



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND URBAN RENEWAL

(Reference: [Inquiry into billboards](#))

Members:

MS C LE COUTEUR (Chair)

MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)

MS T CHEYNE

MS N LAWDER

MR J MILLIGAN

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 2017

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Secretary to the committee:

Ms Annemieke Jongsma (Ph: 620 51253)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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WITNESSES

HOLLO, MR TIM, Executive Director, Green Institute Ltd**29**

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.01 pm.

HOLLO, MR TIM, Executive Director, Green Institute Ltd

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal inquiry into billboards. Today we will be hearing from Tim Hollo from the Green Institute. I draw your attention to the privilege statement on the table, the pink card. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement.

Mr Hollo: I do, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I remind witnesses that proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and are webstreamed and broadcast live. Do you have an opening statement you would like to make, Mr Hollo?

Mr Hollo: I do have a short one, yes.

THE CHAIR: Over to you.

Mr Hollo: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for having me today and for the opportunity to give evidence. I want to start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the land of the Ngunnawal people and by paying my respects to their elders past and present—and elders emerging as well. In doing so, I note that I had a fascinating conversation over the weekend in Brisbane with an Indigenous elder who pointed out a powerful parallel between advertising in public space and terra nullius, which I will return to in just a minute.

Before I go further, I want to put on the record very clearly who the Green Institute is and who I am speaking on behalf of, to clarify any understandings. The Green Institute is the official think tank for the Australian Greens party, so it is related to the Greens. It was established as a parallel to the Chifley Research Centre and the Menzies Research Centre, which I am sure you are aware of, the official institutes of the other parties. Bearing that in mind, we are structurally and governance-wise entirely independent of the Greens. While not hiding our light under a bushel at all—we are a Greens entity—we are entirely independent of the party and nothing I say should be taken as representing the Greens or as binding or being bound by the Greens. I just want to put that front and centre and make it clear.

In my opening statement—I am assuming you have read my submission—I want to make a brief statement of principle and a brief statement of practicality in relation to what I am talking about in these terms. The statement of principle is about the enclosure of the commons and the privatisation of public space. This is where the deep parallel with terra nullius appears. It is not just a parallel, but the same process, the same thinking, coming at the same time. If you think back in history, the 18th century, when the English first came here to take on this country, to take over the country and declare it terra nullius, was the same period of time when the enclosures of the commons were happening in England itself. Public land that was used by people for their purposes, for finding food, for grazing cattle, was being progressively

enclosed and taken on for private purposes, and people were being forced off the land.

I see advertising in public space very much in those terms: as an enclosure of the commons. It is taking space which is public space and converting it into private space. When I say “public space”, there is a real meaning to that that the commons encapsulates. It is not nobody’s land. Terra nullius was a principle that said, “This is land that nobody is using. It is nobody’s land; it is unused land.” In the same way that Australia in 1787 was not unused land, public space is not unused land; it is land that we all get benefits from. Putting advertising on it encloses that and makes it private.

The understanding of that is particularly important for Canberra, as the capital of this nation, and that is something which is clearly implied in the existing regulations, that statement in the regulations talking about advertising and ensuring that advertising does not compromise the role of the territory as the setting of the national capital and seat of the government of the commonwealth. It is really not a stretch to say that this city and the space in this city should be representing the public interest and not the private interest. That is a key statement of principle underpinning my position and my evidence.

On the statement of practicality, as I set out in my submission, it is my understanding of the evidence that advertising is bad for us as people and as a society. I think we all know that somewhere; all of us actually understand that. There is evidence that I set out there with quotes from advertising executives themselves talking about how they understand that advertising is designed to make us unhappy, designed to make us restless. That is how it works. There is also quite strong evidence from Tim Kasser and Justin Thomas, two very highly respected psychological researchers, talking about how advertising is directly implicated in mental health issues. Justin Thomas puts it extraordinary clearly, saying that it is “implicated in the onset of psychological disorders”. Tim Kasser clearly links advertising to materialism, which he then links causationally to the rise of mental health disorders.

Advertising leads to greater disconnection in society. It leads to greater disenfranchisement. Putting public space into private hands is part of the process of taking democracy out of our hands. It is a disenfranchising process. I think all of us, looking around the world today and as people engaged with politics, are concerned about that process of disenfranchisement.

In terms of the direct terms of reference and the question of urban renewal—and I think it has been pointed out in previous evidence—it is an extraordinary suggestion to make that advertising in public space could actually support urban renewal when in fact it is quite the opposite. It is taking urban space that belongs to us and handing it over to private corporations, usually large companies, which will consequently also damage small business, making urban space even less of a public good, a public common. In terms of the practicality, it is clear that it is unpopular. It is very clear that advertising is unpopular. There is plenty of evidence from around the world and from around Australia. I think the response to this inquiry has shown quite how unpopular it is.

In closing my opening statement, I just say that if the government is considering bringing Canberra up to date, in a sense, and bringing the regulations into line, given

all of these factors, and given global trends in urban design away from public space advertising, the best way to do that is to be super clear about where the line is on a matter of principle and practicality and to say that actually we need to hold the line and, if anything, pull it back. I have a vision of Canberra that could be heading in the opposite direction. It could be putting our best foot forward as the bush capital, as we like to call ourselves, and starting to roll back advertising on public transport and in bus shelters, reclaiming that public space for us as the nation's capital.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We had the most submissions about billboards that we have ever had for any inquiry, and they were overwhelmingly in one direction. People have argued that they are not representative of the whole Canberra population. Can you talk us through any reason why we could think that a majority of the Canberra population do not want to see more billboards?

Mr Hollo: The first thing I would say is that, as noted, there is plenty of evidence from direct polling across the country that shows that people do not particularly like advertising. I quoted a few numbers in my submission about that. That is the first stage. I think there is demographic evidence, I guess you could say, that would suggest that Canberra would be more in that direction than other cities, given demographically who we are, in terms of the high number of public servants and people in the tertiary sector. That would suggest that.

In terms of the response to this particular inquiry, I would put on the table that, as you all know, I have put a bit of a campaign out on this. But I would say it is a little bit of a campaign. We are all campaigners. You know how hard it is to campaign. There was not much effort put in here to drive submissions, considering the result that we got. I put on a public meeting at the ANU. Quite a few people turned up. We agreed at that meeting to set up a Facebook group. I and a couple of other members of the group did so. We did not put a hell of a lot of effort into it. We did a tiny bit of media. And this was the result. If the implication of the question, as I understand it, is whether this resulted because there was a big campaign on one side and not on the other, I would say that there was not a lot of effort put into driving a large number of submissions.

The media response, I would say, is another indication of that. I had the opportunity to go on ABC Canberra twice in the course of this, once the day before the submissions, so there was not a huge amount of time then, and once after all the submissions had been published. In both cases, the talkback, texts and emails in were running hot in one direction and not the other. There were a couple of comments from people saying, "Oh, don't be silly; this is ridiculous." There was one from somebody saying, "I quite like it." And there were large numbers of people backing up the position that they do not like advertising.

Putting those together—while, as I said in my submission, the institute certainly does not have the capacity to do a poll in Canberra, which we all understand is not a cheap and easy thing to do—that evidence suggests that, in fact, it is a broad public position.

MS CHEYNE: Did you spend any money on your campaign?

Mr Hollo: Not a cent.

MS LAWDER: In your submission—and you have spoken a bit about it today—you have talked about advertising being unpopular and ugly. Are you meaning advertising generally or are you referring to billboards?

Mr Hollo: I am referring to advertising generally. I do, of course, acknowledge that the terms of inquiry are about billboards. I think most people would probably consider billboards more invasive and ugly, but I note that in a previous hearing you had quite a conversation around what even is a billboard, how you define that.

MS LAWDER: I am still not sure.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Hollo: I do not think any of us really are. The key examples around Canberra that I would consider as billboard advertising, other than the two obvious ones, are the bus shelter ads that have appeared. I would suggest that they fall under the remit of this as billboards. This is part of the encroachment of billboard advertising into the city and certainly something that I believe should be rolled back.

MS LAWDER: Your definition is just as valid as any other we have heard.

MS CHEYNE: We have not ruled anything out.

MS LAWDER: For example, when you talk about advertising being ugly, intrusive and invasive and having deep negative social impacts, you are not looking at education campaigns and community campaigns—that speed kills or about smoking and sunscreen?

Mr Hollo: I certainly differentiate those kinds of public information campaigns, community health campaigns and all of that kind of material from commercial advertising. It has a very different social role to play. I think there is a reasonable amount of discussion in the literature around this issue of where you draw the line. That, again—like “What is a billboard?”—is something of a subjective question. You need to think about theatres advertising what they are putting on—another example being the Canberra Theatre here—and cinema timetable advertising and that kind of thing. There certainly is a difference between public information and commercial advertising. Exactly what that difference is is a matter of opinion.

MS LAWDER: But, in theory, if you are against billboards you are against billboards, even if they are a community education sort of thing.

Mr Hollo: I would say with large-scale billboards in a city like Canberra, yes, I personally am against that, regardless of what they are. I noted in my submission a suggestion on the bus shelter ads that, if they could not be bought back, if the contract could not be cancelled, one option might be to buy them back and put public art into them, that kind of thing. Similarly, I have been muttering for a while about a budget from the ACT government to put public art on our buses instead of advertising. I think that is quite a different thing. There are obviously grey areas in there. In terms of large-scale billboards, as I say, my opinion is no. I would rather not have the bus shelter ads at all but have public art, communications around public health and that

kind of thing—

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

MR MILLIGAN: Your submission is quite detailed, which I appreciate. However, I would like you to elaborate a little more on the negative social impacts that advertising billboards have on individuals. Can you elaborate a little more on what Ms Lawder was also talking about: that it leads to depression and whatnot? I am interested because I did a marketing and advertising degree at university and this was not highly discussed in that degree, to be honest. Do you have any examples of any advertising material specifically that can actually contribute to the social impacts that relate to depression and mental illness?

Mr Hollo: I will take the second part first. The evidence is that it has got nothing to do with the specifics of the advertising. The evidence is the presence of advertising and the increasing omnipresence of advertising in our lives, rather than anything specific in the ads. There is plenty of conversation on the specific societal impacts, for instance, of sexualisation in advertising and those kinds of questions, and they are very important ones.

The mental health suggestions of Tim Kasser and Justin Thomas go to the way advertising frames society and the way advertising constructs our role in society and what it tells us about who we are and how we are to interact with other people. Kasser has done a reasonably large amount of research himself and collated a very large amount of other people's research. I am certainly happy to talk bit more, but if you are interested in digging further I would highly recommend his book *The High Price of Materialism*, where he goes into it in very great detail. He talks about how there is a causative link, which has been demonstrated through research, through testing, between advertising and materialism in terms of the kinds of values that we express when we are tested as to how we respond to particular questions. And there is another causative link between increasing levels of materialism and mental health disorders. They have been tested in all sorts of ways, from children through to adults.

There is one key example that I can call to mind from *The High Price of Materialism* where he talks about research in which young children were asked to view an advertisement for a particular toy. Then they were shown two pictures of two children, one holding that toy and one not holding that toy. The researchers described the child with the toy as not a very nice child, and the child without the toy as a nice child. They then asked the kids, some of whom had been shown the ads, which child they would prefer to play with, some having been given the ad for the toy and that information about the kids—some were shown the ad and some were not—and they found that there was a correlation between those who were shown the ad and a preference to play with the child who had just been described as not a nice child but had that toy. They used that as an example of how advertising can lead to antisocial behaviour, as they describe it. That is one example.

There are other examples of testing populations in schools in the US where advertising has been introduced to the school environment. Obviously that is many, many steps further down the line from what we are talking about here in Canberra. Hopefully we will never get anywhere near that. They tested those children, and the

pro-social and antisocial behaviour demonstrated at the school has shown, through their testing, that introducing advertising into schools increases antisocial behaviour amongst students, it increases levels of bullying and it increases rates of depression amongst the students.

Yes, their conclusion is that it is, as I say, a two-step process, essentially. It is not advertising that makes you nasty or whatever. Advertising increases our priority of materialist values—which they define as values which prioritise self, wealth and power in the self as opposed to what they describe as intrinsic values, values such as community and cooperation, pro-social values. The second step, once you increase those materialistic values, shows that there is another direct psychological link between that and mental health disorders.

Justin Thomas does not go through that double-step process. His research is much more direct—I do not think it is as sophisticated as Kasser’s research—but he talks about simply measuring populations, essentially. And his conclusion from his research is that there is a link between increasing advertising in certain populations and increasing levels of psychological disorders in those populations.

MR MILLIGAN: Just for clarification, your concern is more about the message that is on the sign than the sign itself or, for clarification, advertising is ugly—advertising being a message in the design or the physical presence of the billboard itself? Which one? The ugly and unpopular? Is it relating to the physical sign or is it relating to the design and message of what is on the sign?

Mr Hollo: It is related to the fact that it is advertising.

MR MILLIGAN: In general?

Mr Hollo: Yes. It can be television advertising—

MR MILLIGAN: Is it not up to individuals to determine whether they view that advertising as something that they think is nice and can appreciate or not nice or ugly?

Mr Hollo: I think there are two very different issues here. I do not connect my very personal statement that advertising is ugly—which, as I say, is a personal statement that seems to be one that is reflected among large-scale popular opinion—with the other statement that advertising is bad for our mental health. The mental health issues and the societal issues that I raise are not to do with the fact that it is a billboard, not to do with anything that is on the sign, not to do with the look and feel or anything like that; they are to do with the presence of advertising, and that—

MR MILLIGAN: Government, private, not-for-profit, charity?

Mr Hollo: No, commercial advertising.

MR MILLIGAN: So you are singling out commercial entities compared to non-commercial that disagree with advertising?

Mr Hollo: Not commercial entities, the commercial message.

MR MILLIGAN: So it is more or less an attack on commercial businesses rather than on the visual landscape that we have here and having business signs up?

Mr Hollo: I would very much say it is not an attack on commercial businesses. It is not an attack on commercial entities. I am not suggesting that. I am saying it is the dominance of that. The point that Kasser makes in his very extensive research is that all of us have within us materialist values, all of us have every range of values, and across society everyone displays all values in various different ways. His point is that the problem arises when certain values are out of whack, become too dominant. And when materialist values become too dominant, he says, it leads to these deeper issues. That is backed by a substantial amount of psychological research.

I would make it very clear that my position and his position and the position of others who take this view is not an anti-business position; it is not an anti-commerce position. It is an anti-dominance position. It is talking about finding balance. The omnipresence of advertising in our society is what begins to lead to the process of those values becoming so dominant that they lead to a range of societal issues.

MR MILLIGAN: And is it the responsibility of government to legislate or to determine what you can and cannot advertise and who it comes from?

Mr Hollo: Sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

MR MILLIGAN: Is it the role and responsibility of government to determine who can advertise and who can use billboards and whether it could be large business or small business or do we have to make it equal between all?

Mr Hollo: I do not see it as an issue between large business and small in terms of government regulating that. And I certainly would not suggest that government should be regulating who should advertise. But I do believe it is government's role to regulate the extent of advertising, and certainly in public space. I do not think it is necessarily government's role to regulate for preference or any of that kind of thing. What I am trying to do with this is lay down psychological evidence that I find persuasive that says that, when you increase the levels of advertising in public space and you increase materialist values in our society, that leads to a whole range of issues that are problematic and that we should all be concerned about.

MS CHEYNE: I have a few questions that relate to this. I might jump around a little. To get it straight in my head—and I appreciate that the answer is a more complex one than this, but I would appreciate a short, simple answer—is the position that you are coming from one that all public advertising should be minimised to the extent possible?

Mr Hollo: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: Including messaging that is community based?

Mr Hollo: No. Advertising.

MS CHEYNE: Commercial advertising? If I was advertising, for example, or if the government was advertising its support for LGBTIQ citizens and being a friendly city with rainbows, would that be something that you would think potentially falls under community messaging, rather than being a blight on the landscape?

Mr Hollo: Again, this is something on which I would note there is a differentiation between blight on the landscape, which is talking about a personal preference for a particular visual thing, and community messaging. I would say that is quite a personal thing. I have no doubt that there are members of our community who would think that that would be a blight on the landscape. I personally would not. I have no doubt that there are some who do. My point is that it would not be a commercial thing; it would be a public statement of some kind about who we see ourselves as, as a community and a city. It is not a commercial message, and it is the commercial message which increases the materialist values which lead to those implications that I have been talking about, which is a separate thing from ugliness.

MS CHEYNE: Just for the record, things like “Put on your seatbelt”, “ACT Policing is targeting drink-driving this month”—I think one of my staffers recently saw a billboard in Hobart informing people about composting—those sorts of messages are fine?

Mr Hollo: Absolutely. I do not see any of those as in any way commercial messages.

MS CHEYNE: You do not think there should be any restrictions on the size or placement of those?

Mr Hollo: This is a separate thing again. That is where the issues become two separate issues. I appreciate that perhaps my submission could have teased those two things apart better. Yes, I think there are a number of issues alongside each other here. One is the question of advertising per se and its impact on community and its impact on society. Another is: do we want Canberra, the bush capital, to have a whole lot more signs and a whole lot more physical infrastructure around our streets, along the light rail corridor and all of that kind of thing? That is a separate issue. In terms of advertising, no, I do not include in that anything like public health issues, statements of who we are as a society, that kind of thing.

Were it to be suggested that we should make zones where we should have a lot more billboards, as I think was suggested in the original terms of reference—which I took to mean the light rail corridor—I would object to that regardless of whether they are commercial or not because I think that would change the character of the streetscape of Canberra and I do not want to see that. But I see that as quite a separate question from the content, in fact. Regardless of what it is, I would not like to see that, even if it did mean public art or seatbelt warnings or anti-smoking or anything like that. I would not want to see that.

MS CHEYNE: I have got a further question about commercial issues which I will come back to, but I will quickly go to another question. In your opening statement and even now you are talking about the changing character of streetscapes and the areas of natural beauty, I guess, that are at risk—some that are at risk from any messaging and some that are at risk from commercial messaging, I think, and some that are at risk of

all of it. If billboards were restricted to not perhaps zones like light rail corridors but zones that are commercial or even industrial, would that influence your view about what could be there?

Mr Hollo: Yes. Again, taking the issues separately?

MS CHEYNE: Yes.

Mr Hollo: Yes, it would, absolutely. I would not want to see those commercial zones further commercialised; that is my point on the question of commercialisation of space. But, obviously, if we are talking about industrial areas around Fyshwick or something like that then you have got to put aside the question of beautification or protection of streetscapes, that kind of thing.

MS CHEYNE: How do they look already?

Mr Hollo: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: Some people love it.

Mr Hollo: Yes. Of course. I note as well that I am not anti-urban or anything like that. There are beautiful urban landscapes. If you look at Jeffrey Smart's artwork and that kind of thing, there are ways of seeing the urban in particularly beautiful ways too. But that is not the character of most of Canberra. It is not, and it should remain not.

MS CHEYNE: My final question is about people's attitudes towards billboards and commercialisation and revenue that comes from billboards. You cited a number of statistics pointing to Australians' dissatisfaction with advertising, but we have also been presented—as someone who is quite familiar with the submissions you may have read this—with information that people's attitudes towards billboards might change if they are told that revenue from them will be directed to improving local infrastructure or to community organisations. I think OMA, a billboard company, did a survey and found that 77 per cent of people changed their tune a bit if told revenue would go to local infrastructure. Do you think there would be a balance to be achieved if there was limited commercial advertising on signs or billboards but if all of that revenue went to community infrastructure? Would that negate some of that psychological impact that you are talking about?

Mr Hollo: There are a number of layers there. Would it negate the psychological impact? The answer to that, to me, would be clearly no, it would not, not specifically. Would you be able to outweigh that with investments in community infrastructure? How long is a piece of string? I do not know the answer to that. My suggestion is that there are other and better ways for government to find revenue than by selling off our public space. That would be my philosophical response to that.

When we are looking for ways for government to find revenue, we should be doing that in ways which support other government goals of a healthy, sustainable, happy society, rather than doing something on which we kind of agree there is evidence that it is probably not very good but we will sort of do it anyway because we might be able to get some cash. I do not think that is a particularly good position to take and I would

certainly argue that there are other and better ways to raise the revenue. Realistically, if we are talking about small areas, strictly limited zones, the revenue is pretty limited.

THE CHAIR: Can I try to clarify what I think you are saying, which is that there are two lots of regulations—one about the content of any signs or billboards, and you are anti any commercial, and a separate set of regulations about the size and location of any signs, regardless of what their content is; is that correct?

Mr Hollo: That is a fair representation, yes. If it were put to me in those ways, I would say yes. My basic point is that I do not think there is any need for us to open up more space to billboard advertising in Canberra. If anything, we should be pulling it back. But if that was the compromise that was being looked at then I could imagine that that could make sense.

THE CHAIR: You talked about commercial and government, but what about what are characterised as information signs? There is a big sign over there for CMAG, which I look at all the time. I suppose it is not a good example, but what about a commercial enterprise that puts a sign up saying “Joe Bloggs” and whatever? What do you think of those?

Mr Hollo: What might be termed hoardings?

THE CHAIR: Yes. It would be providing information: “This is where such and such is,” or “This is where such and such will be,” as per the standard developer’s sign, much loved by some members of the committee.

MS CHEYNE: I have no view on them. They are just very noticeable.

THE CHAIR: Your view of them but not on them.

MS CHEYNE: Yes.

Mr Hollo: I would suggest that in those terms the regulations as they currently stand take that kind of thing into account. There are all sorts of regulations as to size, whether they can be lit up and all sorts of things like that. I do not think that those regulations necessarily need to be updated that much. If we were to start seeing zones of Canberra, such as Northbourne Avenue or similar areas, become much more developed, and within that if there were to be a lot more hoardings along the way, declaring, “This business is here,” and “That business is there,” I would certainly see that as an intrusion.

The key point here—and I return to my point about the commons and the enclosure of the commons—is that it is not just labelling that building. That is outward focused, it is coming into the public space, and everybody who comes past that is seeing that. So I would certainly like to see that limited. In today’s extraordinary world, where you can plug the address into your phone, into Google Maps, and very often you can plug a business name into the Google Maps app on your phone and you can find it, I think it is less necessary than it used to be; put it that way.

THE CHAIR: Do I take it that, with our current regulations being a bit inconsistent,

as they are, you would not have major problems if Canberra stayed as it was? It is more that you are concerned about a possible intensification of billboards?

Mr Hollo: I would like to see—

THE CHAIR: You talked specifically about the bus shelters and the buses themselves, but this committee has nothing to do with bus shelters or buses. If we take out those two on the grounds that they are not under our purview, if things stayed fairly much as they are, would you feel that it was not too bad a compromise?

Mr Hollo: I certainly would think that would be a decent outcome, to stay as they are. The key point is that I think there are—and this is something that the Chief Minister noted—people who are pushing those boundaries, and I think they know they are pushing those boundaries. The key examples that have been mentioned already in public and in submissions, including in mine, are things like truck-top billboards parked by roadsides, that kind of thing, which is clearly something of a grey area. Also, quite clearly, I would think, they go against the spirit of the regulations as they currently exist. Given that, I would suggest there needs to be an effort to implement the regulations better. If they were to stay as they are, that would certainly be—

THE CHAIR: As with many things, the regulations are not that bad, but we never actually enforce them. So who knows?

MR MILLIGAN: I would like to know your view on this: a lot of our construction sites around the territory, including on Northbourne Avenue, put signage up. You would tend to think that they are putting it up to improve the visual appearance of that area. Are you in support of them doing that or would you prefer them not to put up signage at all and just leave their fencing or whatever they choose to use to block off the construction site? What is your view on that signage?

Mr Hollo: Again, it is something of a grey area, isn't it? Most of the signage that I can draw to mind of what is up around Canberra tends to be reasonably sensitive. It will often have the logo of the company that is there, but often that is all. In terms of my perspective on what I was articulating to you earlier, the commercialisation of public space, I do not think that putting your logo on your fencing and blocking off the building site is much of an imposition, frankly. I do not think it is much of a commercialisation of that public space. I do not have a terrible problem with that.

MR MILLIGAN: It comes back, again, to the messaging and the content that you are primarily against?

Mr Hollo: It is not the specific messaging. It is quite difficult to put one's finger on exactly where it lies, and I think that is reflected in a lot of the research. It is about how it is perceived, really. If you think about a bus shelter ad for a product—whatever it is, a soft drink, a deodorant or something like that—through its design it might not say anything more, frankly, than the logo of a building company on their fencing. But the design of it conveys something a lot more commercial. It is this point that Kasser and others go to, and which the advertising executives point to in their quotes in my submission. It is where the advertising is telling you that you cannot be satisfied until you get that product. That kind of content is what is damaging, in Kasser's estimation.

Simply putting your logo on your fence and saying, “This is the name of the company that’s building this site,” does not have the same impact.

MR MILLIGAN: With the studies that were done by these different groups, obviously that is advertising across the board, not just billboards. It is advertising in the print media, in magazines?

Mr Hollo: Exactly. Ms Lawder was alluding to this in her question earlier, or at least I took it as such in my response, in terms of things like theatre advertising, cinema session advertising and that kind of thing. I would see fencing with the building company’s logo on it more along those lines. That is a public statement of, “This is who we are. This is what we are doing,” rather than a piece of communication which is intended to make you dissatisfied until you do a particular thing.

MR MILLIGAN: But a lot of the advertising companies would say they can improve the urban visual environment with signage and whatnot. Obviously, that is a very similar concept to putting up signage around a construction site. Do you agree that there is the potential that signage could improve an urban environment visually?

Mr Hollo: I think they are quite separate issues. Fencing around a construction site plays a very different role from, say, setting up a bollard with a kind of back-lit ad in the middle of a public space, which you see a lot of the time in Sydney and Melbourne already. Thankfully, we do not have that around Canberra. I think they are radically different things. They do not have the same purpose. I do believe that fencing around a construction site improves public amenity. I believe that sticking up a new bollard in the middle of an urban area with an ad on it does completely the reverse.

MS CHEYNE: Do you think fencing around a construction site that advertises the site improves public amenity?

Mr Hollo: I was thinking that through as I was answering Mr Milligan’s question. It is a very interesting question.

MS CHEYNE: As you might be aware, in my home electorate and home suburb there is one I drive past every day. I think it is quite attractive advertising. It is advertising what the site will eventually look like and also has the name of the site that is lit up at night and is relatively big. I am not sure if that influences your answer somewhat. You were talking about the name of the builder so that then people know and can go and look that up, but this is, “This is what the site will eventually look like and here is a really big name of the site.”

Mr Hollo: That is one of those funny areas where it is kind of crossing between the two. Certainly it strikes me that, if the name is lit up, that is already breaching the existing regulations.

MS CHEYNE: No, we have checked this. I use this example a lot. In the existing regulations there is nothing about lighting or digital stuff.

Mr Hollo: I thought they did talk about light. That is interesting.

THE CHAIR: Our regulations are quite old.

MS CHEYNE: They are more than 20 years old.

Mr Hollo: Okay. That is one area where I would certainly go back and amend them, then. I was under the impression, and I cannot recall where I got that, that they did talk about light. To the specifics of your question, I would say that it would be one of those areas where it is going to be up to decision-makers to tread carefully and make the kind of decision which happens in public policy, as you know, all the time. There is an uncertain area between what is simply a public information statement of who is building it, what it is going to look like and that kind of thing and turning that into a commercial message.

MS CHEYNE: Yes, because in one sense it is a community message.

Mr Hollo: Exactly. There will always be cases like this in every issue of public policy, as you know well, of where that line lies. I am not sure I would want to be the arbiter, for sure. I am also not sure of the extent to which one would want to regulate where that line is. I think it is one of those lines which should be an issue for decision-makers to think through in each case. That already happens with advertising on ACTION buses and that kind of thing. There are decisions that get made on where that line lies.

MS CHEYNE: But you want all advertising off ACTION buses.

Mr Hollo: I would love to see that.

MS CHEYNE: Including rainbows? It is a serious question.

MS LAWDER: Advertising is advertising.

THE CHAIR: Is that a community service message?

MS CHEYNE: That is why I am asking.

MS LAWDER: Who makes the call?

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate that your submission was written before there were rainbow buses.

Mr Hollo: But there were obviously other things as well. Again, there are a number of issues involved. The full-wrap advertising over the windows is another question again. A lot of people have raised with me and with others, and in all sorts of contexts, how the wrap over the windows is problematic for passengers, particularly at night. That kind of thing I would certainly like to see gone. With less intrusive messaging on the sides or the backs of buses, I can see that there are reasons for doing that. It is a space which the government has to communicate with citizens. It might be a good way to do that.

MS CHEYNE: Your submission says:

... that billboard advertising has the “potential to enliven urban areas” is utterly extraordinary and runs contrary to basic common sense as well as clear evidence.

We have talked a little bit about art and introducing more art, including along corridors and within buses. I know that there are some cities, including, I believe, Melbourne, which have introduced mural billboards. The murals are painted by local artists. I think it is Apparition Media who does it in Melbourne. Their work is pretty impressive. What do you think of that approach, of combining advertising with art, particularly if it encourages local employment?

Mr Hollo: Is it advertising a commercial product or service?

MS CHEYNE: I think it can be, yes.

Mr Hollo: Again, it goes to your earlier question where you asked about revenue and whether that can cancel out the negative impacts. I think that that is a parallel to this.

MS CHEYNE: There are better ways to employ people?

Mr Hollo: Yes. It is employing local artists for a commercial purpose. I think there are other ways to support local artists. For instance, why do we not commission local artists? Why do we not have a fund to commission local artists and put their art on the sides of our buses or inside the buses or in public spaces—that kind of thing—rather than privatise that, rent it out to commercial purposes?

MS CHEYNE: Your answer might not change, but another example is that Canberra Airport recently had augmented reality billboards where you could pat a bettong or get bitten or something—

Mr Hollo: My kids had a fantastic time with that the other day.

MS CHEYNE: promoting the National Zoo and Aquarium, arguably a commercial body, and fun was had by all. So advertising, particularly through digital media on billboards, could potentially be fun as well as advertising a commercial product. Versus advertising something like Coke, advertising something like playing with furry animals is a bit more palatable, but does that influence your opinion and your own personal experience?

Mr Hollo: Technology has the capacity to do extraordinary things, obviously. It has the capacity to do all sorts of things. But fundamentally the principle remains the same. In fact, it becomes more powerful in a sense. If you are playing a game and having a fun, engaging time with a commercial message, that would amplify the kind of thing that Tim Kasser is talking about in terms of the impact, because it becomes even more all-encompassing. You go into this other world, in a sense, through technology.

MR MILLIGAN: More effective?

Mr Hollo: Exactly. But the virtual reality kind of thing, and commercialising that virtual reality, is an extremely powerful thing to do. So my feeling is that the medium does not change the underlying principle. In fact, in some ways it makes the underlying principle more important in that we need to get our heads around that underlying principle better: how we differentiate between something which is commercial and something which is informative, and what the impacts of that are. I certainly think that introducing more technology-based advertising into public spaces would be more intrusive again than billboard advertising. Of course, Canberra Airport is not a public space; it is a private space—

MS CHEYNE: Correct.

Mr Hollo: which we cannot regulate. Again, I return to the principles underlying it rather than the technology.

MS CHEYNE: You have made your views on Adshell quite clear. Are you aware of other people in the community who also want Adshell advertising stopped? And—a question I think I know the answer to—have you considered the potential job losses from that and from losing that advertising contract? I think you might say that there are better ways for people to be employed.

Mr Hollo: I think you have understood me. I would also suggest that there are not very many jobs. I do not know the exact numbers, but it is going around and replacing those every couple of weeks. You have understood my point absolutely. I certainly think there are other ways of doing it, but I also do not think there is a particularly large amount of revenue and a particularly large number of jobs from that kind of thing. On the first question, whether I am aware of other people of that opinion: absolutely, yes. Quite a number of the submissions raised that. In addition to that, in talkback on ABC 666 after the submissions closed there were a couple of callers who noted that kind of thing. It is certainly something that others have raised with me as well. It has been noticed that those bus shelter ads have increased the penetration of advertising in public space in Canberra.

THE CHAIR: This concludes the committee's proceedings for today. Mr Hollo, on behalf of the committee, I thank you. You will be sent a copy of the *Hansard* for any corrections that you may wish to make.

Mr Hollo: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

The committee adjourned at 3.59 pm.