

Civics in action at Canberra's Albert Hall

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In an intriguing regeneration of its original purpose, the Albert Hall in Canberra – notwithstanding its approaching 80th birthday – has again become a vigorous player in the civic life of Australia's national capital. Neither Federal nor ACT government agencies were ready for the strength of opposition to their plans for this heritage precinct that dominated the usually mellow months of autumnal Canberra. The Albert Hall put heritage into the headlines, special features, opinion pieces and letters to the editor – sometimes all in the same edition of Canberra's daily newspaper. Talkback radio buzzed, television news teams ran regular stories – and as winter set in, the Albert Hall starred in Estimates hearings in both the Senate and the ACT Legislative Assembly. In the offices of Federal Minister Jim Lloyd and the three ACT ministers whose portfolios cover its heritage, management, maintenance and future, the Albert Hall had become a presence. By the time the last leaves left the trees, the proposals, policies and processes of both governments lay exposed to a coldly critical public gaze.



Albert Hall, Canberra (Photo ACT National Trust Living Image Library)

It is not nostalgia that kindles such public passion, but the idea, embedded in the Albert Hall, that participation is essential to democracy. In Canberra, more than any other Australian city, we can readily compare the vision and the reality of Australia's

constitutional democracy. The campaign for the future of the Albert Hall draws its power directly from this heritage place.

The opening of the Albert Hall on 10 March 1928 was no less significant a nation-building occasion than the foundation of the national capital itself on 12 March 1913, nor the opening of Parliament House in 1927. In the ringing words of Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, the new Albert Hall was 'a definite step towards making Canberra the centre . . . of everything that will uplift the Australian people – a centre from which will radiate all those aspirations that are truly national'.¹ In those grander days, a prime minister could assert the essential roles of the arts and of the citizenry in national life and pronounce the Albert Hall the civic and cultural heart of the new national capital. And for much of the 20th century that's just what it was. The city's only performing arts venue for its first forty years, the Albert Hall influenced the growth of flourishing musical, operatic and dramatic societies like the Society for Arts and Literature formed by Robert Garran, Harold White and Robert Broinowski, and for Lewis Nott's breakaway Canberra Repertory Society. Once the Albert Hall was built, literary and musical salons were no longer confined to the homes of Canberra's elite, but open to everyone with an interest and the price of a ticket. The Albert Hall was the stage local artists shared with international musicians and theatre companies and the venue for tours by the Royal Ballet and a fledgling Australian Ballet. It was Canberra's first concert hall and playhouse, and an exhibition space for painting and sculpture before Australia had a national gallery.

But it is the significance of the Albert Hall as a place for civic as well as cultural assembly that is most important in understanding how a neglected heritage place could so readily ignite potent civic action. Eighty years ago, no city in a constitutional democracy could be complete without a hall suitable for formal public assembly. The first such events at the Albert Hall were probably the British Empire Forestry conference in September 1928 and the congress of the 65th District of Rotary International a year later. In May 1930, it was the venue for public hearings of the Constitutional Royal Commission reviewing the working of Australia's Constitution. In the early 1930s the Canberra Relief Society's unemployment benefit concerts were held there. In 1934 British Poet Laureate John Masefield gave the official address after the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the first National Library building, on Kings Avenue. Three years later the Albert Hall became the birthplace of the Australian Institute of Librarians.

¹ Reported in the *Canberra Times* 12 March 1928

During the second world war it was the venue for Red Cross fundraisers and in 1945, the unforgettable site of the celebrations of the declaration of peace. There was a flurry of activity there in the years of postwar reconstruction, with a major refurbishment for events including the first graduation ceremonies of the new Australian National University College. From the legislative creation of Australian citizenship in 1949, Australia's annual citizenship conventions were held at the Albert Hall. In 1951 the nation's jubilee was celebrated there, the major events including the Town Planning Congress where principal speaker William Holford so impressed Prime Minister Robert Menzies that Holford was given direction of the first major planning of the national capital since its inception.

The Albert Hall even had a Cold War role, with meetings like the 'Women against Socialism' rally chaired by Annabelle Rankin in 1948. Six years later, the first sessions of the Royal Commission on Espionage triggered by the defections of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov were held there. In the final federal elections of Menzies' record term, the Albert Hall became the first National Tally Room to be televised. Two months after Menzies' retirement, it was the venue for the historic conference of the Federal Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, when the 10-year campaign for a Constitutional referendum was won, and the campaigners turned instead to working for the 'Yes' outcome so resoundingly achieved on 27 May 1967.

Even such a rapid historical resumé reveals an intriguing civic history, but wandering about the Albert Hall last summer told a very different story. The landscaped gardens are straggling and neglected, cobwebs curtain the tall arched windows, drifts of dessicated leaves made tinderboxes of accessways, and the stage loading doors at the rear faced the detritus of a works depot. Inside, paint peeled, toilets leaked, a hole gaped in the gallery ceiling, piles of chairs teetering up the stairs obscured the graceful balustrade. Could this be the place where the glorious operatic career of 'Our Joan' was launched in 1950? The place the Prime Minister had charged with a key role in national civic and cultural life in 1928?

Though the Friends of the Albert Hall network was not formed until March 2007, the current public campaign for the Albert Hall probably dates from December 2005, when the ACT Government called for commercial 'Expressions of Interest' in taking on what they apparently saw as a liability rather than a legacy. Unsurprisingly, the response was minimal. Did the ACT Government, charged with responsibility for the management, conservation and maintenance of the Albert Hall, then turn to the

National Capital Authority, responsible for planning of the precinct, for help? For hard on the heels of its controversial 'Griffin Legacy' amendments to the National Capital Plan, in March 2007 the NCA issued Draft Amendment 53 for the Albert Hall area.

Recalling the NCA's DA53 public consultation session in the Albert Hall on 5 March still wrings wry smiles from the 60 or so people who attended. That the level of interest was underestimated was evident - not enough chairs, insufficient copies of DA53, and no public address system. That meeting indicated the wide gulf between the planning authority's awareness of the heritage significance of the Albert Hall precinct, and that of the audience. To the NCA it indicated a need to control consultation more carefully, as demonstrated in a second session held at the NCA's own premises on 22 March. That audience was no less vigorous in its opposition to the number and height of the proposed buildings in the development plan; to the land rezoning from cultural to 'commercial/hotel' use; to the major traffic changes planned; and to the inadequacies of the NCA's consultation process.

These meetings fuelled a campaign of opposition, with wide support for a petition calling for the withdrawal of DA53. Volunteers from residents' associations and the new Friends of the Albert Hall were gratified at the cooperation of local businesses, and overwhelmed at the responses of the hundreds of people who queued to sign at local markets. The market stalls provided a valuable public forum for discussing and clarifying the complex mix of Federal planning proposals, and management responsibilities spread across three ACT Government agencies. The heritage issues were easier to explain once the conservation management plan for the Albert Hall Heritage Precinct was finalised and made public late in April. And the petitioners proved a marvellous source of Albert Hall stories - never was civic action more fascinating than at those markets.

With the campaign for the NCA to withdraw DA53 in full swing, on 21 April 2007 the ACT Government called tenders for the management of the Albert Hall. The tender documents deepened concern about the civic and cultural future of the Hall, particularly a requirement that private management would be responsible for the urgent accumulated program of conservation and maintenance, effectively privatising a public building.

On 24 May, a few days after the Albert Hall petition with some 3,300 signatures was tabled in the House of Representatives, hundreds of people assembled in the Albert Hall for the public meeting called by the Friends of the Albert Hall. The resolutions

passed were directives to both governments making clear the high value Canberrans place on participation in the shaping of their city and its national role.

Ironically, this latest episode in the civic history of the Albert Hall adds to its significance as a place where we can glimpse the vision for an Australian democracy. How Federal and ACT governments respond to the challenge of civic action is a measure of the distance between that vision and our reality.

Join the Friends of the Albert Hall at www.ouralberthall.com