II can be largely attributable to the support of former Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies. Although Menzies was not fond of Canberra at first – considering it a place of exile - he realised over time the importance of Canberra as the national capital, and began to treat it as such (Sparke, 1988, p31). Following this change in attitude, he took it upon himself to make Canberra a capital city that the people of Australia could take pride in (National Capital Authority, 2011). The formal creation of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in 1958 was an important part of this process, as it gave a body with the legislative power and budget to make a difference to the city (National Capital Authority, 2011). A second integral part of Menzies’ commitment to the Canberra cause was the restoration of funds to build Lake Burley Griffin (Sparke, 1988, p.32), which he inaugurated in 1964. The creation of ornamental waters was a central part of Walter Burley Griffin’s original plan for Canberra, and contributed to the choosing of the site as stated by surveyor Charles R. Scrivener in 1909:

“I regard the Canberra site as the best that can be obtained in the Yass-Canberra district, being prominently situated and yet sheltered, while facilities are afforded for storing water for ornamental purposes at a reasonable cost.” (Cited in Sparke, 1988, p.131)

The transfer of the Defence Department from Melbourne to Canberra by 1963 also marked an important turning point for the city, as it signified the acceptance of Canberra over Melbourne as the seat of Federal government, despite this officially being the case since 1927 (Sparke, 1988, p.101). Such milestones contributed to a noticeable shift in the dynamic of the city:

“In the years between 1958 and 1965, Canberra changed from a semi-rustic town to an integrated, if still small and incomplete, national capital. It grew from a seemingly purposeless scatter of suburbs on either side of a willow-lined stream and its flood plain to a rapidly expanding city, sure of its future.” (Sparke, 1988, p.103)

During the period from 1958 to 1965, Canberra’s population more than doubled to 86,700 and the annual growth rate averaged 11.8 per cent (Sparke, 1988, p.104). Such rapid growth lead to the realisation that in order to accommodate growth and maintain a liveable city, strategic planning was necessary for the city’s future.
AN EXPANDING CANBERRA

The case for expanding the ACT border gathered momentum between 1965 and 1975, as strategic planning and population projections suggested it necessary for Canberra’s urban area needed to expand in the long-term:

THE Y-PLAN

In 1965, after observing rapid growth in the ACT population, the NCDC requested that Lord Holford, a British architect and town planner, produce a report outlining his observations of Canberra and recommendations for the future of the city (Holford, 1965). The report stated that the original Burley Griffin plan had been outgrown. The original plan was intended for a population of 70,000 people; at the time when the report was written, the population of the ACT was already 85,000 with an annual growth rate of 10 per cent (Holford, 1965). Holford (1965) suggested that the future planning for Canberra should focus upon policies promoting the following elements, many of which can be observed in the city’s layout today:

- A satellite system of towns;
- An open space system;
- Highways (free from development) to connect towns; and
- Framework for a coordinated transport system.

Following Holford’s recommendations, in 1966 the NCDC commissioned American transport planner Alan Voorhees to work with one of their engineers, Ian Morison, to develop a long term plan for the ever-growing city (Sparke, 1988, p.152). The resulting Y-Plan, or General Plan Concept, was adopted in 1967 (Troy, 2007), and presented in a book entitled “Tomorrow’s Canberra” (NCDC, 1970).

Tomorrow’s Canberra describes the methods used to derive the strategy for a Canberra urban area of half a million people or more (NCDC, 1970, p224), and how the Y-Plan was chosen after a computer modelling assessment of six different possible spatial structures (Morison, 1995). The linear Y-Plan structure was intended to respect Canberra’s surrounding hills and valleys, while incorporating a series of “new towns” of about 100,000 people per town linked by transport corridors. These new towns were to radiate from central Canberra to the north-west, north-east, and south (NCDC, 1970, p.67). These new towns included the present-day areas of Belconnen, Woden, Tuggeranong and Gungahlin. The idea of expansion across the ACT border into NSW was integral to Voorhees’ plan. It was stated that “within the ACT it [the Y-plan] would accommodate up to 500,000 and if necessary one million by expansion across the borders into NSW” (Sparke, 1988, p.154). This expansion into NSW was to be accommodated by extending the northwest arm of the Y-Plan to develop a new town in the Gooromon locality, and to the northeast by developing a new town around Sutton. Over time the plan was extended further north to incorporate areas around Jeir and Gundaroo (as shown in Figure 4):

Figure 4: The General Plan Concept
(Source: Harrison, 1968)
However, the idea of expanding into NSW, and how issues such as governance would be handled, were glossed over in Tomorrow’s Canberra. The NCDC stated that:

“The questions whether further growth could take the form of new towns in New South Wales, their planning and administration, and how integration with the planning and development within the ACT could be achieved, are matters which will need to be examined but which are outside the Commission’s jurisdiction.” (NCDC, 1970, p.224)

Even at this early conceptual stage the expansion of Canberra was becoming a politically sensitive issue. One Commonwealth minister at the time was aware of such sensitivities, and declined to sign Tomorrow’s Canberra when it was presented to him (Overall, 1995, p.82).

POPULATION PROJECTIONS

An interdepartmental committee reported in 1970 that Canberra’s population could reach between 600,000 and 840,000 by the year 2000.

The driving force behind the push to expand the Canberra urban area into NSW was the assumption that Canberra’s population would outgrow available land space within the ACT border. An interdepartmental committee reported in 1970 that Canberra’s population could reach between 600,000 and 840,000 by the year 2000 (Ling, 2013). By August 1975, NCDC communications suggested that based on population projections, it was “a fact of life” that suitable land for detached homes within the ACT would be used up by 1984 (accommodating an ACT population of around 550,000), and development of the Gooromon area commenced, if not completed, by 1990 (see Figure 5).

Even after revisions of these estimates taking into account restrictions on the growth of the Australian public service, the NCDC believed that this would not affect the long term need to expand across the border (see Figure 6). These projections, of course, still have not been met. As of 2011, ABS figures stated the ACT’s population at just under 356,600 people – including a slight decline in the population of the Tuggeranong Valley (Hu et al, 2013). Furthermore, the Gungahlin area was (and is still) not fully developed. Looking back on the projections, former NCDC planner David Wright described them as “mechanical” and claimed

“they hadn’t been thought through”; particularly in relation to public service jobs and the potential for population decline in older parts of the city.
NEW BORDERS?

“...The root cause for the pursuit of expanding the ACT stemmed from concerns that the amount of developable land within the existing border would be exhausted based on population forecasts.”

The root cause for the pursuit of expanding the ACT stemmed from concerns that the amount of developable land within the existing border would be exhausted based on population forecasts. One of the first people to raise the notion that border expansion may one day be needed was former NCDC Assistant Commissioner and ANU researcher Peter Harrison in 1968 (Sparke, 1988). Harrison used journal and media articles to promote the Y-Plan as being capable of holding a metropolitan population of one million people, by expanding over the existing border into NSW (Harrison, 1968).

The border-expansion issue progressively gained prominence into the 1970’s, reaching a crescendo during the Whitlam years:

“Between 1973 and 1975, the issue took wings and before it plunged earthwards, the efforts to keep it flying took on an almost frenzied character. The main reasons for this were a feeling (which might have been right) of ‘now or never’ and a combination of factors which convinced the Canberra protagonists of an urgency approaching crisis. At the forefront were the population prophecies.” (Sparke, 1988, p.234)

Perceived governance issues were also pivotal in the push for an enlarged ACT. The NCDC had argued an expanded border (similar to that proposed in Figure 7) would allow development in newly annexed areas to Canberra’s north to be administered more simply, and in a more efficient and coordinated manner (NCDC, 1975a). This would have seen development in areas such as Wallaroo and Sutton considered (at the time) by only one level of administration (the NCDC) instead of two in NSW (state and local governments), and land in such areas converted to the ACT’s leasehold system to be consistent with existing parts of the Canberra urban area.

The NCDC also argued border expansion would not require resources to be re-directed from NSW (NCDC, 1975a), as is currently the case when NSW residents seek public health and education services in the ACT. As the ACT Government itself stated recently:

Reducing the impact of land speculation was another driving force behind the decision to extend the border. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a substantial increase in the price and sale transactions of semi-rural land on the NSW side of the border (The Canberra Times, 1971), as well as the subdivision of some rural lots (Overall, 1995, p82). By 1971 the cost per acre of land bordering the Federal Highway near the ACT in the Yarrowlumla Shire was as high as $500, compared to prices of just $50 per acre in 1965 (The Canberra Times, 1971). When the Goodradigbee Shire was valued in 1973, the value of some properties around Jeir and Murrumbateman had risen by 100 percent from previous valuations (Sparke, 1988, p.236).

Border expansion was also considered essential to allow Canberra’s status as a garden city to be retained. Expanding into NSW rather than developing more environmentally sensitive areas of the ACT (including Molonglo and Uriarra) would also allow conservation of open space networks that were integral to the Y-plan (Storey, 2014; NCDC, 1975a; NCDC, 1975b).
ALTERNATIVES

Increased housing density was one issue considered, however, this was likely to be unpopular...

Alternative strategies for coping with Canberra’s population growth were determined inadequate at the time (NCDC, 1975a; NCDC, 1975b). Increased housing density was one issue considered, however, this was likely to be unpopular as only 7% of ACT residents lived in medium-density dwellings at the time (Sparke, 1988, p.235). Furthermore, it was considered that higher density development in future urban areas such as Gungahlin, and in older suburbs of Canberra built before 1940, would have only boosted the potential capacity of the ACT to 650,000 people (NCDC, 1975a). This was still well short of the long-term projections of the time, and would have led to the costly relocation of many residents in the older suburbs.

Using uncommitted land or open space within the ACT border was also raised as an option, by members of NSW Shires surrounding the ACT who were not in favour of the expansion (Sparke, 1988, p.235). However it was deemed that many uncommitted areas in the ACT were integral to the city’s open space network, and many others too topographically steep and fiscally expensive for development (NCDC, 1975a; NCDC, 1975b). Among eight areas within the ACT considered unsuitable for such development at the time were Molonglo (which is currently being developed), Jerrabomberra (which is being developed on the NSW side of the border), Majura (considered unsuitable due to flight corridors for the Canberra airport), sections of the Murrumbidgee and Paddys River catchments, and Kowen (NCDC, 1975b).

The notion of placing a cap on Canberra’s population was also raised, as a way to prevent issues faced by larger cities. However, the NCDC believed that limiting the physical growth of the ACT would also limit the capacity of the city to flourish as the national capital (NCDC, 1975a).

CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS

There is evidence the NCDC did not do enough to assist surrounding shire councils in the border discussion period...

As discussions progressed between the Commonwealth and NSW authorities, two main options were presented to manage the potential expansion of the ACT across the border into NSW (Fuller, 1974):

1. That the Commonwealth acquire part of the NSW territory adjoining the ACT, which would become legally part of the Capital Territory; or
2. That a growth centre be proclaimed for joint development by the two governments on the same principles as the development of Albury-Wodonga.

The acquisition of NSW land by the Commonwealth was the preferred option for the Commonwealth, as there was a long-standing belief it was less complicated:

“There would be no particular wish on the part of any Commonwealth agency to complicate the metropolitan problem by introducing a separate and sovereign government into the issues of city development and coordination. It seems unlikely, however, that the decisions will be left to Government agencies, for private enterprise may well see fit to seek to open up new urban areas in NSW close to the Canberra market and employment pool. If this happens then the problems of engineering services, transport, communications, power, employment and finance, to mention only a few, will move to a new level of complexity”. (NCDC, 1964, p.59)

Integral to the preference of this option was the assumption that NSW was not capable of dealing with the border situation. The record of the NSW government was “not good”, the NCDC said, in allowing ribbon development in outer Sydney and permitting the degeneration of green belts (Sparke, 1988, p.235). The NCDC did not want sub-standard development occurring around the fringe of the national capital, such as that experienced in peri-urban areas of many other cities, and preferred to take control of the development themselves (Sparke, 1988, p235). Such sentiment toward planning processes in the ACT and NSW is still supported by former NCDC planner David Wright in the interview: “…for all the criticisms of Canberra’s planning, and there’s been a lot over the years, we do it better than NSW do.”
In early 1973 a joint Commonwealth - State planning study of the development of the ACT was announced by then NSW Premier Sir Robert Askin. The committee involved members from the State Planning Authority, Department of Main Roads, NCDC and Department of the Capital Territory. It sought to determine whether the expansion of the ACT into NSW was truly necessary (Sparke, 1988, p.239). During this period there was a positive relationship between the Commonwealth and the NSW government regarding the proposed expansion. This included letters between Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, acting Prime Minister at the time Jim Cairns and Sir Robert Askin that outlined NSW’s conditional acceptance of the proposed border extension (The Canberra Times, 1974b). Support from NSW was conditional on adequate financial compensation to make up for the loss of revenue that NSW would incur on the areas taken over by the ACT, and that development of the expanded parts of the ACT not detract from people movement to other regional centres such as Albury-Wodonga and Bathurst-Orange (The Canberra Times, 1974b). However, Askin retired as Premier in early 1975.

The relationship between the Shires surrounding the ACT, and the Commonwealth, was often strained during the period of discussion regarding the extension of the ACT border. This strain stemmed from a number of issues including insufficient consultation, potential loss of land (including prime agricultural land) and associated rates revenues, land release and subdivision, and use of and damage to council roads.

One surprising exception came in 1967, when the Mayor of Yass was receptive to the idea of absorption into the ACT. This was despite Yass not sharing a border with the ACT at the time. Yass Mayor S. Dobbin stated that:

“Personally I see nothing against the idea of absorption into the ACT and the national capital has been having a beneficial influence on us for some time both in terms of employment and culture. We have long advocated a rail link with Canberra so we could become a dormitory suburb with works commuting to the ACT. The extension to absorption is not such a large step and personally I can’t see anything against being part of the ACT.” (The Canberra Times, 1967a)

Councils close to the ACT’s northern border, particularly Goodradigbee (which surrounded the then Municipality of Yass), Yarrowlumla, and Gunning (as shown in Figure 8) had sought co-operation and clarification from the NCDC during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, in relation to development along the approaches to the ACT. Under an informal agreement, any proposals for development along the Federal and Barton Highways were referred to the NCDC by the Yarrowlumla Shire and strict controls were placed on any developments that did not fall under the category of agricultural and forestry (The Canberra Times, 1967b). The Goodradigbee Shire strongly advocated for a consistent approach to planning in its lands close to the border, and even prepared a report calling for controlled development on ACT border land (The Canberra Times, 1969a, 1969b). This collaborative approach was displayed by Goodradigbee Shire through much of the border discussion period, with the suggestion of a regional planning conference between surrounding Shires, the State Planning Authority and NCDC in 1971 (Brammall, 1971).

There is evidence the NCDC did not do enough to assist surrounding shire councils in the border discussion period – by not attending meetings with council officials to discuss planning issues (The Canberra Times, 1969a; Davidson, 1969), and taking several years to publicly announce its plans for lands close to the border. The NCDC claimed not attending such meetings was justified, as it was not its place to interfere in NSW affairs (Davidson, 1969; Cook, 1987, p.99). However, such a stance was a paradox as long as the NCDC was also advocating an urban form for Canberra (The Y Plan) which included provisions to extend Canberra’s urban area into NSW (Cook, 1987, p.99). This stance also made it difficult for councils close to the border to adequately plan for their lands (Brammall, 1971; Cook, 1987, p.96), particularly with some of their lands potentially subject to future claims by the ACT.

Figure 8: Local Councils Surrounding the ACT c.1971
(Source: NCDC, 1975a)
The impact upon the local fine wool industry was also a concern for the shires and local landowners. The NCDC had stated that if the border extension went ahead development would not encroach upon prime agricultural land around Murrumbateman (Hodgkinson, 1975). However land holders felt that “the in-roads of people, children, goods, noise and traffic would have a detrimental effect on the stud flocks [of fine wool studs] and their viable operation would be in question” (Hodgkinson, 1975).

Although not directly related to the border expansion proposal, road maintenance was also an issue between the Commonwealth and local councils. It was considered by many local councils that the growth of Canberra was putting extra strain on their local and arterial roads, resulting in meetings with Commonwealth officials for assistance (The Canberra Times, 1973b).

The border expansion proposal received opposition from community groups in areas that stood to be annexed by the ACT. The NSW Border Landholder Association strongly advocated the idea of limiting the growth of Canberra, as it would minimise the negative impacts on the surrounding Shires in terms of loss of income, people and area (ACT Border Land Holders' Association, 1975).

As the border debate intensified, surrounding Shires were also not in favour of the expansion, and suggested the ACT fill its existing border first (Sparke, 1988, p.235; The Canberra Times, 1974b). Media reports from 1966 - nine years before the border issue came to a head – raised the need for the surrounding Shires in terms of loss of income, people and area (ACT Border Land Holders' Association, 1975).

WHY THE BORDER WAS NEVER EXPANDED

“Political changes, a lack of inter-government coordination, and concerns over infrastructure costs...”

Political changes, a lack of inter-government coordination, and concerns over infrastructure costs are identified as key reasons for the ACT border not being expanded.

In 1975 Sir Robert Askin was replaced as Premier of NSW by Tom Lewis – a man who was less accepting of an expanded ACT than his predecessor (Ling, 2013). Even as early as 1967 when the notion of an expanded Canberra urban area was first proposed he was not receptive to the idea, stating that:

“If Canberra is growing at such a great rate it would seem to me that NSW can develop the necessary areas for home-making or satellite cities like Queanbeyan can be developed in NSW to meet Canberra’s needs.” (The Canberra Times, 1967a)

Despite these views, he stated that “my mind is still open and I am willing to listen to the representations on the ACT’s requirements” (The Canberra Times, 1967a). However during the climax of the border discussions, his views regarding the acquisition of NSW land for the ACT were recounted as “You’ve got all that land in Canberra. Why don’t you use it first and when you’ve done that, why don’t you just stop growing” (Sparke, 1988, p.239).

Shortly after his appointment as Premier, it was announced that a committee of inquiry into the border expansion would be formed (Ling, 2013). Known as the Holmwood Committee, its task was to ask the federal government to justify the need for expansion. The inquiry would take into account the impact on NSW citizens, the effect on local government, the possible effects on the fulfilment of the Albury-Wodonga and Bathurst-Orange growth centres and the general effects on the state (The Canberra Times, 1975a). Prime Minister Whitlam wrote to Lewis and suggested that the committee be formed as a joint Commonwealth – state body, but was refused (Ling, 2013). The Commonwealth was invited to make submissions to the committee; however Minister for Urban and Regional Development, Tom Uren, refused to allow any Commonwealth submissions to be made (Sparke, 1988, p.239).
In an attempt to counteract the Holmwood Committee of Inquiry, and convince the public that their reasons for pursuing the border expansion were sound, the NCDC undertook a publicity campaign. This included a series of informal talks with local stakeholder groups and other members of the public (Cook, 1987, pp122-123).

Since a formal submission to the inquiry was out of the question following Uren’s decision, the NCDC also presented their “evidence” supporting border expansion, in the form of a four page advertisement in *The Canberra Times* (Sparke, 1988, p.240). The purpose of the article was:

“...To set out for public information and discussion the issues involved and the options available with respect to the future growth of Canberra as the national capital and seat of government.” (NCDC, 1975b)

The fact that no formal submissions were made to the Holmwood Committee of Inquiry on behalf of the Commonwealth, nor in defence of NCDC planning and population projections, played a major role in the border expansion not proceeding. Unchallenged, the Inquiry instead chose to rely on projections of the National Population Inquiry, which suggested the ACT would have up to 555,500 residents by the year 2000 (The Canberra Times, 1975b). Based on this, the Holmwood Inquiry found that “up to and beyond the year 2000, there is no need to expand the geographical area of the ACT in order to serve and make provision for the national capital and its population” (Sparke, 1988, p.240). Such comments brought the NCDC’s population projections into question - greatly undermining the basis for the pursuit of cross-border expansion (Sparke, 1988, p.242).

By March 1976, the border expansion proposal was off the table. Just months after the Whitlam Labor Government had been replaced by the conservative administration of Malcolm Fraser, the Minister for the Capital Territory Tony Staley announced an agreement with New South Wales to develop a regional plan for Canberra and its surrounds while leaving the borders unchanged (Ling, 2013; Wright, B., 1976; Department of Capital Territory, 1976). The Commonwealth Department of Capital Territory also took the step of distancing itself from the previous population projections that were behind the border expansion proposal, stating:

“The latest population projections for the ACT show a slowing down in the growth of Canberra. This suggests that the supply of residential land in the ACT could last a little longer than had been expected.” (Department of Capital Territory, 1976)

Looking back on the period during interview, former NCDC planner Ian Morison cited a lack of political will for the border expansion not going ahead: “…everyone found the subject too hard and left it for the future to solve.”

Opposition from local councils also made it difficult to pursue an expanded ACT. The NCDC had, at times, sought assistance from the various Shires (The Canberra Times, 1967b), and later the NSW Government (Canberra Times, 1974a) in its efforts to combat subdivision and speculation on rural lands subject to the border expansion proposal. Talks between the Commonwealth and NSW included a request to “…secure the land around the Australia Capital Territory from further development so that the future development options were protected” (Canberra Times, 1974a). However these talks angered the councils surrounding the border, as they had not been notified or asked for input on the issue. This culminated in a council deputation to NSW officials in early 1975 strongly opposing the border expansion proposal, and asking for an explanation of border negotiations (Cook, 1987, p115). While minimum subdivision lot sizes were increased in the neighbouring Goodradigbee Shire from 40 to 400 hectares (Canberra Times, 1974a), the success in combatting land prospecting and development close to the ACT was limited (Sparke, 1988, p.236). The contribution of Commonwealth, State and local government groups to the failed border expansion proposal was well summed up by David Wright during interview: “I think there was a lack of consensus about the future of Canberra, because there wasn’t any coincidence of interest.” Such sentiment in cross-border relations was also evident in the 1960’s, as the idea of Canberra first expanding across the border first emerged (Cook, 1987, p.92).

The cost of infrastructure has also been cited as a potential reason for Canberra’s urban area and border not expanding further north. As expressed during interview, former NCDC planner Ian Morison felt the construction of large-scale communities in areas such as Jeir and Gundaroo would require considerable earthworks (including the construction of roads, electricity and communication lines, and water and sewer pipes). Such communities would also be much farther from existing infrastructure connections and employment centres in the ACT than areas such as Molonglo, West Belconnen or north Gungahlin.
Many potential impacts associated with not expanding the ACT border, as suggested up to 1975, are difficult to measure. This is primarily because the current population is still well below the 500,000 to 650,000 people that was believed to have been the ACT’s capacity based on its current borders.

It could be argued that population increases in areas of NSW close to the ACT’s northern border could make it more difficult to secure an enlarged ACT in the future. The population of Sutton and Murrumbateman, the two largest present-day communities to be in the area earmarked for ACT expansion up to 1975, increased by 38 per cent from 3,300 in 2006 to 4,500 in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This has brought in hundreds more freehold landowners who would (understandably) be loath to have their land come under the ACT’s leasehold system.

Furthermore, many blocks in NSW close to the ACT’s northern border are small acreage lots with their own dams, and would be costly to buy and redevelop as part of a modern and more compact suburb. Within the ACT, there is a belief in some circles that not expanding into NSW has seen the ACT employ the Y-Plan, in the words of former NCDC planner David Wright during interview, “with a bit of imagination.” As such, the development of the Molonglo area could be seen to stem from the need to cater for Canberra’s growing population within the existing border.

A number of trends have also emerged or strengthened since the mid-1970’s that may have future consequences for border expansion. These include the push for higher density development (a point raised by all NCDC planners interviewed), the desire for more sustainable and environmentally friendly living, rising oil prices, and recognising the ACT as part of a wider region.

The ACT’s Planning Strategy of 2012 outlined targets including a 50/50 split of infill and greenfield development for new homes into the future, as well as increased urban intensification in existing town and group centres and along transit corridors (Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, 2012). Such measures in the ACT’s Planning Strategy aim to create a more compact and sustainable Canberra urban area, whose residents are closer to employment nodes and public transport. This also reduces the future reliance on private, petrol-powered vehicles for many Canberrans to travel to work. Increased densities in existing parts of the Canberra urban area were also pursued in the early years of ACT self-government (Morison, 1995). Morison (1995) suggests a reluctance to expand over the border may have played a part in such plans, while David Wright felt during interview that “there was a view that Canberra was too suburban, and that urban consolidation was inevitable”. Higher density development is in contrast to the lower-density development patterns of the 1960s and 1970s that projected the need to expand beyond the current ACT border. The rising cost of fuel and extra time spent commuting to work may also deter residents from moving to areas beyond the current ACT border into the future. Anecdotal evidence suggests there has been a high turnover of residents on large residential blocks in the Murrumbateman area (Yass Valley Council, 2014).

The recognition of Canberra’s urban area as part of, and not separate to, the surrounding region has also expanded in recent years (National Capital Authority, 2010; Norman & Steffen, 2014). This has seen closer communication and collaboration between the ACT, and local councils surrounding it, on urban and regional planning issues. It is also beginning to shift perceptions away from the ACT border marking a hole in a donut (as critiqued in Norman and Steffen, 2014) to visions of the border as a “notional concept, marked only by road signs” (ACT Government, 2013b).

A small number of planning documents released since 1990 have raised the possibility of Canberra’s urban area one day spilling over into NSW. The draft National Capital Plan came under criticism from local councils to the ACT’s north for suggesting cross-border expansion was an option for further growth that could have been needed in less than 15 years from 1990 (Hobbs., 1990). A draft ACT and Sub-region Planning Strategy in 1995 also found new urban areas would be needed outside the ACT in future years, to house an estimated 690,000 people in the Canberra-Queanbeyan region by 2035 (Henderson, 1995). However any tension that may have existed at the time of the latter strategy was downplayed by then Federal Minister for Housing and Regional Development, Brian Howe, who stated “we shouldn’t be in the business of moving borders, but of removing them – at least for the purpose of planning and development” (Henderson, 1995). However it should be acknowledged that recent developments are taking Canberra’s urban area closer to the NSW border – especially those in north...
Opinions on cross-border development were divided between our interviewees of former NCDC planners. Keith Storey felt an expansion into NSW was more of a long term opportunity, with low-density development to continue in areas close to the existing border. Ian Morison saw collaborative cross-border development as inevitable, stating almost 20 years ago that “The ACT Government … will soon have to take an initiative with NSW on how the first urban land release is to be organised for Canberra’s spillover to the north” (Morison, 1995). David Wright expressed fears during interview for the future urban form of Canberra, particularly if it were to expand into NSW without being under ACT control:

“If you don’t own the land across the border we have no planning jurisdiction, then all we’re going to get is costs … we’re going to have to provide the services to it … the people that make the profits will be the people that own the land across the way.”

Wright also pointed to the possibility of neighbouring homes in cross-border developments having the difficult task of conforming to different planning codes (for ACT and NSW) if they were to proceed without ACT control.

When combined, the above causes and consequences of not expanding the ACT border in the 1970’s, and trends that have emerged and expanded in recent years, make a large-scale expansion of the ACT border much less likely than was the case 40 years ago. However, it should also be acknowledged that development is getting closer to the NSW border, and some areas of surrounding NSW are closer to Civic than the suburbs of Conder and Banks in the Tuggeranong Valley. Based on this, there may be opportunities for small-scale incursions of Canberra’s urban area, and possibly the border, into NSW in the future.

CONCLUSION

The push for the expansion of the ACT border into NSW in the 1960s and 1970s was based primarily upon “mechanical” population projections that have still not been met, and was ultimately doomed by political obstacles and infrastructure costs.

The push for the expansion of the ACT border into NSW in the 1960s and 1970s was based primarily upon “mechanical” population projections that have still not been met, and was ultimately doomed by political obstacles and infrastructure costs. Planning and development trends that have emerged and expanded in recent years make a large-scale expansion of the ACT border much less likely than was the case 40 years ago. However, as the ACT and surrounding region’s population continues to rise, the espoused benefits of border expansion coupled with increased development close to the ACT-NSW border are already beginning to re-invigorate the border expansion debate. Given the growing number of residents close to the ACT border with existing freehold title, and the pursuit of higher density development within the ACT, it is likely that any expansion of the ACT’s borders into NSW, if deemed desirable, will be much smaller than that proposed in the 1970s.
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APPENDIX

The interviews of former NCDC planners include Ian Morison, Keith Storey, and David Wright:

Ian Morison joined the NCDC in 1959, as a traffic engineer and transport planner, and went on to be part of the team that formulated Canberra’s Y-Plan. Ian has also published a number of planning reports and journal articles on planning in the Canberra region.

Keith Storey was a senior planner, who worked for the NCDC from 1958 to 1988. His planning publications on the Canberra region include *Planning concepts for the newtown of Tuggeranong* (1971) and *Defining and protecting the green spaces: the Canberra experience* (1977).

David Wright was a town planner with the NCDC, and its post-self-government successors the National Capital Planning Authority (NCPA) and National Capital Authority (NCA) from 1973 to 2006.
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