

Canberra risks losing its character altogether: former planning head Tony Powell

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Self-government has been a slow death knell for Canberra, which now risks losing its garden city character altogether, a former commissioner of the National Capital Development Commission says.

Tony Powell, who has become a vocal critic of planning and development in Canberra, says the ACT government is incapable of improving the dishevelled state of the city and doesn't know how to develop a plan for the Woden town centre.

The National Capital Authority and the ACT planning authority had "virtually ceased to exist" because of cuts to staff and expertise, leaving ACT planners focused not on planning but on processing development applications, he said.

The Land Development Agency appeared to be "running its own race", and where the Territory Plan didn't suit the agency, it simply looked to its political masters to change the rules to suit.

The city centre had nothing to offer visitors and the government was failing to plan proper public space for the influx of apartment dwellers in the city, he said.

He rejected the light rail project as an answer, saying the tramline was not being built where people wanted to go and Canberra lacked the density to support it. Instead, the busses should be privatised, so the Transport Workers Union could no longer block automation in public transport.

Mr Powell, who speaks at a public seminar in the city on Thursday, said the apathetic public was letting the government away with doing a bad job - partly because of the sheer dominance of public servants, who stayed out of politics. The public must get motivated to ensure Canberra didn't lose its character altogether, he said.

Since self-government the public service had slowly been shredded of expertise in architecture, town planning, engineering and landscape design.

It was time to stop relying on consultants and instead, it must build expertise, reliability and experience in the public service, which should be where long-term analysis and planning was done.

"We have to change the ACT government from a didactic organisation that goes around making pronouncements, saying 'we're going to do this and that and too bad', into an information-based government that is able to understand and then make forecasts about future needs."

Mr Powell called on the ACT to start talks with the Commonwealth on a new model of self-government that meant less reliance on land. From the start, the ACT had been left with land sales as its way of making money, and the result was a distorted property market and the most expensive land in the country outside Sydney.

Land was running out, and the ACT was not getting sufficient income to rebuild its increasing body of ageing infrastructure.

"The federal government will eventually have to confront that," Mr Powell said.

"If it thinks giving money to the ACT is a nuisance, they haven't seen anything yet."

Mr Powell has been active in the campaign against development at West Basin beside the lake, which he said had veered drastically from the original plan to improve access to the lake and build a new convention centre and swimming pool.

Instead, the area was destined to have "a whole lot of six-storey apartment buildings stuck between Parkes Way and the foreshore".

"The ACT government and the National Capital Authority have effectively contrived to change the whole status of West Basin from public open space into just a place in which to flog off land," he said.

Mr Powell's comments come as the ACT parliament holds an inquiry into the convention centre, after the government shelved the project.

Mr Powell will speak at a seminar organised by former Labor chief minister Jon Stanhope on Thursday.

This story was found at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/content/adaptive/canberratimes/act-news/canberra-risks-losing-its-character-altogether-former-planning-head-tony-powell-20170515-gw4vvm.html>

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