Designing social change to rebuild the Narrabundah Longstay Park
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My first duty is always to acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the Ngunawal and Ngambri People, on whose land we are meeting today and to pay my respects to their elders past and present.

My sincere apologies that I am unable to be with you today, as I have another commitment at the ANU that I also need to fulfil at this time.

This is my first opportunity to speak publicly about the design of the consultancy that SGS Economics and Planning undertook for the ACT Government on the Future Ownership and Management Options for Narrabundah Longstay Park.

I had only recently joined SGS Economics and Planning as an Associate in their Canberra office when the tender for this project was advertised in August 2008. Having lived in Canberra all my life and as a long term member of ACTCOSS, I was very familiar with the place’s controversial history. For the record, I made my membership of ACTCOSS and my prior knowledge of the Park’s history very clear in our submission. Fortunately, these were seen as assets and not as conflicts of interest.

By way of background, in the previous 30 years there have only been three national studies of long stay caravan parks and their contribution to affordable housing in Australia, and I had been involved in each of those studies. The first was in the late 1980s in the context of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, the second was in the early 1990s in the context of national housing policy studies for the Keating Government, and the most recent of which was the 2003 AHURI study ‘On the margins? Housing risk among caravan park residents’. This study examined the risks of homelessness that long term residents of caravan parks face and their insecurity of tenure. The study included a comparative analysis of the legislative regimes governing caravan parks in each jurisdiction around Australia, including the ACT. So I was pleased to win the brief to examine the long term ownership and management options for the future of the Narrabundah Longstay Park.

The study for the ACT Government involved, amongst other things, taking into account the transfer of the Park to a non-government organisation, its sale to a private developer, building health and safety and site planning and amenity, tenure security, ownership and management options, financial management structures, and relevant legislation, including a comparative assessment of practices and legislative regimes governing caravan parks / mobile home parks in all the other jurisdictions in Australia, something I had already done three times over the preceding 20 years.

Given the high level of sensitivity surrounding the future of the Park at that time, SGS very deliberately built into its methodology a number of opportunities for input by the residents and absentee site
holders of the Park and other key stakeholders. We proposed a four-phase approach as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Stages of the Narrabundah Park Ownership and Management Options Study**

The four phases of the project would include the following:

- Inception and issues identification, the primary purpose of which was to gather information about the site and the issues, to carry out an initial round of consultations, and to produce an Issues Paper.

- Release the Issues Paper and conduct another round of consultations and float possible options for future ownership and management.

- Prepare an Options Paper with an analysis of their relative advantages and disadvantages and conduct another round of consultations.

- Prepare a Final Report to the ACT Government with recommendations on a preferred option or options.

The contract was awarded in October 2008, and the Issues Paper was released in May 2009.

However, the study didn’t quite go according to plan, not only in terms of timeframes, but also in terms of directions.

Following the initial round of consultations and the release of the Issues Paper, all of the residents and key stakeholders were unanimous on their verdict about options: they wanted the ACT Government to run the Park properly like a publicly owned facility, but with a greater level of tenure security than rolling monthly occupancy licences.
This rankled the ACT Government and it took them several months to digest what this might mean for them. Following some lengthy delays and difficult negotiations, it was decided that SGS should produce an Options Paper focusing on continued public ownership and management and how all of the issues identified in the Issues Paper could be addressed in order to bring the Park to reasonable standards, either comparable to, or better than, similar parks in other jurisdictions. But the ACT Government could and had do what needed to happen at Narrabundah Longstay Park because it owned the site and because it was ultimately responsible. They had our and other independent expert advice about the risks they were facing if something dreadful happened in the Park. It was our job to tell them how to do it.

The Options Paper was released in February 2011, almost two years after the release of the Issues Paper and 16 months after we had submitted our draft Options Paper. And I can reveal that, to the ACT Government’s credit, only very few and very minor changes were made to our draft Options Paper before it was released by the ACT Government, and they were done in consultation with us. They certainly respected the integrity of our advice.

I can’t say much about the negotiations that transpired during that period, other than to say that we put two conditions on the table that were not negotiable, and I insisted on these:

- no current resident of the Park, regardless of their tenure, should become homeless due to the changes that will need to be made to improve conditions within the Park; and
- no-one should be able to make speculative profits as the necessary changes to the Park’s operations were being implemented.

As we know from their Interim Response to the Options Paper, the ACT Government agreed to these two conditions.

The other objectives I put on the table included:

- a clear indication of how dwelling owners will have to deal with non-complying/unapproved buildings, structures and fixtures on their respective sites and that all residents will require a minimum level of assistance to achieve the required outcomes;
- existing resident licensees should be given longer security of tenure should their dwellings be brought up to an acceptable standard of health and safety and should they choose to remain living in the Park; and
- the Park should continue to provide an alternative form of affordable low cost housing in the ACT.

And the ACT Government’s Interim Response also accepted these objectives.

There was also some ambivalence by the ACT Government about the need for a final report, but I insisted that SGS had entered into a contract for a due process with the residents and the ACT community and that we should be allowed to complete that process. Our Final Report with 28 Recommendations was released in May 2011.

I am pleased to say that almost all of the 28 Recommendations have been acted upon, with one exception, which I will come to in my final points.
Given my prior knowledge of the Park’s history and my knowledge of how similar places around Australia were being managed and operated (and, more often than not, mismanaged), I went into this brief with my eyes wide open to the changes that I knew were necessary in order to restore social justice for the residents of the Park and to improve conditions in the long term.

I have to say, the tender brief for this exercise was very well written. It included all the necessary ingredients to design a process that was going to deliver real social change: the consultations with residents and stakeholders, a thorough analysis of the issues and possible options, a comparative analysis of the legislative frameworks for similar places in all the other jurisdictions around Australia; and the production of a final report with recommendations.

And on winning the tender I said to the client, I hope you realise this will cause some pain for everyone involved, especially for the residents, the absentee site licencees, and for the ACT Government as they grapple with the changes that will need to be made. And at my first meeting with the residents, I said exactly the same to them. The process of working through the issues and formulating policy responses certainly caused the ACT Government some pain. The processes the residents and site licencees had to go through to have their dwellings fixed or altered to comply with a set of minimum standards for building health and safety reasons in return for longer term licences, was also a very painful process. I don’t doubt there were many anxious moments, or days and months as they waited for the process to unfold and reach satisfactory completion.

**Four final points.**

Firstly, my sincere thanks to the bureaucrat in the ACT Government that wrote the brief. It was one of the best briefs I have seen in many years of consulting practice. And my sincere thanks also to the ACT Government for accepting the spirit of my recommendations and committing to the process of implementation. I know the process hasn’t been easy, but then I said from the outset that it was going to be difficult. Changes of this nature are always difficult, and it depends on how you manage them.

Secondly, I am very pleased to have been able to work with a community of people who are the residents of Narrabundah Longstay Park. Their commitment to their community and to their chosen housing and way of life was a constant source of inspiration to me, especially in navigating this brief.

Thirdly, the one recommendation in SGS’s Final Report that has yet to be acted upon is the need for legislative reform. There is currently no adequate legislative regime for managing places like Narrabundah Longstay Park. The existing Residential Tenancies Act is, in my considered view, inadequate, especially compared to what exists in NSW and Qld. The need for legislative reform in this area is long overdue. My next point underscores the main reason why it is overdue.

My final point is that very similar issues exist in privately operated long stay caravan parks elsewhere in the ACT. It will only be a matter of time before the same issues will boil to the surface and need to be dealt with, but in a very different legal context. And this is where appropriate legislative powers will be necessary. And we can all learn from the processes of designing social change at Narrabundah Longstay Park, and how they can be applied in other circumstances.