

The Accommodation of Growth:  
Canberra's 'Growing Pains' 1945-1955

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the economic and demographic constraints which were placed on the Commonwealth Government in its role as the planner and developer of Canberra during the first decade after the Second World War. These constraints place the establishment of the National Capital Development Commission in perspective, by qualifying the role attributed to various individuals (such as Prime Minister Robert Menzies).

In this more structural light, the 1955 Senate Inquiry into the Future Development of Canberra is an important event, not simply for the rejuvenation of the Canberra vision and the recognition of the need for a National Capital, but for the preparatory framework of the organisational form which Canberra's planning and development body would assume in the future. However, the timing of the establishment of this body — the NCDC — was fortuitous, in the sense that the constraints which previously had held back Canberra's development during the first post-war decade were beginning to disappear.

In the paper, these claims are supported by examining the housing crisis which Canberra faced during this period. This crisis assumed a number of guises, from the housing shortage to discontent over rentals, and from the form housing took to participation in local decision-making. These issues are explored from the perspective of local builders, workers and residents. Indeed, a close examination of the evidence before the 1955 Senate Inquiry reveals the important contribution which Canberran residents made to the final recommendations. However, most commentators have tended to focus attention on the evidence presented by the planning profession.

# The Accommodation of Growth: Canberra's 'Growing Pains' 1945-1955\*

Alastair Greig†

## Introduction

Between 1945 and 1970, the face of Canberra altered dramatically. The population grew from 13,000 to 130,000; key Commonwealth government departments were transferred to the National Capital; Canberra began to perform effectively its function as the administrative centre of the nation; some progress was made towards fulfilling Burley Griffin's landscape plan and numerous ornamental features of the city were established. However, growth during this significant quarter-century did not occur at a steady pace. It remained sluggish until the late 1950s, before rising steeply during the following years, exceeding even the expectations of the statutory planning and development authority, the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC). In the light of this spectacular growth after the establishment of the NCDC in 1957, the construction programme during the first post-war decade in Canberra appears rather unimpressive. During this period, plans which had been drawn up for the transfer of public servants and for the construction of the city largely remained unfulfilled. According to the architect Robin Boyd, Canberra 'reached its nadir about 1954'.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, Canberra experienced high levels of population growth, which in turn fuelled an acute housing shortage.

This paper focuses on the problems governments encountered — and the criticisms levelled against them — in their role as the major provider of Canberra's housing stock between 1945 and 1955. It also examines some of the concerns expressed — and the hardships endured — by Canberra's residents, its builders and its workforce throughout this period. Their experiences shed light on many of the practical problems associated with

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<sup>1</sup> R. Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne, 1960 (1968), p. 28.

building the National Capital and housing its residents in the immediate post-war period.

These experiences of Canberrans also provide a context for understanding the importance of the 1955 Senate Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into and Report upon the Development of Canberra (hereafter referred to as the 1955 Senate Inquiry). In turn, the 1955 Senate Inquiry 'marks a major turning point in the history of Canberra',<sup>2</sup> setting up a chain of events which eventually led to the establishment of the NCDC. Thus, this paper also contributes towards a 'pre-history' of the NCDC.

More importantly, this paper points out the important contribution which local residents, workers and builders made to the debate over Canberra's future. This focus is important, not only because Canberra's residents were at the time among the most politically voiceless in the nation, but also because they have been marginalised in most historical accounts of the development of their own city.

As a consequence, this paper qualifies individualist and/or idealist accounts of Canberra's post-war history, which explain the city's spectacular growth after the late 1950s through reference to such factors as: the sudden conversion of Prime Minister Menzies into an 'apostle' of Canberra;<sup>3</sup> the contributions made by town planners and other experts before the 1955 Senate Inquiry and the subsequent report by Lord Holford on Canberra's future; and the administrative reforms of 1957-1958 which overcame the problem of divided Departmental responsibilities for Canberra's development. None of these factors can be ignored in an adequate explanation of the establishment of the NCDC and the success of the plan to finally transform Canberra into the nation's administrative centre. However, this paper argues that, while they might be necessary components of an explanation, they are not sufficient.

In her examination of the 'lag' in Canberra's development up until the mid-to-late 1950s, Atkins asks:

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<sup>2</sup> K.F. Fischer, *Canberra: Myths and Models*, Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg, 1984. This near-universal verdict is also expressed by local historians L. Wigmore, *The Long View: Australia's National Capital*, Melbourne, 1963; and E. Sparke, *Canberra 1954-1980*, Canberra, 1988; the architect R. Boyd, op. cit., p. 29; the historian/political scientist H. Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, Adelaide, 1970, pp. 28-31; the NCDC's first Commissioner Sir John Overall, *Canberra: Past, Present and Future*, Canberra, 1995, and the NCDC, *The Future Canberra*, Canberra, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, London, 1972, p. 143.

Perhaps the conditions for the successful development of Canberra were not present before the 1950s. Instead of asking “Why was there so long a delay?”, we should ask “Why was the breakthrough possible in the 1950s? What conditions made things easier?” Too much emphasis can be placed on political choice, and too little on the conditions making some choices viable.<sup>4</sup>

This paper argues that these ‘conditions’ can best be understood through appreciating the problems experienced by the people directly involved in the construction and growth of Canberra during this period. An exogenous shock recharging the ‘Canberra vision’ was not required. Canberrans had an acute sense of what was wrong with the city, and planners could add little to the local store of knowledge concerning the measures needed to fulfil the Canberra vision. This argument will be illustrated through an analysis of the local housing shortage, and through references to local contributions to the 1955 Senate Inquiry. An analysis of the Inquiry’s final recommendations reveals the substantial influence of local testimony.

### The Dilemmas of Urban Growth

This section places Canberra’s post-war housing crisis in historical perspective through highlighting a number of dilemmas of growth which would have confounded the most dedicated, enlightened and far-sighted leaders and town planners.

By the end of the Second World War, Canberra remained largely a set of ideas waiting to be implemented. During an initial period of growth during the mid-to-late 1920s, the Federal Capital Commission (FCC) constructed a temporary Parliament House, a handful of government offices, hotels and residential houses. This spurt of activity proved short-lived, and the onset of the Depression forced the Government to reassess its priorities. Responsibility for the development of Canberra was divided between a number of Commonwealth government departments based in other capital cities, and little was added to the city’s built environment during the remainder of the 1930s.

Although the Second World War and the programme for post-war reconstruction strengthened the Commonwealth’s power over the States, Commonwealth departments remained dispersed in other capitals and looked upon the prospect of a move to Canberra with some reluctance. At

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<sup>4</sup>

R. Atkins, *The Government of the Australian Capital Territory*, St Lucia, 1978, p. 44.

the 1955 Senate Inquiry, the Chairman of the Public Service Board pointed out that there had never been any official departure from the policy of transferring the central administrative machinery of government to Canberra. While this policy had remained constant, there had been 'vicissitudes which have delayed achievement of the objective'.<sup>5</sup> While some politicians and departments lacked enthusiasm for the overall project — often referred to as 'the dead hand of Melbourne'<sup>6</sup> — there were other, more structural, reasons behind the 'vicissitudes' which limited Canberra's potential growth during the first decade after the war.

It was estimated that Australia faced a shortage of approximately 300,000 houses at the end of the Second World War and demand for building labour and materials continued to outstrip supply well into the 1950s throughout the nation.<sup>7</sup> However, there were certain circumstances which made Canberra's post-war housing crisis peculiar, including its high level of population growth and the central responsibility which the Commonwealth Government assumed for coordinating growth.

The task confronting the Departments for the Interior and Works — the two key departments involved in the development of the city — were daunting. They were asked to balance the increase in the housing stock with an expansion of office-building, community services, local amenities and other services. In addition, the Commonwealth had to consider the needs of the existing local residents and balance these against the projected needs of the public servants it planned to transfer to the Capital Territory. During 1947 and 1948 the Commonwealth had called for the transfer of 7,027 public servants to Canberra in four stages within ten years. This programme came to be known as 'Operation Administration', because its success was predicated on the completion of the large Administrative Building close to Parliament House. The foundations for this building had been laid in the 1920s! If the transfer targets were to be achieved, then it

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. W.E. Dunk, Minutes of the 1955 Senate Inquiry, p. 2 (between pp. 514-515). Australian Archives, Mitchell, ACT. No. A1203/3 711.409947 AUS PT1-9.

<sup>6</sup> When J. Fraser MP (ACT), in the spring of 1954, admonished his parliamentary colleagues for not spending more time in Canberra between parliamentary sittings, his comments were greeted with a 'derisive outburst' from the Government benches. See also Sparke, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> A.W. Greig, *The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of: Housing Provision in Australia 1945-1960*, Melbourne, 1995.

was also necessary to take into consideration the needs of the additional workforce which would be required to fulfil the building programme.

Canberra had grown rapidly during the Second World War and its population reached 13,000 by 1945. By September 1951, this figure had risen to 23,616, and by June 1954 the population exceeded 28,000 (see Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2). This 85 per cent increase<sup>8</sup> during the previous seven years was higher than any other capital city with the exception of Darwin. However, high rates of population growth were experienced throughout the nation during this period. As a consequence, the Government could not rely on a steady redistribution of building labour and materials from established centres to undertake the development of Canberra.

Furthermore, the private sector within Canberra remained relatively underdeveloped. The Commonwealth Housing Commission Report of 1944 had predicted that during the post-war era the State Housing Commissions would construct approximately half the nation's housing stock. No Housing Commission during the first decade after the war came close to realising this goal and the private sector — along with owner-builders — took responsibility for the majority of house construction.<sup>9</sup> In Canberra, with its reliance on the Commonwealth budget, there was little hope in waiting for the private sector to initiate the task of construction — especially during a time of housing shortages throughout the rest of the country.<sup>10</sup> As long as

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<sup>8</sup> These figures exclude rural ACT and Jervis Bay. The 1954 Census also did not take into account the 400 people in the diplomatic corps. Apart from new arrivals, the ACT had also experienced the highest birth rates between 1946 and 1951. See J. Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953*, Canberra, 1988, p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> M. Jones, *Housing and Poverty in Australia*, Melbourne, 1972, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> At the 1955 Senate Inquiry, the Chairman of the Public Service Board, Mr Dunk, stated: 'I can see no escape in a development as big as that which is required for the completion of Canberra from the Government assuming the main responsibility for housing construction'. Private development would follow, he believed, 'but initially however, people coming to Canberra will expect houses to be provided for them'. 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, pp. 6-7, between pp. 514-5. The editor of *The Canberra Times* during the late-1940s, an ardent believer in the virtues of private enterprise, enjoyed pointing out—rather unfairly—that Canberra was a grand opportunity for the Labor Government to display the virtues of State control. The Commonwealth Housing Commission predicted that the States would construct half of all future housing in Australia (*CHC Report 1944*). Yet, the Commonwealth 'took the lot for the ACT' (May 9, 1946). Indeed, there 'was a time when Governments told the people that private enterprise had failed in housing and that Government programmes were the only means whereby homes for the people could be realised'. This was

**Table 1**  
**The Growth of Canberra's Suburbs Between 1947 and 1954**

<u>City Area</u>	<u>1947</u>	<u>1954</u>
Acton	1,135	1,291
Ainslie	2,626	4,060
Braddon	828	859
Capital Hill	38	434
City	16	28
Deakin	187	412
Duntroon	648	957
Forrest	950	1,027
Fyshwick	991	880
Griffith	2,551	2,943
Kingston	1,024	826
Lyneham, Dickson and O'Connor	10	3,396
Narrabundah	196	3,382
Parkes	17	221
Pialligo	168	328
Red Hill	237	328
Reid	901	1,328
Symonston	211	297
Turner	735	1,935
Yarralumla	320	2,081
Total City Area	15,156	28,277
Total Rural Area	1,380	1,521
Jervis Bay	360	517
Grand Total	16,905	30,315

*Source: Canberra Times, 25 September, 1954, p.2.*

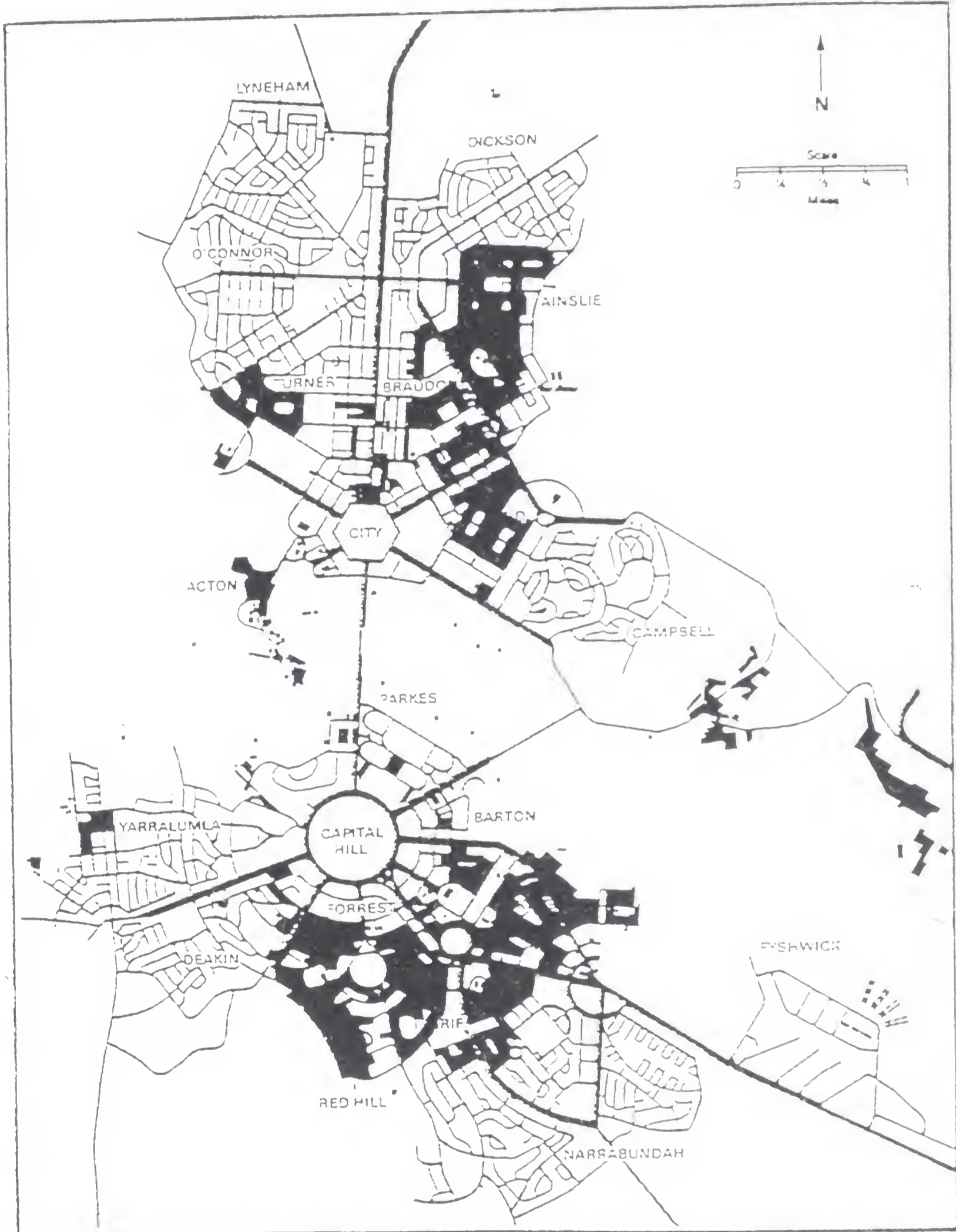
housing demand remained high throughout the nation, and as long as other major national projects such as the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme remained a priority, the Commonwealth would face the problem of attracting sufficient skilled labour and experienced contractors to Canberra.

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clearly a misinterpretation of the aims of the Commonwealth Housing Commission and other housing reformers. who merely noted that the private sector could not be relied on to adequately meet the needs of certain sectors of the working class.

Figure 1

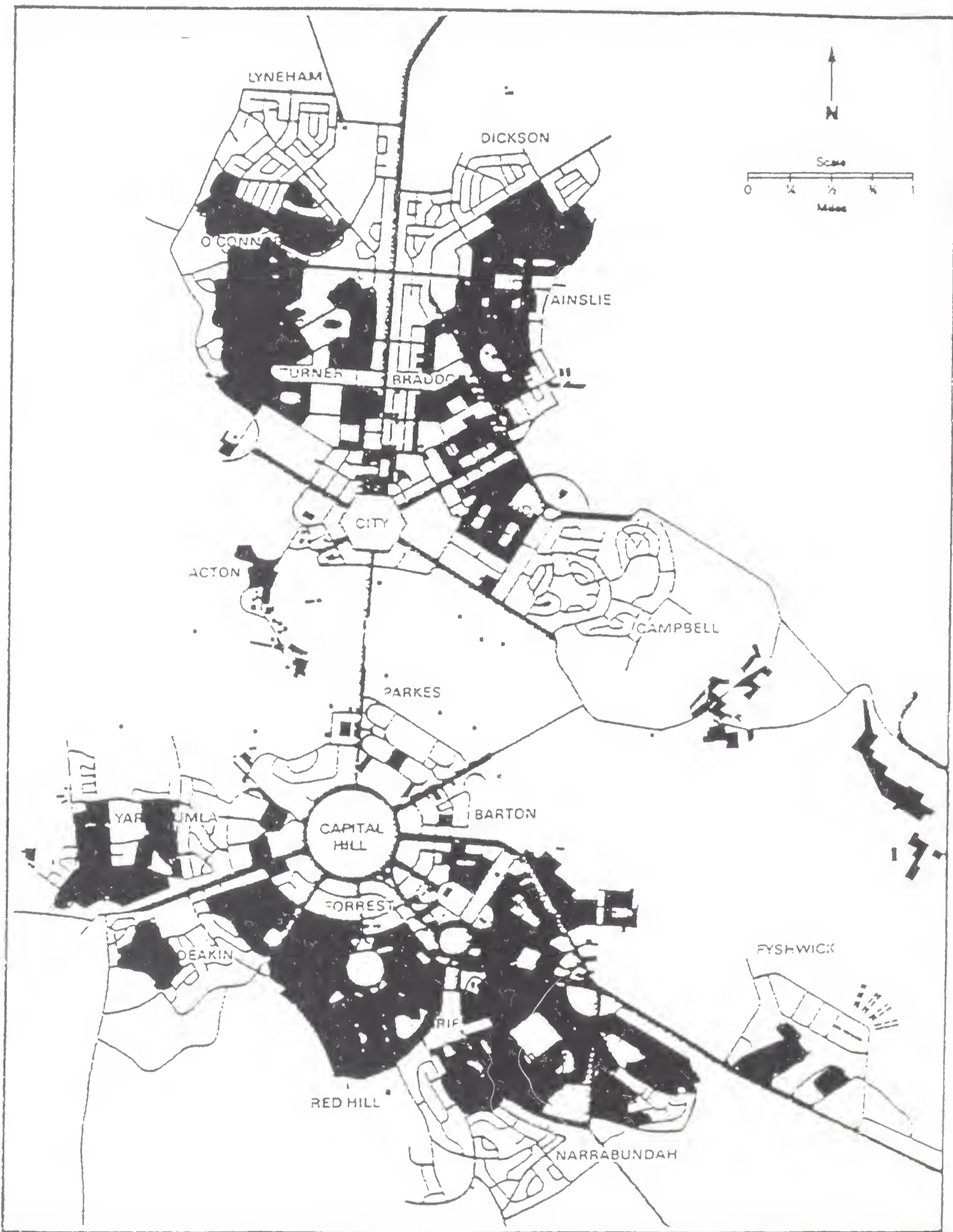
Canberra 1946



From J. Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953*, Canberra, 1988, p. 205.

Figure 2

Canberra 1954



Adapted from Gibbney, *ibid.*

In addition, the national housing shortage meant that available building resources were directed at residential construction. This aggravated the backlog of non-residential building throughout the nation. The problems this created were nowhere more evident than in Canberra. For the city to perform its role as Australia's governmental and administrative centre, it required offices for the transferred Commonwealth public servants. During the late 1940s, the slow progress on the construction of the Administration Building served as a sorry reminder of the state of the Commonwealth's plans to relocate government departments to Canberra.<sup>11</sup> At this stage, disused Army huts were being redeployed as offices.

The Commonwealth was even unable to claim success in diverting scarce building resources into the construction of dwellings in Canberra. Although no government department had been relocated to the capital and the Administration Building had still to be completed, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the local housing situation was deteriorating. By 1954, ACT's ratio of persons per home — 4.07 — was the highest in the Commonwealth. More alarmingly, the number of houses delivered over to the Department of the Interior began to decline after reaching a peak of 512 units in 1952-1953 (see Table 2). The *Canberra Times* remarked in May 1955 that the 'most impressive feature of the housing programme in recent years has been that every time the Minister for Works has promised that housing output will be increased, it has fallen with relentless persistency'.

The post-war housing crisis had serious repercussions for the transfer of public servants from other centres. It hampered the ability of the Commonwealth to recruit staff for Canberra. As early as May 1946, the Commonwealth Government Printer lamented that the shortage of accommodation was preventing him from attracting prospective employees. Interested applicants 'had been directed to the Housing section of the Department of the Interior, and when told that they could not expect a house for at least 18 months, they elected to take positions elsewhere'.<sup>12</sup>

This problem plagued recruitment throughout the initial decade after the war. Apart from the shortages, the high rentals on post-war government houses were seen as a disincentive for persons contemplating the move to

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<sup>11</sup> The first task of confronting the post-war problem of completing the building involved digging up the original concrete foundations laid in the late 1920s.

<sup>12</sup> *CT*, May 31, 1946. See also Gibbney, p. 233.

Canberra. In November 1954, the ACT branch of the Commonwealth Public Service Clerical Association warned in its *Annual Report* that: 'Public servants likely to be transferred to Canberra would seriously consider whether their prospects in the Commonwealth Public Service justified the additional cost of housing in some isolated Canberra suburb'. The resistance of many Melbourne and Sydney public servants to proposed transfers must be seen in the light of the perceived absence of any 'pull' factors from Canberra. The 1955 Senate Inquiry also made the point that if the new Administration Building were completed, 'the lack of housing would prevent its being fully utilised'.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Housing Units Delivered to the Department of the Interior**  
**1945-1954**

1945-1946	58		
1946-1947	136		
1947-1948	248		
1948-1949	284		
1949-1950	393		
1950-1951	499	Under construction	1,044
1951-1952	477		664
1952-1953	512		313
1953-1954	460		421
1954 (Jul-Dec)	169		

*Source:* K.F. Fisher, op.cit

Apart from the shortage of residential homes and office buildings, the Commonwealth had to contend with the acute shortages of infrastructure, services and amenities throughout the ACT. There was also a shortage of

<sup>13</sup> *The Senate Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into and Report upon the Development of Canberra*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, September 1955, p. 17.

public halls and other entertainment facilities, which reinforced the impression that Canberra was nothing more than a group of isolated suburbs 'looking for a city'.<sup>14</sup> Local Progress and Welfare Associations blamed incidences of local vandalism on the absence of amenities for youths,<sup>15</sup> and at the 1955 Senate Inquiry a local builder, Mr McDonald, agreed with Chairman Senator McCallum's comment that 'the bad thing about this place from the point of view of young people is that there is no shopping centre, no beautifully lit neon-signs on buildings, and not enough restaurants and dance halls — the legitimate things that young people are attracted by'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the failure to establish Canberra as the administrative centre of the nation wasn't merely a question of lack of will on the part of the Government, public servants or planners. Prevailing economic and demographic circumstances, combined with the nationwide building shortage, would have set limits on more modest schemes for Canberra's development. Furthermore, as the next section will illustrate, the administration of Canberra suffered from divided departmental responsibilities and short-term budgetary concerns. There was no administrative body with undivided authority to balance the scarce financial, material and human resources needed to execute Operation Administration. These concerns were voiced by a range of local builders and workers' organisations at the 1955 Senate Inquiry. However, the evidence presented so far suggests that prevailing conditions would have troubled the most 'powerful, responsible and competent'<sup>17</sup> planning authority.

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<sup>14</sup> There were a number of variations on this theme including Wigmore 'Six suburbs in search of a city', op. cit., p. 7, Menzies, 'six villages in search of a city', op. cit., p. 143; See also Sparke, op. cit., p. 1. Los Angeles has often been dubbed 'a hundred suburbs in search of a city'. See E. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, London, 1989, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> After a spate of vandalism on a building site at Ebdon Street, Ainslie in June 1946 was blamed on 13-14 year old boys, the Ainslie Progress and Welfare Association turned attention towards the lack of facilities for Canberra youth: 'Throughout Canberra generally, the youth are afflicted with boredom because of the lack of facilities for healthy amusement and sport' (CT, July 9, 1946).

<sup>16</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1363.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from a letter from Prime Minister R.G. Menzies to the Minister for the Interior, Allen Fairhall, 14, August 1957, where Menzies outlined his views on 'the type of Commission required to take over the development of Canberra'. Quoted in J. Overall, op. cit.

## Permanent Homes and Temporary Expedients

On the eve of the 1955 Senate Inquiry, there was a range of conflicting perspectives on the Commonwealth's record of housing in Canberra. On the one hand, the Minister for the Interior, Mr Kent Hughes pointed out in Parliament in September 1954 that 'the Government had been responsible for the erection of more permanent homes than in the previous 20 years of Canberra's history'.<sup>18</sup> W. Borrie, Professor of Demography at the Australian National University endorsed this view at an ANZAAS conference on Canberra in January 1954, arguing that the 'rapid increase of population since 1947 has of course only been made possible by the success of the post-war housing programme'.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, *The Canberra Times* retorted that '...in not one post-war year has the housing target ever been approached'. Many local residents and workers questioned the 'success' Borrie acclaimed. No local issue attracted as much attention in the paper as the 'housing situation' throughout the first decade after the war. This section reviews some of the most prominent issues through local lenses, and highlights the practical recommendations made by builders' and workers' organisations at the 1955 Senate Inquiry. While expert planners tended to debate symbolism and space, Canberrans focused their demands on decent houses and a place to live.

### *'The Cheap and Shoddy'*<sup>20</sup>

In an effort to overcome the dilemma of housing provision for public servants and other residents while finding accommodation for the workers recruited to build these houses, the Government experimented with a range of 'temporary expediencies'. However, this solution brought other aesthetic and equity problems in its wake. These were associated with the tendency for the temporary and the expedient to become permanent, especially when the demands of growth encouraged the recycling of temporary

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Calwell responded that many of the programmes the Minister spoke of were initiated under the Chifley Labor Government.

<sup>19</sup> W.D. Borrie, 'Population of the Australian Capital Territory and of Canberra', in H.L. White ed., *Canberra: A Nation's Capital*, Angus and Robertson, n.p., 1954, p. 227. Borrie did concede that: 'Supply is still behind demand and standards may be criticised...'.  
<sup>20</sup>

Senator McCallum, the future Chairman of the 1955 Senate Committee, expressed his view—when moving for the Committee's appointment on November 3, 1954—that the 'cheap and shoddy' were dearest in the long run'.

accommodation. This problem had plagued the National Capital ever since Burley Griffin and then Sulman proposed the 'initial city' around the district of Kingston.<sup>21</sup>

One-tenth of the 2,111 government-owned houses in July 1946 had been defined as temporary dwellings. In addition, throughout the Territory a number of hostels, camps and 'guest houses' were used as temporary accommodation.<sup>22</sup> By 1951, over one in five of the local population were living in hostels. This accommodation tended to be occupied either by workers engaged in building programmes, or by public servants and other workers who had lodged an application for a government-owned house. This accommodation was subsidised by the Government, although public servants tended to occupy better quarters than construction workers.<sup>23</sup>

Under these circumstances, hostels, camps and guest houses appeared expedient for housing the workforce required to build permanent accommodation.<sup>24</sup> As each large influx of building labour was recruited, additional temporary accommodation had to be found. For example, when plans were announced in August 1946 for the reception of a large group of British building tradesmen, the Government transported the disused military camp at Narellan to a location near the sandwash plant between the Molonglo River and the Prices Office buildings as accommodation. In 1951, skilled labour shortages also encouraged A.V. Jennings to bring 150 carpenters from Germany in order to fulfil their large housing contract in

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<sup>21</sup> As early as 1904, before the Canberra site was chosen, the Inspector-General of Works, Mr P.T. Owen also rejected the erection of temporary buildings on the future capital site. Wigmore, op. cit., p. 45 & p. 50. The 'permanency' of the temporary was also a feature of Canberra's initial period of growth between 1925-1930 under the FCC. See F. Wylie, 'The Community Spirit—"intangible but all important": Social Service Idealism in Canberra 1925-1929', *Canberra Historical Journal*, New Series, No. 36, September 1995; A. Gugler, *The Builders of Canberra 1909-1929: Part One - Temporary Camps and Settlements*, Canberra, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> For a map of such hostels and camps, see Fischer op. cit., p. 52. ANZ's first Kingston branch was also a prefabricated building, erected in December 1954. It took two weeks to erect. See *CT*, December 16, 1954.

<sup>23</sup> This was not a new problem. A similar process of segregation occurred during Canberra's initial period of growth in the late 1920s. See Wigmore, op. cit., p. 124. See also Sparke, op. cit., pp. 25-6.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Hungerford's novel *Riverslake*, (Melbourne, 1953) describes the conditions, the atmosphere and the conflicts within such camps in the late-1940s. 'Riverslake' was a composite of Riverside and Eastlake Hostels. One of his short stories, 'The National Game', was set in a camp called Eastside. See T. Hungerford, *Short Fiction*, Fremantle, 1989.

Canberra. On arrival, these workers were also housed in hostels. One German carpenter recalled that on arrival at the 'primitive group of fibro-clad barracks' on Capital Hill 'everyone was disappointed, we had expected better accommodation'.<sup>25</sup> Initially, the Ministry and local contractors targeted single men, rather than families, in an attempt to provide labour for the city while avoiding additional cost on facilities.<sup>26</sup>

However, after a decade of experience, numerous witnesses before the 1955 Senate Inquiry claimed that this method of recruiting labour and developing Canberra had serious drawbacks. Aesthetically, Canberra was beginning to resemble one large building site. In an industrial broadcast on June 20, 1955, Mr H.E. Curran, a carpenter from the Trades and Labour Council (TLC), objected to the 'acres and acres' of temporary housing being erected in the city and stated that 'this type of structure gives one the impression that Canberra is only being constructed as a temporary city', and he feared that the National Capital would be seen as a 'city of pre-fabrication'. These sentiments were echoed by the President of the New South Wales Master Builders' Association (MBA).<sup>27</sup>

More practically, many local witnesses argued before the 1955 Senate Inquiry that a substantial proportion of future permanent dwellings constructed should be made available to skilled building tradesmen. Most agreed with the local Master Builders Association (MBA) that 'the most satisfactory type of skilled tradesman has always been a permanent resident of Canberra'. Skilled tradesmen placed in hostels tended to view Canberra as a 'terminal', and this resulted in tradesmen eventually 'drifting' to other capital centres. The MBA also demanded more 'intermingling' of the population. They rejected schemes — such as the 'Narrabundah fibros' — where 'you have your building sector segregated in an area surrounded by a lot of gum trees and public servants in another area'.<sup>28</sup> On the basis of his

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<sup>25</sup> A. Stuetz ed., *The History of the Jennings Germans*, Canberra, 1986, p. 19. See also Gibbney, op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>26</sup> By 1954, there were about 2,500 non-British adult migrants in Canberra, coming from 24 countries, including 32 persons classified as stateless. The largest national groups are the Poles (573), Italians, Dutch and Germans. See also Gibbney, op. cit., pp. 238-40. On the masculine character of the city, see *ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Gibbney, op. cit., p. 271-2.

<sup>28</sup> Senator McCallum replied that 'I would not object to the gum trees. It is the type of housing that is wrong' (1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1262).

Canberra experience, the Melbourne-based builder Mr A.V. Jennings agreed that 'permanent resident tradesmen are desired' for Canberra to overcome its housing problem and accomplish 'Operation Administration'.

The ACT TLC was also in broad agreement with the MBA, although it was careful to appease existing hostel dwellers with the qualification that 'such allocation not be allowed to upset the balance as against those people who have been waiting for homes for some time'.<sup>29</sup> Another practical suggestion made by the TLC to attract permanent tradesmen included a 'locality' allowance of £5 a week rather than a 'living away from home allowance' in order to discourage the use of Canberra as a terminal. They also recommended that encouragement be given for tradesmen to build their own houses in the district.

Thus, by 1955, many local organisations had rejected the notion that Canberra's future growth could be based upon expanding the stock of temporary accommodation for building workers, on both aesthetic and developmental grounds.<sup>30</sup> As long as work was plentiful throughout the nation and the housing shortage continued, there were more attractive options for building workers than a Canberra winter in a group of fibro barracks.<sup>31</sup>

However, as the shortages intensified in April and May 1955, Ainslie Hostel was refitted to accommodate more building tradesmen brought over from Britain with their families. The difficulty the Commonwealth had encountered balancing its various responsibilities manifested itself immediately. The transfer of family groups into the underhoused and underserviced city was accompanied by protests from the ACT TLC and

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<sup>29</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1386.

<sup>30</sup> By June 1955, the TLC noted that advertisements were beginning to appear for building labour with the inducement of a 'house provided'. However, during the 1955 Senate Inquiry, the TLC also described the case of one building contractor, the McConnell Company, which lodged 12 or 13 tradesmen in a house in O'Connor (1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1390).

<sup>31</sup> Before the 1955 Senate Inquiry, the TLC stated its belief that it was 'unreal to expect that either builders or tradesmen could be coaxed to leave a place where there is already some assured work to come to Canberra and face an intermittent allocation of work with consequent intermittent employment' (1955 Senate inquiry Minutes, p. 1384).

from Parent and Teacher Associations, who argued that it accentuated the overcrowding at Ainslie Primary School.<sup>32</sup>

In April 1955, the front page of *The Canberra Times* warned that hostel residents were complaining of overcrowding: 'Canberra has never been so overcrowded, with hotels, hostels and guest houses filled to capacity — and over'.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that hostels were subsidised, prolonged exposure to these conditions inevitably led to personal frustration. Lack of privacy, petty house rules and impermanence can usually only be tolerated when the sufferer perceives that a realistic and desirable end is in sight. However, population growth, combined with the Government's priority housing list, appeared to consign some residents — especially young single men and women — to an endless purgatory of hostels.<sup>34</sup> Ill-defined 'essential workers' who were transferred, or were attracted, to Canberra often received priority over the long-suffering hostel dwellers. The general sense of anticipation which began to grip Canberra as the long-awaited Administration Building began to take shape was tempered by the recognition that this meant more names on the Government housing waiting list. One woman, a long-term 'guest' of Lawley House<sup>35</sup> had warned *The Canberra Times* in October 1954 that:

Climate apart, I can see only one factor which might make the reception of a couple of thousand or so newcomers somewhat chilly; I refer of course to the accommodation problem...Perhaps I am doing the Minister and his Department an injustice when I express an awful presentiment that these (new 8-storey) flats (at Braddon) are largely intended for the new recruits from Melbourne rather than for the need of a sector of Canberra's present population which has heretofore been subject to gross lack of consideration.

The Commonwealth somehow had to crash through this accommodation barrier. Canberra was desperately short of houses and non-residential

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<sup>32</sup> *CT*, May 5, 1955, May 14, 1955.

<sup>33</sup> *CT*, April 27, 1955.

<sup>34</sup> As Gibbney notes: 'With private board and lodging becoming rare, most single people were condemned to, what seemed to many to be, a life sentence in one or another of a number of government barracks, euphemistically called hostels'. *Op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>35</sup> Lawley House on Brisbane Avenue (like Havelock House on Northbourne Avenue) was a more up-market guest-house built in the late 1940s. During the late 1970s it received a new lease of life as Pine Lodge before becoming a Police Training Academy.

buildings, yet looked for some sign of more public service transfers to Canberra as evidence of the Government's commitment to the National Capital.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, more houses and services were needed for the people who could construct the necessary dwellings, offices and community facilities.

These dilemmas over priorities were accentuated by two further problems which had become acute by 1955: the first concerned the problem of attracting sufficient workers, while the second involved the Territory's budgetary allocation. In reality, both problems were interconnected. During 1953 and 1954, as the population continued to expand, the Territory had lost 900 tradesmen. The original intention of the Director of Works to construct 1,000 homes in Canberra during 1954-1955 had been reduced to a mere 300 due to the lack of building tradesmen. Jim Fraser MP (ACT) informed the Parliament in early September 1954 that it was estimated that the success of 'Operation Administration' was dependent on attracting at least 3,300 skilled building tradesmen to the Territory. On the eve of the 1955 Senate Inquiry, there were 6,000 houses in the ACT and the proposed transfers would require an extra 4,000 over the next couple of years.

The local TLC pointed out that the low wages in the district were a disincentive to attracting building labour. By September 1954, Canberra tradesmen were receiving between £15 15/- and £15 18/- per week, while wages for interstate tradesmen ranged from £20 to £28. The TLC claimed that this was causing a 'seepage' from the local building industry and from Canberra as a whole.<sup>37</sup> This problem was also raised by Mr W.I. Byrne, a member of the Canberra Advisory Council<sup>38</sup> and a delegate of the TLC. He criticised the Government for failing to 'face the fact that Canberra is a city of high prices and low wages'. If the Government was serious about developing Canberra then it was a 'palpable absurdity' to fix the basic local

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<sup>36</sup> This anticipation was reflected in *The Canberra Times* editorial of September 23, 1954: 'During the brief and hitherto undistinguished life of the present Parliament, a somewhat comforting note has been struck by the increased interest that members of parliament have been taking in Canberra.'

<sup>37</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, pp. 1385-6.

<sup>38</sup> The membership of the Canberra Advisory Council—originally established after the demise of the FCC—was at this stage partially elected and partially nominated by the Department of the Interior.

wage lower than Sydney.<sup>39</sup> However, while these grievances were legitimate and needed to be addressed, they failed to attack the problem that even if more workers were attracted by higher wages, they still had to be accommodated. Canberra could not pull itself up by its bootstraps. This combination of population expansion, labour shortages and material scarcity placed the Commonwealth on the horns of a dilemma.

However, comparative wage levels were only part of the reason for the alarming decline in the number of tradesmen in the Territory. This withdrawal of labour was also a result of the Government's methods of financing Canberra's development. Each year a set figure was allocated from the budget for this purpose, which meant that the city was at the mercy of economic circumstances, governmental changes and other political priorities. This budgetary system added an element of unpredictability to long-term planning. By 1955, the harmful repercussions of the sharp budget cuts of 1952-1953 had left their mark upon the city's construction programme. Numerous witnesses before the 1955 Senate Standing Committee active in the local building industry highlighted the adverse consequences of existing financial arrangements and there was widespread support within the building community for changes to the financial and organisational administration of the National Capital. Witness after witness recalled how the budget cuts of 1952-1953 had led to a dispersal of the local building workforce. Mr A.V. Jennings described how he had built up his local workforce to 420 men. However, after the budget cuts, 'the men began to move out of the Territory',<sup>40</sup> and the firm was left with less than 100 workers. Another contractor also stated that the principal reason why 'the housing situation is in its parlous state' was the serious implications of the 'considerable reduction in the [1952-1953] vote'. Up until then, the Department of the Interior had built up its building workforce to well over 2,000 employees. However, in the wake of the budget 'the workforce has drifted away, and the contractors have drifted away too'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *CT*, November 8, 1954. J. Fraser MP (ACT), responded in Parliament to allegations from a Tasmanian Member of local waste and high subsidies by pointing out that: 'The citizens of Canberra make their contributions (to the nation) from a basic wage which is considerably lower than in the adjoining state of NSW, although prices here are generally much higher' (*CT*, September 18, 1954).

<sup>40</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, pp. 1501-5.

<sup>41</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1344.

These statements were supported by the Deputy Director General of the Department of Works and the Public Service Board. Mr W.E. Dunk, Chairman of the Public Service Board, argued that the construction programme for Canberra required 'a clear authority for a high level of expenditure on a programme based over a period of years, rather than have to rely on the fluctuations and uncertainties of annual budgets'.<sup>42</sup> Mr F.J. Watters, from the MBA, also criticised the 'spasmodic' nature of the works programme, and claimed that this remained a major disincentive for large contractors establishing permanent operations in Canberra.<sup>43</sup> All local witnesses, regardless of political persuasion, spoke of five-year, ten-year and even fifteen-year plans as the most effective means of ensuring continuity and stability of work. These were the only conditions under which contractors and building workers would be attracted to Canberra on a long-term or permanent basis. The continuation of the system of annual appropriations from the budget would perpetuate the 'boom and bust' environment which the Territory had experienced during the previous five years.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, many witnesses advocated a return to some form of 'unified control' for the construction of the city, along the lines of the Federal Capital Commission (FCC) which coordinated Canberra's halcyon era of growth during the mid-to-late 1920s. This administrative reform — or regeneration — was also supported by evidence from Sir John Butters, former Chief Commissioner of the FCC, who also emphatically rejected the erection of temporary dwellings. The success of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority added further weight to the argument for administrative reform. However, the SMHA would remain a competitor for labour, material and capital resources, and held higher priority than the development of the National Capital.

By the time the 1955 Senate Inquiry sat, Canberra's residents, builders and workers were able to draw upon their practical store of knowledge to

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<sup>42</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 5, between pp. 514-5.

<sup>43</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1255.

<sup>44</sup> In August 1954, Mr J. Fraser MP called for an all-party Parliamentary Committee of both Houses to oversee the development of the Capital Territory. Too often under the present system of ACT Administration, planning for the future gave way to 'expediency for today'. He advocated a return to the system of planning five years ahead and budgeting for that period.

highlight problems associated with Canberra's growth. In addition, it did not require outside experts to enlighten local residents about problems associated with temporary dwellings: for many, this was part of their daily experience.

### *Innovations in Permanent Housing*

The relationship between temporary and permanent housing was only one key controversy surrounding Canberra's early post-war growth. Another debate centred on the forms of permanent housing. This section examines a number of guises this debate assumed.

Immediately after the war, the Commonwealth's housing programme for Canberra resumed on the assumption that most permanent post-war government houses would be built using traditional methods and materials. Thus, by August 1946, 178 of the 181 houses under construction were clad with brick. The remaining three were timber-clad. However, labour and material shortages soon forced the Government to search for alternatives.

As part of its 'plan to break through the housing hold-up', the Government announced in June 1946 its intention to erect 300 prefabricated homes for employees of the Canberra brickworks. This was followed in July by an announcement that a site had been surveyed in Narrabundah and that tenders had been called for the erection of a group of prefabricated houses. (This was the sight of the infamous 'Narrabundah fibros' mentioned earlier). In mid-1946 a number of articles also appeared in the local press concerning the erection of steel houses in Victoria. When a member of the Canberra Advisory Council suggested that 'steel homes be erected in Canberra to ease the housing shortage' he was informed by the Ministry for the Interior that no 'application has been made by any private individual to build steel framed houses'.<sup>45</sup> However, at least one Beaufort steel house was erected in the Territory.<sup>45</sup> In August 1946, the Minister for the Interior, Mr H.V. Johnson, before the Canberra Advisory Council, announced that tenders would be called for 100 concrete homes to be constructed using 'Victorian Housing Commission methods'. The Minister stressed the importance of the time saved in erection.<sup>46</sup> Over the next ten years concrete homes became a familiar part of the residential landscapes of

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<sup>45</sup> See P. Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the Forties and Fifties*, Melbourne, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> *CT*, August 6, 1946.

suburbs such as Narrabundah, Yarralumla, Deakin and O'Connor. Other 'innovative' solutions included the erection of over 200 houses in O'Connor using materials transported from the Tocumwal air base in NSW.

During this period, the search for innovative methods and materials was stimulated by recurrent problems with the quantity and quality of local bricks, and the difficulty of procuring bricks at a reasonable cost from other centres such as Goulburn, Bowral and Parkes. In March 1955, the Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior informed the Advisory Council that the current backlog in bricks was approximately half-a-million units. During 1954 — a year when the number of brick dwellings built actually increased — 24 per cent of houses were monocrete, 22 per cent were imported pre-fabricated Riley-Newsum houses, 21 per cent brick veneer, 20 per cent brick, and 13 per cent concrete. In addition, 119 flats were constructed. The brick crisis, as well as the shortages of labour, encouraged A.V. Jennings to sub-contract a Melbourne firm which 'masonry veneered' exterior walls at their McGregor St, 'New' Deakin, site. It was claimed that this method rivalled brick in permanency and cost, as well as possessing the additional advantage of relieving the shortage of carpenters and bricklayers.<sup>47</sup>

The shortage of bricks also discouraged the erection of houses other than single dwellings on single blocks of land. Few semi-detached houses were constructed during the first post-war decade for this reason. In October 1954, the Ministry of Works announced that there had never been a change of policy on semi-detached houses, and that their lag in production had been 'brought about by the necessity to conserve bricks'.<sup>48</sup>

Controversy over brick supply was rarely absent from the pages of *The Canberra Times*. Topics ranged from cases of alleged fraud and theft of bricks by employees; attempts to purchase bricks outside the ACT by the Minister for the Interior; claims that the brick famine was forcing bricklayers and other tradesmen to leave the trade or the town, and complaints by members of the Canberra Advisory Council that the quality of bricks produced by the 'dry press method' at the government-owned brickworks at Yarralumla was hampering the building trades. In

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<sup>47</sup> CT, May 21, 1955, p1 & p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Semidetached houses were not for resale. A contract for the erection by June 24, 1955 of ten semi-detached houses in O'Connor was let to Mr F.A. Somes of Griffith for £36,489. These were the first group of semis 'for some time' in Canberra.

September 1954, *The Canberra Times* attacked 'the notorious monopoly of the brickworks which has been selling bricks to the building trade of consistency little better than gingerbread'.

Despite the problems the Government experienced procuring bricks, and despite the availability of alternative forms of cladding, the Ministry of Works continued to call for more tenders for brick homes than any other form. It had calculated that, in 1953, there was a difference of only £2 per square between the erection of a brick home and a timber home.<sup>49</sup> Some witnesses before the 1955 Senate Inquiry suggested that while innovative materials might be cheaper, extra labour was often involved and tradesmen were 'not accustomed to that type of construction', prolonging erection time.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the TLC and the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) regularly expressed their concern that some firms attracted to the Territory to engage in innovative projects were using illegal forms of piecework. Industrial disputes arose in 1951 at an A.V. Jennings site and in 1955 at H.S. Levinsohn's site in Narrabundah. The TLC maintained that day labour remained the most efficient and least expensive organisation of construction.<sup>51</sup> Other witnesses argued that brick homes were preferable in Canberra's climate.

Numerous 'non-brick' dwellings were also tainted with the brush of expediency and this led to a perception among many residents and commentators that non-brick dwellings and innovations were aesthetically undesirable in the National Capital. The Narrabundah fibros, the 'Tocumwal' houses in O'Connor and the Monocrete spread around the post-war suburbs were often used as examples. These claims prompted the appearance of the Australian Timber Development Association before the Senate Inquiry, in an effort to promote the virtues of timber, or weatherboard, homes. According to its Director, Mr C. Davis, the advantages of timber houses included their cost, reduced construction time, availability of materials, savings on labour and their aesthetic value. Another virtue was that timber homes would provide a much clearer and consistent television reception due to the natural insulating qualities of

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<sup>49</sup> The worsening brick crisis, and the importation of bricks from outside the Territory increased this margin to £7 by 1954.

<sup>50</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1262.

<sup>51</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, pp. 1368-1405.

timber. In addition, the occupant of a timber home would have a greater feeling of security in the event of an atomic strike upon the city. Mr Davis explained: 'It must be the fervent prayer of all of us that no atom bomb should fall on Canberra — indeed nor on any part of Australian soil — but it is a possibility that we must consider. Scientists have revealed, as many of you have undoubtedly read, that the resident of a timber structure has five times greater chance of survival than the inmate of a brick building.'<sup>52</sup> Mr Davis did not explain to the Inquiry how slim that chance of survival might be.

Thus, the shortages in building materials, the poor quality of many traditional materials and the difficulties experienced recruiting building labour all encouraged the search for new, more efficient, more economical methods of producing permanent housing. It also prompted lively discussions on the most appropriate materials and forms of housing in the local environment. However, as the national housing crisis abated and brick supplies improved, the Department of Works — and later the NCDC — increased the production of brick veneer dwellings.

### *Other Housing Issues*

#### (a) land-use

The after-effects of the 1952-1953 budget cuts reverberated beyond the issue of labour supply and attracting contractors. The cuts also prompted a range of housing and land use controversies. These debates were early manifestations of Canberra's current 'consolidation' controversies. One local contractor argued that:

The effect of the 1952/53 budget reductions was that a considerable amount of money that usually would have been spent on engineering services in extending water supply services to the outskirts and distant suburbs, was reserved for the building of homes ...the Departments were faced with the problem of having to find additional homes within the areas already serviced with water and other services. Since then, there has been continual

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1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1328. Throughout the hearings, the Chairman of the Senate Inquiry, Senator J.A. McCallum revealed his own personal bias towards stone houses. At one stage, he asked a local contractor about his thoughts on Australia importing a 'couple of thousand stone masons' (1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1364). Similar questions were directed at the TLC and the MBA.

encroachment on lands which the people of Canberra have regarded as set aside for parks and gardens.<sup>53</sup>

Controversies over land use and allotment size received prominent coverage in the local press during the mid-1950s. One battle involved the ‘alienation’ of the Solander Place parkland in Yarralumla and its rezoning for housing developments.<sup>54</sup> Another ‘consolidation’ effort which aroused local controversy involved an innovative housing project at Narrabundah Heights, between Captain Cook and Walker Crescents, which was viewed by many critics as ‘substandard for the National Capital’. Complaints included the small frontages of the houses, their proximity to each other, thoughtless siting, unsuitable building materials and the monotony of their design. This project was also referred to, and visited by, the 1955 Senate Inquiry.<sup>55</sup>

During 1954, the proposal to build Canberra’s first multi-storey block of flats was also the subject of public attention. While some observers questioned the aesthetics of an eight storey block of flats within a ‘garden city’, more utilitarian residents — anxious to see more accommodation — merely criticised the siting of the flats on the Northside at Braddon, when most of the government-employed tenants would be working on the Southside. In Parliament during September 1954, Jim Fraser MP claimed that the ‘Flats Plan’ would further strain the overburdened local bus service. However, one Ainslie resident believed: ‘Better from Civic than from “South Yass”, as the Savannah fringe of O’Connor is coming to be known’.<sup>56</sup>

Canberra’s future centrepiece, the planned lake, did not escape the clutch of financial constraints. In 1953, the Department of the Interior pushed through planning amendments which would have replaced West Basin with a ‘ribbon’ of water. The Department attempted to soothe local concerns by stating before the Canberra Advisory Council that: ‘Implementation of the ribbon of water does not mean the abandonment of the Lakes Scheme. It is

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<sup>53</sup> 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1348.

<sup>54</sup> Mr Fraser, MP described this action as ‘official vandalism sanctioned by the Minister charged with the administration of the National Capital’ (*CT*, September 1954). See also Wigmore, p. 154. The Solander Place controversy was discussed during the 1955 Senate Inquiry. See evidence of K.J. Mulherin, President of the ACT Progress and Welfare Council, in the 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, p. 1428.

<sup>55</sup> See the Final Report of the 1955 Senate Inquiry; see also *CT*, June 7 and June 8.

<sup>56</sup> *CT*, July 29, 1954.

the first step in what could eventually be the fulfilment of the scheme.<sup>57</sup> Canberra, which some feared gave the impression of a temporary city, would now receive a 'temporary' stretch of water in place of the 'permanent' lake. Although financial and engineering arguments were advanced in support of this temporary expediency, more cynical commentators pointed out that many influential public servants belonged to the Royal Canberra Golf Club, which would have been submerged under fifteen feet of water once the original lakes scheme was complete. The important question surrounding these issues concerned the ease with which the gazetted plan for Canberra could be altered with minimal public discussion and consultation.

#### (b) local participation

These debates surrounding local participation, consultation and democracy tended to spill over into housing controversies. For example, the concerns of residents were raised by the decision taken by the Director of Works in the mid-1950s to redesign new government houses without fuel stoves. The Department claimed that its decision had been motivated by the fact that post-war housing costs had risen considerably — especially during the period around 1950 — and, as a consequence, rentals of new houses were markedly higher than rentals of older and more substantial pre-war homes. In September 1954, the 'almost powerless'<sup>58</sup> Canberra Advisory Council voted six to two that 'fuel stoves were necessary in Canberra's winter', and that, where possible, these essential items should be built into future government houses.

This fuel stove issue — as well as the Solander Place and the 'ribbon of water' controversies — revived the question of who spoke in the interests of Canberra residents.<sup>59</sup> There was discontent over the fact that the

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<sup>57</sup> Sparke, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Atkins, *op. cit.*, p. 52. However, as Wigmore points out, "As ... the council's meetings were reported in the press and on the air, it was in a position to mould and influence public opinion, and to stimulate interest in local affairs'. *Op. cit.*, p. 158. During the halcyon era of growth in the late 1960s, one elected member of the Advisory Council remarked that if 'all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, then the elected Members of the Australian Capital Territory Advisory Council are the only politicians in Australia who can honestly approach their electorate pure of heart'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>59</sup> This was a major issue in disputes between local residents, workers, the Canberra Social Service movement and the FCC during the late 1920s. See Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Department of Works could declare unilaterally that fuel stoves were unnecessary or too expensive. The Advisory Council, in recommending the return of the stoves, claimed to have canvassed the views of Canberra housewives, and claimed to be representing their needs. However, the ACT Progress and Welfare Council, representing the remaining active suburban Progress and Welfare Associations,<sup>60</sup> complained that they had not been consulted by the Advisory Council on this and other issues such as the siting of suburban hotels.

Another local organisation, the National Council of Women (ACT) had taken an active stance on housing issues since the early 1950s, and had submitted a report on the inadequacies of government-built housing to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior in 1951. The NCW (ACT) firmly believed that 'opportunities should be presented to Canberra's residents to participate in the future planning of their city'. Freda Stephenson has documented how the NCW (ACT) earned the right 'to be listened to and to be part of the decision-making process in Canberra' through its ability to initiate programmes for change rather than mere demands for change. Apart from its concern with housing the aged in Canberra, the Council also conducted the first wide-ranging statistical survey into the opinions of local residents on their Government houses. Before the 1955 Senate Inquiry, the Council's representatives, Madge Horgan and Sheila Wigmore, focused on the inadequate channels of communication between the Government and Canberran residents over planning issues. Stephenson argues that 'Council was in the forefront of the movement to have citizens consulted about decisions that concerned them ...',<sup>61</sup>

In November 1954, the Advisory Council agreed to provide six copies of its minutes to the Progress and Welfare Council after it had been pointed out by the Turner branch that the minutes of Advisory Council meetings

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<sup>60</sup> The first Welfare and Progress Association was founded in Reid in 1930. At the height of the movement there were 11 suburban associations. (More on the rise and decline of the associations). However, by the time of the 1955 Senate Inquiry, this number had declined to 4 (Yarralumla, Duntroon, Turner and O'Connor). In April 1955, the President of the O'Connor Association, Mrs A.R. Browning informed *The Canberra Times* that the branch was considering disbanding, due to lack of community interest. See also Gibbney, op. cit., pp. 246-8.

<sup>61</sup> F. Stephenson, *Capital Women: A History of the Work of the National Council of Women (ACT) in Canberra 1939-1979*, Canberra, 1992. The statistical survey on housing was completed after the 1955 Senate Inquiry.

could be regarded as the 'equivalent of Hansard' for Canberra residents. The President of the Advisory Council, Mr Bailey, voiced his concern that in effect this meant the Advisory Council would be forced to refer all important matters to the Progress Associations. Advisory Council member, Mr A.T. Shakespeare further added that it was unreasonable to hold up advice to the Minister by contacting bodies with no constitutional status. However, another member, Mr W.I. Byrne, reminded his colleagues of the reality that the Minister combining the functions of the Departments of the Interior and Works 'is to all intents a one-man dictatorship of Canberra'. 'There must be some way', he suggested, 'to give the people a voice. The people of Canberra are political eunuchs.'<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, until 1949, local residents were not formally represented in the Commonwealth parliament, and relied on sympathetic parliamentarians, such as Allan Fraser MP (Eden Monaro), to voice their concerns. Although the seat of ACT came into existence in 1949, restrictions remained on the local members' voting rights until the 1960s.<sup>63</sup>

The establishment of the NCDC in late 1957 failed to overcome the problem of local participation. While the organisation might have provided the administrative and planning platform for growth, it was often labelled a 'benevolent dictatorship'. However, many local residents during the 1950s appeared to accept this lack of rights as a necessary trade-off for growth. For example, Mr J.L. Mulrooney, before the 1955 Senate Inquiry, believed that the most effective way to administer the affairs of Canberra was through 'a dictator with the milk of human kindness'.<sup>64</sup> Canberra's growth and local democracy would remain in a state of tension until the late 1980s. It was only after the Commonwealth Government felt that the NCDC had completed its mission that Canberra residents acquired democratic control over their local affairs.

### (c) private housebuilding

As noted earlier, Canberrans' reliance on the Commonwealth Government for housing was accentuated by the lack of interest

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<sup>62</sup> *CT*, August 31, 1954.

<sup>63</sup> During the period under discussion, the ACT was served by Dr Nott 1949-51 and Jim Fraser, who held the seat until his death in 1970. On the history of the seat, see Wigmore, pp. 156-8.

<sup>64</sup> *CT*, May 18, 1955 Senate Inquiry Minutes, May 17.

demonstrated by private builders in Canberra. Thus, the issue of 'political sovereignty' was compounded by the inability to exercise 'consumer sovereignty'. However, between 1945 and 1955 private housebuilding began to increase in Canberra, although from very low levels. From an average of 12 per cent of total completions during the early-1950s, the number of non-government housing completions rose to almost one-quarter in 1954-1955. The growing interest in private building was associated with the increase in the number of residential blocks released by the Government, a growing sense that the Government was taking a greater interest in Canberra, and the announcement by the Commonwealth in 1955 of changes in the terms for home building loans in the ACT. Blocks released in the Southside (apart from Narrabundah) tended to be the most popular and commanded the highest premiums, while blocks in the newer Northern suburbs such as O'Connor attracted less interest, and were more difficult to clear.<sup>65</sup>

By 1955, more advertisements began appearing in the local newspaper under 'Houses for Sale', and 'Vacant Possession'. For example, in February 1955, Civil and Civic Contractors were advertising architect-designed brick veneer cottages at Boolimba Crescent, Narrabundah.<sup>66</sup> In addition, during 1955, the Real Estate Agent R.A. McKillop & Co. began advertising, in the *Saturday Canberra Times*, a range of new brick residences in Turner, Ainslie and O'Connor for prices ranging from £4,000 to £7,700. However, rarely were there more than ten homes advertised at any one time.<sup>67</sup>

This upward trend in private building prompted the Canberra Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects to investigate the possibility of opening an ACT agency of the Small Homes Service. However, these plans were dropped in April 1955 when a study of released residential blocks

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<sup>65</sup> During the mid-1950s, these blocks covered both timber and brick areas. Brick areas attracted higher premiums, while successful bids in timber areas tended to be only marginally above the reserve price. *CT*, May 12, May 26, 1955.

<sup>66</sup> During 1954, Civil and Civic received contracts to built one-third of the new government housing stock, while Jennings received contracts to build one-fifth of the stock. At this stage, the only private work conducted by Jennings was the non-residential building, Industry House. A.V. Jennings claimed before the 1955 Senate Inquiry (pp. 1501-5) that 55% of homes handed over to the Department in 1953 and 54% in 1954 were erected by Jennings.

<sup>67</sup> Between October 1950 and the end of 1954, 513 government houses were sold to tenants. The aggregate sale of these houses was £1, 285, 530.

revealed that only a small proportion of private lessees did not already use the full services of an architect.

The establishment of the NCDC did not 'crowd out' private investment in Canberra. As predicted by local organisations such as the TLC and the MBA, the commitment by the Commonwealth government to Canberra's growth encouraged private housebuilding, and, in turn, this enabled the NCDC to focus its attention on office building, community facilities and services, as well as the more ornamental features of the city, such as the lake. Within five years of the establishment of the NCDC, private housebuilding had overtaken the Government in annual completions.<sup>68</sup>

## Government Housing Allocation and Rentals

### *Housing Allocation*

In an environment of housing scarcity and housing hardship, and in a situation where the Department of the Interior was in effect a monopoly landlord, it was not surprising that the system of housing allocation aroused fierce controversy among local residents between 1945 and 1955. In an August 1954 letter to *The Canberra Times*, Ronald Mendelsohn noted that: 'Complaints about the allocation of houses are a hardy perennial in your columns'.

Throughout Australia at this time, State Housing Commissions struggled to meet public demand and faced concerns over accountability.<sup>69</sup> In Canberra, between 1946 and 1954, the government housing waiting list lengthened from 1,000 to over 2,600 applicants. An early example of this concern over the allocation of housing and the general housing shortages occurred during mid-to-late 1946 after a number of 'squatting' incidents, nationally and locally. Throughout mid-1946 newspapers had been reporting that while many demobilised ex-servicemen were experiencing problems finding shelter, there were over 5,000 holiday homes lying vacant around Sydney alone. In May, it was reported that the occupation of vacant houses by ex-servicemen was to be tested in the High Court. In July a

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<sup>68</sup> See A. Beer, 'People's Houses', in *Canberra: A People's Capital?*, ACT Division of the Australian Institute of Urban Affairs ed., Canberra, November 1988.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see S. Marsden, *Business, Charity and Sentiment: The South Australian Housing Trust 1936-1986*, Adelaide, 1986.

number of homeless families in Sydney occupied the Housing Commission Properties Branch, and five days later a group of squatters was removed from a new Housing Commission home in Granville which was ready to be delivered over to the successful applicant from a recent Housing Commission ballot.<sup>70</sup> Soon after this incident, in August, the NSW State President of the Returned Servicemen's League (RSL) warned that 'the lack of housing facilities was the greatest social problem facing discharged servicemen' and was the cause of 'considerable unrest'.<sup>71</sup>

On July 19, The *Canberra Times* was able to report that 'Canberra has its first squatter for some time' — a 45 year old serviceman who had taken possession of a government weatherboard on Lister Crescent, Ainslie. On September 10, the paper reported that Mr Don O'Reilly, employed by Canberra Steam Laundry and a resident of Canberra since 1925, along with his wife and four month old baby, had been evicted from the same house at 4:46 pm the previous day. After the police had asked the family to vacate the premises, Mr O'Reilly, with the help of a carrier, a friend and the assistance of the sheriff, loaded the family furniture onto a lorry. The *Canberra Times* also reported that the O'Reilly's served afternoon tea to the eviction party. Mr O'Reilly managed to borrow a tent and a neighbour allowed him to pitch it in her backyard. Two days later, it was reported that another squatter, Mr Horace Worster, who had four young children, was also threatened with eviction from an Ainslie government-owned house.<sup>72</sup>

Local organisations and other commentators used these incidents to question the allotment procedures of the Housing Section of the Department of the Interior. A *Canberra Times* editorial, entitled 'An Ex-Serviceman's Spring', attacked the Government's record on housing and its policy of allocating government houses:

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<sup>70</sup> The squatters had been staying in emergency accommodation at Herne Bay on the East Hills railway line. After a few days of resisting a return to their emergency accommodation and camping outside the Granville house they finally returned to Herne Bay.

<sup>71</sup> *CT*, August 15, 1946.

<sup>72</sup> Both the Canberra Branch of the Australian Legion of Ex-Servicemen and Women and the RSL condemned Mr O'Reilly's actions and squatting more generally. Mr H.K. Joyce, President of the RSL, stated that 'The whole position of housing in the ACT is tragic, but the League will not and cannot countenance illegal acts', and pointed out that there were ex-servicemen in a similar or worse plight (*CT*, September 10, 1946).

The Government has fallen farther and farther in arrears in its housing programme in the ACT, and it is so deeply in arrears that it is unable any longer to administer according to the precepts of democratic government...Because it is unable to discharge anything like reasonable responsibilities, the Government has decided that it shall grant tenancies to public servants.<sup>73</sup>

This charge of discrimination continued to be levelled against the Ministry for the Interior over the next decade.

Not only did the length of the waiting list for government-owned houses increase during the decade after the war, the average waiting time for applicants also steadily rose to over two years by 1955. For single persons, the list was almost meaningless, due to the system of priorities. The severe shortages of government-owned housing, the long waiting lists and the hardships which many residents were enduring, combined to create an atmosphere of suspicion towards the Housing Section of the Ministry of the Interior, and throughout the first post-war decade there were persistent allegations of favouritism and misallocation of the scarce housing stock.

As early as May 1946, the Advisory Council demanded access to the Ministry for the Interior's lists of people who had been allotted government-owned cottages, their location, and the occupation of the lessees. Mr A. Gardiner of the Council stated that he knew of a bank employee who received a house in three days and had boasted that the bank manager obtained it for him.<sup>74</sup> Such rumours and stories abounded in post-war Canberra. As the squatter story illustrates, there were frequent allegations that only public servants could obtain government homes.

Dr L.W. Nott, the Medical Superintendent of the Canberra Hospital and an elected member of the Advisory Council, also attacked the 'chaotic state of housing' in Canberra, calling it 'a disgraceful state of affairs'. He added that the hospital, the police and the clergy were often called upon to assist with emergency accommodation for people in need. He also promised that at the next meeting of the Advisory Council he would move to make the unused Prime Minister's Lodge available for housing. Furthermore, he argued that lists should be supplied of single persons and widowers occupying whole houses in Canberra, which, if proper priorities were

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<sup>73</sup> *CT*, September 10, 1946.

<sup>74</sup> *CT*, May 9, 1946.

observed, could be sheltering family units. Dr Nott claimed he had a list of single persons occupying houses of several rooms.<sup>75</sup>

In the midst of the 1946 General Election, Dr Nott,<sup>76</sup> along with Mr A.T. Shakespeare, called for ‘a complete and immediate review of the discriminatory housing policy of the Commonwealth Government in Canberra in view of the complete failure of the Government to carry out its declared plans to relieve the housing shortages’. The TLC along with the third elected member of the Advisory Council, Mr Gardiner, defended the Government on the ground that it was ‘doing its best but has been hampered by lack of labour and materials’.<sup>77</sup> However, they also remained critical of the housing allocation process. Local Labor Party identities were not afraid to attack the Chifley Government over this issue. In June 1946, Mr Allan Fraser, MP (Eden Monaro) claimed that the allotment policy was discriminatory and was creating an ‘underprivileged class’ in the National Capital: ‘If you are not a Commonwealth employee, you cannot obtain at present any government assistance in renting a house in Canberra’.<sup>78</sup>

As the housing crisis worsened, as waiting lists lengthened, and as the secretive nature of the system of allotment remained in place, suspicion of unfair allocation and selection procedures was continuously refuelled by rumours, letters to the editor, questions from the TLC, the Advisory

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<sup>75</sup> CT, September 11, 1946. *The Canberra Times* ‘Readers Voice’ column regularly contained letters complaining about ‘these people who occupy houses too large for them’, and about ‘single girls to whom houses are let. Signed “Waiting”’ (CT, June 21, 1946).

<sup>76</sup> Dr Nott later became the first Member of Parliament for the ACT, and held the seat as an independent until 1951.

<sup>77</sup> The TLC promised to devise a new practicable method for allocation, which ‘will remove the suspicions with regard to the unfair allocation of houses which at present are so very prevalent in Canberra.’ Mr Ulrich Ellis from Turner expressed a widespread concern over the process of allocation: ‘No-one knows on what basis housing priorities are allotted; or why it is possible for persons low on the priority list to be given homes above the heads of those who have been waiting long periods. Obviously, there must be ‘special’ cases in any system of priorities .... But ‘special cases’ should be based on avowed principles, known to all citizens, and not determined in secret by unknown persons who cannot be called upon to justify their actions .... Canberra citizens are treated with the utmost contempt in public affairs .... Public criticism is a democratic right. But in Canberra the law of the totalitarian states prevails’ (CT September 19, 1946).

<sup>78</sup> CT, June 7, 1946. Of the 1,903 permanent government houses in Canberra in July 1946, 1,550 were occupied by government employees and 353 by non-government employees.

Council, Progress and Welfare Associations and parliamentary questions. For example, in August 1954, Jim Fraser MP (ACT) sought particulars from the Minister for the Interior relating to the allocation of a desirable, low rent government house on Arthur Circle, Forrest, which had previously been occupied by a member of the Russian Embassy, and the suggestion that a medical practitioner had received preferential treatment over others on the waiting list with greater need. The doctor was already a resident in, and practising in, the suburb.

Canberra's residential status hierarchy was further complicated by the growth of the Australian National University. Gibbney argues that 'the ease with which university people were able to evade the problems associated with the government housing list aroused the jealousy of those whose housing future was, to say the least, uncertain'. The University, in its attempt to attract staff, became a significant landlord within the city, and fears were voiced during the early 1950s that the institution was crowding out private enterprise.<sup>80</sup> Its peculiar residential status tended to accentuate the Academy's separate social status within the city.

### *Rental Reform*

The issue of government housing allocation plagued other housing authorities throughout Australia and was not unique to Canberra. However, one problem that was unique to the National Capital was the fact that, unlike most State Housing Authorities, a significant proportion of Canberra's public housing stock was built prior to the war. By the time of the 1955 Senate Inquiry, approximately half of the government-owned homes had been constructed since 1939. As rentals were based on the cost of dwellings, they were sensitive to historical shifts in building costs. This discrepancy between rents according to the age of the dwelling was apparent at the end of the war. For houses erected since 1943, rentals were 37/6 to 45/- per week, while those erected in 1922-1923 were rented for 18/-.<sup>81</sup> Houses built after the war were subject to the rising building costs

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This issue persistently cropped up at Advisory Council meetings. In November, 1954, Mr H. Barrenger from the Department of Works assured Mrs Stevenson of the Advisory Council that the time lag in housing was about two years, and that there was no differentiation between public servants and private employees on the housing list.

<sup>80</sup>

Gibbney, *op cit.*, p. 259-61.

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The TLC claimed that for a man earning £5 or £6 this was too high. (*CT*, August 8, 1946).

and inflation of the post-war era and this was reflected in higher rentals. Furthermore, the majority of these post-war dwellings were located in areas with fewer services, were smaller in size, were on smaller blocks and were often built with inferior materials. There was a general perception within the community that pre-war government-owned houses had lower rents and were of higher quality.

Thus, the order in which applicants received houses was only one of the contentious issues affecting allocation. Of equal importance during the first decade after the war was the issue of the *particular* houses which individuals received. The Arthur Circle case, cited above, would not have received such prominence but for the fact that the house was pre-war, substantial, and was subject to a relatively low rent. Such characteristics made most pre-war homes the target of applicants on the waiting list. However, there was much local resentment over the perception that they remained reserved for the upper echelons of the public service. Worse still, once occupancy was gained, it was possible to purchase these properties from the government at prices well below market value and resell for a handsome capital gain.

By the spring of 1954, the Minister for the Interior announced that the next step in the development of Canberra would be a 'review of the rent position'. As an indication of the direction of reform, the Minister stated that the current 'rent position' was that 'the older and larger homes which were mostly occupied by senior men, were subject to a lower rental than the newer smaller homes now being built'. Half-an-hour after coming into the House, having just signed the order for the rental review, the Minister was asked by the local Member, Mr Jim Fraser, whether the rentals of tenants on modest incomes in the older pre-war suburbs of Ainslie, Braddon, Reid, Turner, Kingston and Griffith would be increased.<sup>82</sup> These comments opened a lengthy debate among local residents and organisations over the equity of the Canberra rental situation. Battle lines could be drawn between 'newcomers' and 'oldcomers'.

The 'oldcomers' were supported by Mr Jim Fraser MP. First, he pointed out, many of the residents of the inner pre-war areas were early residents of Canberra and had since retired or were close to retirement. An increase

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Mr Kent Hughes also expressed surprise that Mr Fraser had got onto the question so early, hinting at leaks within his Department.

in their rentals would inflict a hardship on people whose income was limited to a pension. Second, even though the tenants of pre-war houses paid, say, 1934 rentals, the houses they occupied were almost paid for. Third, the pre-war homes did not have the same modern amenities as the newer dwellings. Fourth, many 'oldcomers' believed that their cheaper rentals should be considered a reward to those who had suffered the privations of living in the ACT as pre-war pioneers. Raising pre-war rentals would be an injustice to early residents. Responding to claims made by Senator R. Wright (Tasmania) that Canberrans want everything yet are not prepared to pay for it,<sup>83</sup> the ACT TLC Treasurer, Mr C. Stephens, pointed out that when it came to rentals Canberra residents were, comparatively speaking, 'paying through their nose' and that this local situation 'will become worse if there is a move to increase rentals of older homes'.<sup>84</sup>

'Newcomers' and their defenders, on the other hand, pointed to the anomalies of the rental allocation system and the inequalities which it brought in its wake. The first problem concerned the tendency for the Government to allocate older homes with low rentals to persons with high incomes, while the newer post-war dwellings with higher rentals were allotted to applicants on lower incomes. Echoing suspicions which had circulated over the previous decade, some pointed out that 'it seemed that the better type house, in selected areas, was reserved for incoming senior public servants'. Second, newcomers also pointed out that many dwellings of pre-war vintage were not tenanted by older residents. As these houses became vacant many younger households had managed to gain possession. Third, the current rental system led to cases where there were areas — such as Reid, Yarralumla, Turner and Narrabundah — where houses with rentals of 17/6 to 40/- faced others where the rentals are 60/- to 85/-. These discrepancies could not be justified in terms of dwelling quality or amenities. Fourth, while pre-war houses might lack some of the more modern amenities, few of the older residents were willing to exchange their pre-war home for a 'few extra cupboards and windows' and a rental hike of 10/-. Fifth, the older residences had the benefit of larger, more private blocks denied to the newcomer. Sixth, many applicants who claimed the need of a large pre-war home used this as a pretext for purchasing the

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<sup>83</sup> *CT*, September 18, 1954.

<sup>84</sup> *CT*, October 18, 1954.

house and reaped large capital gains on subsequent sale. One case of a house purchased by the tenant from the Government for £3,000 and resold for £6,000 was mentioned. Seventh, in the event of a rental increase those on low fixed incomes such as pensioners would be protected by the economic rental scheme. Finally, some newcomers pointed out that if Mr Fraser could convince the Minister that rentals of pre-war homes should be retained and high rentals of new homes reduced then it would be a stunning political victory on his part, but it would be borne by the taxpayer.

In early April 1955, the Minister for the Interior announced a series of rental adjustments which favoured the 'newcomers'. This decision, which was to take effect from July 1955, increased rents on houses built prior to 1945 on a sliding scale based principally on locality. These increases ranged from 25 per cent to 75 per cent. Houses constructed between 1945 and 1950 were also subject to lower rental increases. On the other hand, substantial reductions were made in the rentals of homes constructed since 1950.

Placing Canberra's housing situation in a comparative perspective, Sparke has argued that although 'some might wait two-and-a-half years for a government house, at least they obtained them several years before Australians on government housing lists in other cities'.<sup>85</sup> However, it should also be noted that pressure on government housing authorities remained more intense in Canberra due to the fact that both the private rental market and owner-occupation were virtually ruled out as tenure options for most local residents during the early post-war years.

### **The 1955 Senate Inquiry Recommendations**

Canberra was severely affected by the housing shortage which faced Australia in the wake of the Second World War. This paper has examined a number of guises which this crisis assumed, ranging from the production of dwellings, the shortage of building workers, the financing and distribution of housing as well as the specific forms which post-war Canberra housing assumed. Throughout the paper, attention has been devoted to the responses of the local population to their difficulties and challenges. It also argued that, given the nation's housing crisis and the Government's priorities, Canberra could not have developed at a significantly faster pace during the

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<sup>85</sup> Sparke, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

first post-war decade. However, the experience of this decade and the debates surrounding the future of Canberra reveal the ingredients necessary for the future planned growth of the National Capital. The right economic climate in itself would be insufficient to meet this objective. As Fischer has pointed out:

...a change in the economic and political climate alone was not sufficient to fulfil the reviving post-war ambitions of building a great capital. What was needed as a first step was a thorough analysis of the inadequacies of past practices of planning and development as well as a renewed agreement on the desired qualities of that great capital, and on how they were to be achieved. This task was performed by the monumental inquiry of the Senate Select Committee...<sup>86</sup>

It is appropriate to conclude with some observations on the 1955 Senate Inquiry. This paper provides some illustrations of the wide range of administrative, financial and supply problems which the Senate Committee had to consider, as well as the rich body of evidence from those involved in the construction of the city and those living within the city. However, most accounts of the period have focused attention on the testimony and evidence of 'external experts' and the intervention of 'great men'. Furthermore, they have either ignored or trivialised the contributions made by local residents. For instance, one planner claimed that of the witnesses who provided evidence at the Inquiry, most were 'representatives of domestic interests more concerned with improving their lot than building a national capital'.<sup>87</sup>

Although it is difficult to state with confidence whether witnesses before the Inquiry were representing 'domestic interests', a count of the 82 witnesses reveals that, at the most, 35 represented local organisations or were locals presenting individual evidence. In addition, many of these 'local interests' were presenting joint evidence. A clear majority were acting on behalf of either the Government, professional organisations, national business organisations etc. Furthermore, during the Inquiry, in February 1955, the Senate had expressed its disappointment that only a few local groups and individuals had come forward to provide evidence. This statement was made three days after local residents and groups had been

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<sup>86</sup> Fischer, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>87</sup> P. Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect*, Canberra, 1995, p. 74.

invited for the first time to appear before the Inquiry (over three months after it had been established!).<sup>88</sup> Given their experience of previous inquiries, local residents might well have been justifiably sceptical of another parliamentary talkfest.<sup>89</sup>

It is also important to note that the evidence of ‘local interests’ was far from monolithic, and as Harrison has pointed out: ‘Expert evidence on the virtues of the Griffin plan was divided and some professionals were frankly derisive of what they judged to be an anachronism’.<sup>90</sup> It might be more accurate to state that much of the evidence of ‘domestic interests’ and ‘experts’ was complementary. While many planners sought to preserve the integrity of the gazetted plan and its grand vision, local evidence tended to focus more on overcoming many current practical problems associated with construction and labour — fundamental issues relating to the planned movement of public servants to the town.

A close reading of the Senate Inquiry Minutes, combined with an analysis of the Final Report of September 1955, reveals that local evidence was influential in drafting the final recommendations. This was reflected in the Final Report of the Senate Committee, published in September 1955. The Report recommended that the ‘present system of divided departmental control of Canberra be replaced by a single authority’ and that ‘the authority be guaranteed, by an appropriate provision in the enabling Act, sufficient finance to permit it to carry out a long-term balancing programme’ (Recommendations 3 & 8). The experience of the previous five years had underlined that it was the responsibility of the Commonwealth to avoid creating ‘boom and bust’ conditions affecting Canberra’s construction industry. These recommendations were also directed at encouraging ‘continuity’ of work as an incentive for attracting contractors and workers. It was also the main precondition for realising Recommendation 23: ‘That large-scale contractors be encouraged in order to cope with the lag in the construction of buildings and essential services’. This proposal had been recommended by A.V. Jennings. However, by June 1955 the Department of Works had begun inviting proposals from large Australian and overseas contractors that could handle 1,000 units, at the

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<sup>88</sup> *CT*, February 23, 1955.

<sup>89</sup> See *CT*, ‘Letters to the Editor’, February 28, 1955.

<sup>90</sup> Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

rate of 250 per year, for proposed developments in Yarralumla, Narrabundah, Lyneham and Dickson. Contractors would be guaranteed at least four years work. Department officials claimed this 'really big planning' was due to the impetus of 'Operation Administration', and was designed to alleviate competition for labour with other large projects throughout Australia.<sup>91</sup>

The Senate Committee also recognised that continuity of work, and Government commitment to the National Capital, would attract more private investment and private housebuilding. It recommended that 'sufficient housing sites always be kept available in order to prevent the payment of competitively high lease premiums' (Recommendation 25). The brick issue also received attention through the recommendation that 'immediate steps be taken to encourage the production of bricks from sources near Canberra...' (Recommendation 22). However, by mid-1955 the Yarralumla brickworks was already in the process of retooling, and had built a new kiln with a chimney stack which dominated the 'skyline' of the suburb.

The proposals of the TLC and the MBA concerning the need to attract permanent building workers and tradesmen were accommodated in Recommendation 24:

That to attract and retain the labour force required for the construction of the city, married men in the essential trades be guaranteed early allocation of houses, or the opportunity of building them for themselves, and that single workmen be provided with more attractive quarters, including comfortable messing accommodation.

Recommendation 26 also called for alternative accommodation to hostels. An end to the erection of temporary buildings was also recommended (Recommendation 35). Furthermore, the 'temporary houses erected for workers at Narrabundah, Causeway and Westlake were also to be removed 'at the earliest possible opportunity consistent with the supplying of housing requirements' (Recommendation 39).

However, despite these recommendations, the number of houses constructed did not rise substantially until 976 units were handed over to the authorities in 1958-1959. In March 1956, the Government again cut

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<sup>91</sup> *CT*, June 11, 1955.

deeply into Canberra's budget, with subsequent layoffs within the public and private works sectors. At a mass rally outside Parliament House a month after the announcement, called by the TLC, a resolution was passed urging the Government to follow through the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry.<sup>92</sup>

The Senate Inquiry's recommendations relating to Canberra's administration, finance, materials supply and labour supply need to be placed within the context of Canberra's post-war experience. This experience demonstrated that the physical construction of the Canberra vision required the establishment of an authority along the lines of the future NCDC. However, it should also be borne in mind that by the time the NCDC was established, the worst years of the national housing shortage had passed, more labour could be tapped from the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, and the NCDC was not faced with the competition for scarce resources which had contributed to many of the difficulties of the earlier post-war years.

An account of these 'conditions' and 'vicissitudes' would be incomplete without appreciating the lively controversies associated with Canberra's 'growing pains', and the experiences of its residents, builders and workers.

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<sup>92</sup> See Sparke, *op. cit.*, p. 52.