

The SITING and NAMING of CANBERRA

In the first day of January 1901, the colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania joined together in a new Commonwealth of Australia. Both before and after Federation, there was much public bickering about what and where a federal territory and Seat of Government should be. The Constitution said that the Parliament must choose a site at least one hundred miles (160km) from Sydney and that the Parliament would sit in Melbourne until a new parliament house was built in the new capital.

King O'Malley, a member of the first federal parliament and later Minister for Home Affairs, proclaimed his belief that 'cold climates have produced the greatest geniuses'. He later became the most outspoken advocate for a federal district in the Snowy Mountains area of southern New South Wales.

More than 60 country centres in New South Wales were promoted as sites for the capital because of their bracing climate, the purity of their water supplies or an abundance of stone and timber for building. Towns along the main railway line from Sydney to Melbourne offered accessibility to both cities, but sites in the far south of the state around Albury were deemed to be too close to Melbourne. Sites in the north of the state, such as Armidale and Tamworth, were considered too far from Sydney and much too far from Melbourne.

In the winter of 1902, members of both Houses of Parliament left the comforts of Melbourne to inspect many of the nominated sites.

Despite the freezing conditions in the mountains, the politicians were strongly attracted to sites in the south-east of the state. When the Parliament held its first vote, the Senate proposed Bombala but the House of Representatives selected Tumut. Six months later, both Houses agreed to Dalgety, a small township just north of Bombala.

The New South Wales government refused to support 'remote Dalgety'. It continued to press for a site closer to Sydney and pushed strongly for towns near Orange and Bathurst. A 'new' site at Yass-Canberra emerged as an acceptable compromise. This large district was almost exactly a 'hundred miles' (160km) from Sydney and offered clean air, a good water supply and an invigorating climate. If the Federal Parliament would change its mind in favour of Canberra, New South Wales would provide land on the coast so that a federal city could have its own seaport at Jervis Bay. In October 1908, the Seat of Government Bill, confirming Yass-Canberra as the nation's capital, was passed by the Parliament.

Surveyor Charles Scrivener was instructed to find an attractive setting for 'a beautiful city ... embracing distinctive features ... worthy of the object, not only for the present but for all time'. In a bold move, the Government conducted an international competition for the design of the capital which entrants were told would be the 'official and social centre of Australia'.

The winning design of Chicago architect Walter Burley Griffin was truly a magnificent plan for a city in the country. It was said that Griffin's design would create 'the only really modern city in the world'. When the Federal Parliament sat for the first time in Canberra in 1927, Canberra

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was seen as the 'modern and the picturesque blended into a composite and harmonious whole, cradled in a setting that for its purpose can have no peer'.

In 1913, when the Canberra area was no more than an outback sheep station divided by the Molonglo River, a ceremony was held to name the city. 'Canberra', as a new name for the capital, was a sentimental favourite and logical choice. The name probably derived from a local Aboriginal word for 'meeting place' and had been in common use in the district for more than three-quarters of a century. The people of Australia, nevertheless, responded with imagination and good humour to a Government invitation to find a suitable name for their future capital. 'Cookaburra', 'Wheatwoolgold' and 'Kangaremu' headed a list of Australiana which also included 'Sydmelperadbrisho' and 'Meladneyperbane'. Politics prompted other names such as 'Swindleville', 'Gonebroke' and 'Caucus City'.

It was something of a relief when at noon on 12 March Lady Denman, the wife of the Governor-General, mounted a crimson-draped platform and declared in a clear English voice: 'I name the capital of Australia, Canberra – the accent is on the Can'.

Roger Pegrum

Further Reading

- Frederick Watson, *A Brief History of Canberra*, Federal Capital Press of Australia, 1927
- Lionel Wigmore, *The Long View*, F W Cheshire, 1963
- Roger Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, Hale & Iremonger, 1983
- Pamela Statham ed., *The Origin of Australia's Capital Cities*, Cambridge University Press, 1989
- James Birrell, *Walter Burley Griffin*, Queensland University Press, 1964

