



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

(Reference: Proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO biosphere)

Members:

MR M GENTLEMAN (The Chair)
MR Z SESELJA (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2006

Secretary to the committee:
Dr H Jaireth (Ph: 6205 0137)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

WITNESSES

ADAMS, MR HAROLD JOHN PARKER, President, ACT Rural Landholders Association **1**

GRIFFIN, DR ANTHONY, Vice-President, ACT Rural Landholders Association **1**

The committee met at 1.36 pm.

ADAMS, MR HAROLD JOHN PARKER, President, ACT Rural Landholders Association

GRIFFIN, DR ANTHONY, Vice-President, ACT Rural Landholders Association

THE CHAIR: I declare the meeting open. Good afternoon, gentlemen. Thanks very much for coming along. Before we start, I will read to you the privileges card. You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal action, such as being sued for defamation, for what you say at this public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter. Would you like to make some opening comments?

Mr Adams: Thank you very much indeed, and thank you for giving us the time to appear before this important committee. You will have received a submission which we made earlier in regard to the proposal and which, I think, has been circulated. We have since looked at the issues paper which was developed about two or three weeks ago. As a result of that, we have developed what I call a commentary on the issues paper which supplements the original paper that we wrote on the thing. If it is convenient to you, I will just read it out. It will take about five minutes or so.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Adams: In relation to the issues paper, we note that the general tenor of the submissions made to the committee are generally supportive of the concept regarding the ACT biosphere. In this regard, we note that the committee itself is cautiously supportive, recognising that more work needs to be done to develop a proposal for which all the issues have been fleshed out and resolved. Furthermore, the benefits to the ACT community arising from UNESCO endorsement need to be clearly defined. Statements like “changes in personal attitudes so that a new spiritual relationship is fostered with the environment and between people” to my mind mean very little. We need substance.

The proposal when developed needs to show in substantive form what will be the benefits to the ACT community: how they will be better off; how their lifestyles will be improved; whether it will impact in any way on their basic freedoms; and whether it will result in more stringent controls in relation to recreational opportunities, water usage, household waste—across a whole range of activities involving the ACT community.

We also note that the federal government requires more information on the proposal before it will be in a position to endorse the biosphere proposal, pointing out areas where legislation could be involved at the federal level. Whether the proposal will need to be considered by the joint parliamentary standing committee on the ACT is not mentioned, but in our view it would be appropriate.

In similar vein, the biosphere proposal as it impacts on ACT-New South Wales cross-border issues has been given limited consideration and a number of specific issues identified. In this regard, we note the recent agreement between the Chief Minister of the

ACT and the Premier of New South Wales to set up an ACT-New South Wales Regional Management Framework and the supporting structure that will be required to be set up under this initiative. We also understand that an agreement between the ACT and New South Wales in regard to water supply to New South Wales communities has been concluded, but we are not privy to that arrangement. That needs to be considered as part of the biosphere proposal.

By way of observation in regard to cross-border issues, the developments in New South Wales have run counter to developments in the ACT in that extensive areas of broadacre farms in New South Wales adjoining the ACT have been broken up into small acreages, extending from Yass to Captains Flat. The effect of that on the environment generally is self-evident and, in turn, places particular value on the remaining broadacre farms in the ACT.

I turn to the addressing of specific issues. As indicated in our previous submission, any proposal relating to the proposed ACT biosphere needs to recognise that 24 per cent of the ACT is farmland, the vast majority of which is held under 99-year lease terms. As such, it is no longer a land bank and should have the same status as other open space, such as nature parks, woody grassland and national parks. With more and more of surrounding New South Wales being broken up into small acreages, the generic value of ACT farmland increases year by year.

The biosphere proposal needs to recognise the historic values that the rural landholdings bring to the biosphere proposal, with some families still living on land that was taken up in the 1830s and 1840s. Furthermore, the corporate knowledge of the ACT rural community is unsurpassed. This, in turn, is a biosphere resource which should not be overlooked.

Assuming the biosphere nomination eventually receives ACT Legislative Assembly approval and federal government approval, it will be necessary to establish whether UNESCO endorsement has primacy over ACT environmental law in its broadest sense. This, we see, as an important consideration because the ACT farming community, under the existing leasehold regime, is required to execute a land management agreement with the ACT government. Accordingly, we would not wish to see an international authority having an overview role in respect of farm management in the ACT.

Finally, because of the importance of ACT farmland in the biosphere proposal, any structure set up to drive the proposal, such as, as referred to in the issues paper, a steering committee representing stakeholder organisation, should have ACT rural landholder representation. Similarly, we need to be represented on stakeholder groups supporting the newly established ACT-New South Wales Regional Management Framework which was executed between the Chief Minister and the Premier of New South Wales in, I think, March of this year. We believe that we should also be represented on the Expert Reference Group on Sustainability, because it is also connected with this proposal.

Too often the rural community, specifically this association, is overlooked when committees are set up which impact on the livelihood of ACT farmers and their properties. That happened with the Reshaping of the Territory Committee which was set up immediately after the bushfires. Ninety per cent of the rural land in the ACT was completely burnt out. People lost buildings, cottages, homes and outbuildings, but we

had no representative on that committee. I believe that was a major oversight on the part of the government and we were constantly responding to their recommendations.

We feel very strongly that too often in the past the rural community has been overlooked. For instance, there was a study of the southern grasslands which we were completely unaware of and which we should have been involved in because it involved an enormous number of farmers, running from Symonston down to the south, and it became a fait accompli at the end. Apart from knowing what is going on, farmers can make a contribution to the planning process. That is our feeling about that. I have no further statement to make, but Dr Griffin may wish to make some supplementary comments.

Dr Griffin: The farmers fail to see what benefits the biosphere reserve would bring to them. In many ways, we feel that the concept is rather self-indulgent. It is certainly not impressing the rural community at the moment. We also fail to see how you can compare the ACT with icons such as Uluru, Wilsons Promontory, Kosciusko, the Macquarie Island world heritage area, et cetera.

Our other concern is that the proposal may well play into the hands of the green movement, the more radical elements of which would like to see the end of agriculture. They do not see people or livestock as part of the landscape. There is very much a lock-up mentality, the results of which we have seen and experienced with the disastrous bushfires of January 2003. We must not forget that four people lost their lives and there was wholesale destruction of flora and fauna habitat, farms, livestock, houses and livelihoods. Many of us have still not recovered. Have we learned nothing from this experience or do we have more and more of the same, ensuring that history will repeat itself in the future, possibly with even greater devastation?

The other thing is that obviously there would have to be a bureaucracy set up to introduce the biosphere proposal, and we just feel that we are over-regulated as it is and we just do not wish to see any more imposition upon our farm management. The other issue that we feel strongly about is that a lot of the land is now designated as nature reserves, national parks, et cetera, and there does not seem to be any real management of these areas with regard to weeds and feral animals, and the build-up of litter on the ground could mean that bushfires in the future may well create another disaster.

Another point I would like to make is that we understand that rural land would not be included in the core area of the biosphere reserve but that we would be designated as a buffer zone. It is not clear what impositions would be placed upon us if we were declared a biosphere and became a buffer zone. I think they are the points I would wish to make.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for those statements. In regard to representation on bodies, I certainly hope that the planning and environment committee has been opening it up for you to make submissions and come along to these hearings.

Mr Adams: We appreciate that.

MR SESELJA: You referred to not having representation on the committees. In your opinion, have there been areas where, because you have not had a voice, you have suffered or it has been detrimental to you?

Dr Griffin: We get the impression that we are consulted on some of these issues but it is purely window-dressing, that the decisions have already been made and we are allowed to express a view but we are just not listened to, really.

MR SESELJA: Can you give an example of that?

Dr Griffin: With shaping the territory, I think we scored in that document one paragraph that was relevant to the wishes of the rural community, yet we were severely affected by the bushfires. As I said before, not only were we victims of the bushfire but we became victims of the recovery.

THE CHAIR: In regard to that representation, have you had meetings with the rural lessees association and endorsements from them to proceed in these types of areas in the task force?

Dr Griffin: We have a committee, and these matters are discussed in committee and we develop a policy which Mr Adams presents or I present, depending on the circumstances.

Mr Adams: If I could just comment on that point of view: the first report that the committee made envisaged a completely different approach to the western areas of the ACT. They wanted to have cherry farms, vineyards, farm-gate sales and to expand on the Tidbinbilla reserve, put hobby farms into the Ingledene area, et cetera. We had to address all that in a response to the committee and, when we appeared before them, they were really rather upset that we would criticise this so-called visionary plan, yet we knew that it was contrary to the Burley Griffin concept of hills and ridges and it was contrary to the Professor George Seddon report and also John Langmore's report on the bush capital. Those seminal reports seemed to pass by that committee, because they were never referred to in that paper.

The Seddon report is very important because it says that in Canberra, through the leasehold system, you can develop that sharp distinction between bushland and urban, rural, forestry, et cetera which you do not get in any of the other cities of Australia, where you have ribbon development and small farm things scattered around the outside which are an absolute eyesore. That is the thing that we felt really in the planning concept, rural being part of it, was overlooked because people did not have the corporate knowledge or the very good reports produced by John Langmore, the former member for Canberra, and Professor George Seddon from Western Australia. They were completely overlooked, so we got an enormous tangle.

The outcome of that was the fact that they said that we have to have closer coordination between the agencies of the ACT government and the rural community. I think that recommendation would have gone through to the wicketkeeper had I not picked up on it and wrote to the Chief Minister saying, "This is the opportunity that we need so that we know what you are planning and what is going to affect the farmland." So we have a consultative forum which has, I would say, 50 per cent or 75 per cent effectiveness on it.

A thing like the new airfield at Williamsdale, which you are probably aware of, needs to be fleshed out as to the background to it and so on. Our understanding of the proposal for the airfield is that the private operators at Canberra airport are now being charged a landing fee, a parking fee, a take-off fee, et cetera—things which they obviously got for

free when it was run by the Department of Civil Aviation or the air force—and they have said that they need their own airport because they cannot afford that. There is the cost of putting in that airfield—I think it is of the order of \$4 million—for a small community group. At least that has come up in discussion in the forum. We think that is the sort of area that needs to be fleshed out in this proposal. How an airport there would affect the biosphere is something that needs to be looked at.

That is one of the things that have come out of it in a positive sense, but it has to be further developed. We did not have that dialogue with the government agencies. It meets about every three months and some of the areas are coming out, but very often it is very difficult to get a definitive answer out of the government. The people that live in the Naas-Gudgenby valley are on rural leases that have virtually run out and are really wondering what the government is going to do about the proposed Tennent dam, and the whole thing has been left in limbo. We know that the opposition, as one of their standing policies, are saying that they would build the Tennent dam, but the Stanhope government has said that we do not need the Tennent dam. We have a group of farmers down there on the largest piece of farmland in the ACT—a very attractive area, productive and so on—and they have been left in limbo at the moment. We have written to the planning people about what is going on and have had no definitive answer.

THE CHAIR: How many rural farmers would there be in the Naas-Gudgenby area?

Mr Adams: I think there are 14.

THE CHAIR: Are they all in your association?

Mr Adams: Yes. There are about 120 farmers and we have about 90 members of our association.

Dr Griffin: Could I comment on the rural forum that was established? Unfortunately, because it is run through the Chief Minister's Department, we do not get any environmental people along, no one from Environment ACT. A lot of the issues that we have involve Environment ACT and they are not present at those meetings. I understand that it has become defunct, that they are not going to have any more.

Mr Adams: No, it is moving from the Chief Minister's office to another minister. I would have to look it up. We got notice the other day. We are still going to have it. I am saying that it just needs sharpening up. If it works well, it is a step forward as to where we are going. That is why I think our ability to comment on the biosphere proposal is a step forward. Although we have certain misgivings about it, and I think they are well founded and established, there is an enormous amount of corporate knowledge within our farming group which could be useful in the development of the proposal as it moves ahead.

MS PORTER: Dr Griffin, you said—correct me if I am wrong—that the farming community was not impressed by the idea. I was just wondering whether, through the committee, they have had an opportunity to examine the discussion paper that we have put out.

Dr Griffin: They were able to get some of the information from the net. They probably

have not seen this discussion paper. When something new is happening and we do not really know how it is going to impact on us, there is a lot of resistance to it and we really need to know—

MS PORTER: More detail.

Dr Griffin: Yes. Is it going to affect the way we run our farms?

Mr Adams: If I could add to that: we do put out to our members about three times a year a newsletter which covers developments in the rural community. They might be about livestock identification, kangaroo problems and so on. In the next one we will cover the biosphere and there will be a web site on it, so people could get the issues paper off the web site if they wanted.

THE CHAIR: If you were to contact your association and find out how many people would like to have a copy of the issues paper, we could provide them for you.

Mr Adams: Yes, but I do not think that it really answers our concerns, and that is the problem. The document does not really address the issues that we feel are important.

THE CHAIR: But it might be good for the rest of the members of your association to be able to have a look at it.

Mr Adams: Sure.

MS PORTER: Mr Adams, you were saying before that you think the forum would be moving to another department. I think that it will be the new territory and municipal services department, which does have environment within it.

Mr Adams: We had advice the other day, about a week ago, but I do not have the point of contact at the present time, which I will get, but we are probably not due to have another meeting until next month. We will see how that goes.

MR SESELJA: Obviously, you are not at this stage in favour of the biosphere proposal. From the rural leaseholders' point of view, what would be some of the environmental issues affecting your members that you would want to see addressed before we go down the biosphere road? You mentioned management of some of the national park areas, weeds and other things. Would that be high on the list of priorities?

Dr Griffin: It would indeed.

Mr Adams: Most of our farms butt onto some form of government-managed land. Mine is next to a travelling stock reserve and forestry. Dr Griffin has forestry, national park, et cetera. For instance, I think that 15 farms abut the Namadgi national park. We have asked over, I think, two years for a landholder to be on the Namadgi national park management board because there are so many common issues, particularly relating to wild dogs and maintenance of pressure on wild dogs with the introduction of pig baits, which apparently are highly effective, and the control of woody weeds, blackberries. Dr Griffin has a huge problem with blackberries on adjoining commonwealth land. I think that most of our farms are in that situation.

Environmentally, as far as we are concerned, there is no audit process which goes before the Legislative Assembly so that you can look at, say, the Gorooyaroo reserve annually and see that the woody weed problem is under control and getting better and better, that there are no rabbits, foxes or pigs on the property and that there has been a program for spraying the briars or hawthorns which are spread throughout. The Assembly has no feedback as to how all the nature parks are looking, whether they are becoming overrun with woody weeds and so on. We have management plans. One of the big problems, of course, is with the river management plan. Dr Griffin will tell you that it just acted like a wick in the bushfire, that there was so much fuel in there that it just generated its own wind.

We have a major problem with that. If you have farms alongside them, these are the sorts of issues that they have, control of boundaries. That is why we have asked to have somebody on things like the Namadgi national park management board. Every time we put it up they say that the matter is under consideration. I think the last one was whether the person you had would have an understanding of Aboriginal culture. The fellow we put actually has employed a couple of Aborigines and probably knows about them better than anybody else. Those are some of the difficulties that we have in this area of what you might call environmental management.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to see rural lessees manage some of the other open areas in the ACT—say, open area that is left from old forestry?

Mr Adams: I think there is an opportunity there. Dr Griffin would have a better feel than I have because his farm is out in that bushfire area, but I think that some of the areas that were previously forestry or whatever could well go into productive farming. That is the cheapest way the government can run land, because the farmer does it for you.

Dr Griffin: And it is more productive than pine forestry. I have ACT Forests land virtually right around me and they are very bad neighbours because they do not control anything. It has always been that they just have not had the money. ACT Forests have now been taken over but in the past, to try to improve their bottom line, they spent as little as possible. They just let the weeds go wild. I have huge blackberries on the boundary, St John's wort and Paterson's curse, and I spend many thousands of dollars trying to control these weeds coming into my property. I did write to ACT Forests about 18 months or two years ago, after the bushfires, about an area I agist from ACT Forests which adjoins me. There are no plantations on it and I offered to purchase that land and have it included in my lease. The answer that came back was that it was not a good time. I do not quite know what that meant, but I think it meant "don't keep pushing because you are not going to go anywhere". That was one of the things we put in after the bushfires, when 70 per cent plus of the ACT forest assets had been destroyed. There was a lot of that land which was quite good arable land, good grazing land, that could have been turned into farming country. That just did not get a guernsey at all. We got rural villages and other things instead which impact badly upon rural enterprise.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming along and providing that information to us.

Mr Adams: Thank you. I hope we have been constructive.

Dr Griffin: We do not want to be too negative, but the problem is that we need to be able to understand what impact a biosphere reserve would have on the rural community, particularly in relation to regulations and what we can and cannot do, because we do not rape and pillage, as we are often accused of doing.

THE CHAIR: It is certainly important to this committee to make sure that it hears your comments, too.

Mr Adams: Some of our people are not just what you might call backwoodsmen farmers. John Hyles has some wonderful stock. This year the top of his wool clip came in at 15.1 microns, some of the finest wool produced in Australia. If the Yass people get to 17.5 or 18 they think it is pretty good, but he produces some of the finest wool grown in Australia. Frank Coonan produces wonderful stockhorses. He has 12 horses eventing in Europe. Another one has harness horses out near the dragway. He will be history. He produces harness horses for driving beautiful carriages around and people come from far and wide to buy his horses. Dr Griffin has some of the best cattle running in the place. They are not hobby farms. We have people who have really good stock and are very proud of what they do, and they are doing an excellent job. We think that farming should be encouraged because we have people who really know what they are doing. We rest our case. I hope we have been constructive and that you have an understanding of what some of our concerns might be.

THE CHAIR: Thank you again. We will get a copy of the Hansard transcript to you as soon as we can.

The committee adjourned at 2.10 pm.