

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

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Canberra – a National Park City

Start

Recently, Canberra was named the World's Most Sustainable City.

This is a great honour, and testament to the incredible work undertaken at all levels across our community – from robust policy making by the ACT Government, to contributions made by business, industry, not-for-profit, advocacy and individuals. It takes a village!

However, I was dismayed, following this news, to see so many media channels – nationally and even internationally – splashing images of Parliament House alongside these headlines.

Canberra is NOT just Parliament House!

Parliament House plays such a minor role in the day-to-day life of ordinary Canberrans and the various attributes that make Canberra such a special place in which to live and which won us the sustainability title.

I felt that this portrayal of Canberra undermines so much of the hard work that's been undertaken over the last ten years or more to rebrand Canberra, to position us within the national psyche as being so much more than Parliament House and federal politics.

Perhaps its time for a divorce from Parliament House!

I recognise and am grateful for the contribution that Parliament House brings; not least of which – it is the very reason for our being. This fact is not lost on me. But we have grown up, evolved and matured into a city in our own right and this city has so so much to offer.

Over the past decade, we've seen the success of the Brand CBR campaign. I think we would all agree this has helped us to reimagine our our city, particularly in the eyes of the nation, it has contributed to fostering a renewed sense of place, pride and identity.

The work of Visit Canberra, in many of its marketing campaigns over the last ten or more years, has helped cast Canberra in a different light. Testament to this is the growth in the visitor economy, with visitor expenditure increasing from \$1.3 billion in December 2009 to \$2.8 billion in December 2019.

We were recognised by Lonely Planet as ranking third in their salubrious 'Best in Travel' in 2018. Accolades like this don't come easily. They're achieved by a multi-faceted approach to place-making.

This Saturday night you can even tune into SBS to see Canberra feature on Episode 1 of Trails Town TV, showcasing Canberra as a leading bicycle tourism destination in Australia/New Zealand!

I'm so proud to call Canberra home. I made a conscious decision to move here 16 years ago. And there's not a single day that I have regretted this decision or given it a second thought.

In Canberra, it's hard to keep up with weekend activities – there's always some festival, activity or celebration. There's always something to do; and always something different to do – as a visitor and as a local.

Some of our advantages include our proximity, and the ease of being able to connect different places and experiences within the ACT. Our relative lack of traffic congestion sets us apart. Our changing seasons; our natural and man-made environments; our suburban shopping centres; our heritage as a planned city; and our treed landscape and nature reserves all help provide our unique character and sense of identity and place.

Over 60% of the ACT is managed as either National Park, nature reserve, urban open space, forestry or other green space. Canberra was founded on principles of the Garden City movement; a concept and design which is still very much alive and well today.

Our green spaces, urban forest canopy and tree cover are going to become increasingly critical as the ACT continues to work towards reducing the urban heat island effect, and to providing climate change solutions.

We're all reasonably familiar with the concept of National Parks – protected areas that are home to fauna and flora, unique geology and cultural heritage; inspiring places which capture people's hearts and minds.

And we're all familiar with urban areas – more than half the world's population lives in towns and cities, despite them comprising only 3% of the earth's surface.

National Park Cities recognise the important relationship between urban and natural areas, including the role of nature in our everyday lives for mental health and wellbeing.

Globally, recognition of 'National Park City' status is being awarded to those cities where people and nature are well connected.

To date, London is the only city in the world that has achieved this status. In Australia, Adelaide has commenced its journey towards this recognition.

I believe Canberra has what it takes.

National Park Cities provide a framework, vision and narrative for those cities where government, business, not-for-profit and the community come together to achieve shared goals towards clean air, green spaces, outdoor recreation, health and wellbeing, wildlife and habitat protection, and sustainable initiatives, activities and projects.

Crucial to the success of an application to become a National Park City is collaboration and community support, together with the backing and leadership of local politicians.

On reviewing what it takes, and what it means, to be a National Park City, it's almost as though the founders of the National Park City Foundation had Canberra in mind:

'A large, citywide landscape; a place, a vision and a community that aims to be healthier; a city that includes a wide range of places, projects and initiatives that its residents would be proud to show other residents and both national and international visitors; a city that has an active civic society and an appetite, energy and mood to deliver key aspects of the National Park City; a city that has a robust, collaborative and healthy network of cross-sector organisations to implement actions to make the National Park City a success; and a city that implements meaningful policies to protect, increase and enhance nature, culture, heritage, the environment and public space'.

National Park Cities have also been described as those where: “people and nature are better connected; Cities are rich with wildlife; Where every child and young person benefits from exploring, playing and learning outdoors; Cities where we all enjoy high-quality green spaces, where the air is clean to breathe, where it’s a pleasure to swim in the rivers and where we can all live lives that are more harmonious with ourselves, our communities and our planet”.

Sound like Canberra?

National Park City status for Canberra would provide us with yet another feather to our bow. It would add credentials to our marketing campaigns, our sense of identity, place and pride. It would challenge us to further our aspirations to be a healthy, clean, green city.

Canberra offers an unparalleled intersect between urban living and natural environments. We have the best of both worlds – where the most indulgent, civilised and sophisticated experiences of city living are just a hop, skip and jump from our nature parks and natural environments.

Organisations, groups and businesses across the ACT contribute in many different ways, and from many different perspectives. Their work shows the breadth of talent and interest we have within our community. From the cultural heritage embedded in the ACT from our traditional custodians, to our environmental, and social groups our innovative, imaginative business that make such a considerable contribution to the fabric of this city.

Within Government, projects and initiatives including those from the City Renewal Authority, Floriade Reimagined, Enlighten, the Multicultural Festival, Nature Play and others all contribute to place-making and liveability.

It’s often said that, in our city of 470,000 people, we have 460,000 planners. I see this as a real positive – Canberrans are active, engaged and passionate about their city and its future. Let’s embrace this in the opportunity that National Park City status would present, by working collaboratively and cohesively for a joint vision that brings together all that Canberra already has to offer and further heightens it.

If Canberra were to become a National Park City, a robust framework that sets out our vision would need to be developed, in accordance with the National Park City Foundation's Universal Charter. I would encourage that this aligns with a wide range of existing Government policies and objectives, including our Wellbeing indicators, the ACTs Transport Strategy and Active Travel Framework, our Statement of Planning Intent, the current planning reform work that's underway, and the Draft Reserve Management Plan for the Canberra Nature Park which is currently available for public comment.

I would imagine that if Canberra were to become a National Park City, we would have a dedicated online platform that would act as a central hub, bringing together the many partners, projects, activities and initiatives from across Government, business and the community; providing information for locals and visitors. The hub would gather supporters and provide connections. We would use our status for marketing purposes, and to bring together networks to share knowledge and further inspire each other. We would recognise the projects, activities and initiatives underway, and those to which we are aspiring.

Unlike UNESCO World Heritage Sites, or National Parks as we commonly know them, National Park Cities – overseen by the World Urban Parks Association and the National Park City Foundation – do not carry the burden of legislation, regulatory restriction or bureaucracy. They do, however, carry accountability through annual reporting and measurement against stated outcomes.

National Park City status is an ongoing journey. It's a continual engagement with the National Park City Foundation and with other National Park Cities worldwide. It's an ongoing opportunity to challenge ourselves, to pursue continual improvement in merging the benefits of city living with our surrounding and immersive natural environments and experiences, through strategic policy and everyday actions.

It's a continual dialogue between city leaders, community groups, businesses and organisations. It provides ongoing opportunity to promote our identity, our sense of place and pride. It's an ongoing platform from which we can leverage and build our narrative as a sustainable, healthy, smart, innovative, progressive and contemporary city to be etched in the hearts and minds of Canberrans, Australians and internationally.

The National Park City Foundation has an ambition to name 25 National Park Cities by 2025. To date, there is one – London.

I call on the ACT Government to explore whether there is benefit for Canberra to become a National Park City, through dialogue with the National Park City Foundation, and with our community.

I also call on the ACT Government to continue the important branding work already well underway to position Canberra as 'more than'; to encourage people to visit, study, work, do business and live; and to continue to work closely with local and national media outlets to help them positively advocate Canberra's unique identity and charm.

Thank you.

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