

Speech to Canberra Skeptics

‘Canberra — Was It Worth It?’

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National Museum of Australia

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I’ve been told that this speech has to be solidly based on facts and evidence. This is a tall order, given the topic. But I’ll do my best.

1. Capital Cities

Let’s start with them. Two groups — unitary states and federated states. Unitary states: capital city is the chief city of the largest or most successful group in the history of the creation of the state. (NB Nation states are a recent creation. Most not older than 50 years. The ones we think of as old, like UK, are still comparatively young: England, Scotland Wales and Ireland all once independent. France was a set of duchies, Germany of baronies.). So, London is the English capital, Paris is the old Roman capital of Gaul, Berlin the Prussian capital, Moscow the Russian capital, and so on.

Federated states are different, since there has been an agreement to form the new entity by smaller once independent entities. Setting up the federation comes with the need to select a new capital. Why not an old one? It would give that former state undue power and influence. So USA — Washington (1790), Switzerland — Berne (1848), Canada — Ottawa (1855), Australia — Canberra (1911),

Brazil — Brasilia (1955). There are other federations, and the USSR was said to be one. But I'll stick with these ones.

Federated capitals cities usually are placed where they are for some good political reason, so Washington is in, though not far in, the South, Ottawa is on the border of Ontario and Quebec, Berne is on the border of French and German-speaking Switzerland, and Brasilia is in the interior and therefore, more or less equi-distant from the other centres of population, which are all on the coast.

2. The Canberra Deal

The Constitution said (s.125) that the seat of government was to be determined by Parliament, that it was to be within territory that the Cwth would acquire from NSW, but more than 100 miles (160 km) from Sydney, and that until the new capital was ready (no time was set), Parliament would sit in Melbourne. This is not unlike the other federal deals, but in Australia the real wrangle was between New South Wales and Victoria (in Canada it had been between Toronto and Montreal, and between Toronto and Kingston).

So we can see that:

The capital city could have been anywhere in New South Wales that was well away from Sydney.

It didn't have to be built at any time.

Until it was built, Parliament would sit in Melbourne.

There was no undue delay in starting, which tells us something. By 1911 the present site had been selected (available water meant that some site close to the southern ranges was almost the most likely), and work started by

1913. The war and the Depression slowed things right down, and it was not until the 1950s that Canberra was definitely going to be the nation's capital — until then it was divided, with much of the administration being conducted from Melbourne.

A new federal capital was just about certain. The only alternative would have been a continual delay in starting, leaving Melbourne eventually as the de facto capital. Wherever the new capital was built it would have suffered most of what Canberra has suffered — derision, contempt, dislike: '300,00 people surrounded by reality', 'seven suburbs in search of a city' and so on.

3. *The Hypothetical* Would things have been very different had there been undue delay, and Melbourne were now, in 2006, the actual, though de facto, capital city of Australia?

Would NSW have accepted it? There would always have been enough MPs and Senators to move for the immediate building of the new capital, given that the Constitution allowed it.

So Melbourne would have to have been very sensitive in the way that it acted as the nation's capital. Probably Victorians would have seen themselves much less as Victorians and much more as 'Australians', which is how many Canberrans see themselves.

Melbourne would be a big public service town, and expensive. There might well have been a 'Melbourne allowance' like the London allowance. It would probably be bigger than Sydney, much more likely the financial capital, and even more a cultural, artistic and musical city. It would be Beijing to Sydney's Shanghai.

There would be a lot of tension between the Cwth and the government of Victoria.

My guess is that national identity would have been much the same, since it seems to me to be formed more through local perception of external (war) and internal (depression) events than by government decisions.

There would a nationwide antipathy to Melbourne because it was both a state and a national capital, but (as with Paris and London) everyone with aspiration would want to get there, because it was the big scene.

But, again, my guess is that it was never going to happen. We were always going to have a Canberra, somewhere. There was never any suggestion of a serious kind that the building of the national capital would be postponed, or abandoned. It is possible that by the time of federation Australians were also used to the idea that it was good practice (following that in the USA) to separate the centres of political and economic power, though I can point to no specific speech on the subject.

4. The Federal Capital problem

All federal capitals are verbally abused, with Berne a possible exception, because outside them their very existence is an indication that there is another power, and that the state, and its capital, are simply less important than local inhabitants feel is right. The names of the capitals become shorthand for the national government. This is almost identically true in the Anglophone federations.

There is an ambivalence about them, that is different to the ambivalence of people in unitary states to their own capital.

In federations there is a tension over money. The capital cities have to look the part, which costs money, which people see as better spent elsewhere. There is a jealousy also about the location of public buildings and services, which local interests want put elsewhere.

Then there is the question of how they should be governed. Washington DC (co-extensive) has been badly run. Canberra (in my judgment) is well run, but not many think so. It has been governed in three different ways, too. But separating the national government from the local government is always tricky, and there is no perfect solution.

Federal capitals remind people that they belong to one country, but that can get in the way of local loyalties. Most people simply want to live their lives, and can find three levels of government hard both to understand and to manipulate (ask any politician).

In short, unlike unitary capitals, which are simply taken for granted — what alternative could there ever have been to Paris, you ask? — federal capitals are always somehow in a spot of trouble with someone somewhere, and about their very existence. Canberra recently listed as a major mistake!

5. Canberra – an Evaluation

But it's turned out quite successfully, despite a rocky start. Technological changes, like planes, telephones, television, computers, have increased the powers of central governments vis a vis regional governments everywhere, and this has been plainly true in Australia. High Court decisions during the century have also favoured the extension of Commonwealth power. In short, Canberra was going to grow, as Washington and Ottawa have. No likelihood whatever of its declining. None of this has

endeared the Commonwealth Government to the States, or made Canberra a happy name.

Its influence as a model is probably more powerful overseas than here — about a hundred delegations or official visitors a year to see how we do it. Putrajaya in Malaysia is built on the Canberra model.

At home it incorporated the 'garden city' principles of the late 19th century and then popularised them. Most Australians live in suburbs, and most live in postwar suburban areas whose design and construction were affected by the Canberra example (non-grid form, nature strips, extensive planting, planned neighbourhoods with shopping centres, schools and churches, and so on).

More fundamentally, its success has given weight to the notion that urban planning can be effective, and lead to a higher quality of life. The avoidance of neon signs on tops of buildings, for example, was only possible here because of design rules and a set of principles that governed everything. Of course some people hate it, but the great majority enjoy the benefits (O'Brien story). As we get more and more used to the idea that our environment has to be managed and cared for, Canberra appears more forcefully as an example of what we can do (control of water etc).

It remains an ideal, and ideals are good for us!

And ideals are always an implied condemnation of what actually is, which takes us back to the problem of the planned federal capital: ours is much the most successful in the round, but it is not liked for that reason.

Was Canberra worth it? Absolutely. It is one of the few Australian creations that has no obvious superior anywhere in the world, and for that reason also we should be proud of what we have managed to achieve over the past century. Besides, I have lived here four times, and each time it has got better. You cannot say that for many other cities in the world. In fact, I cannot think of one.