

Timothy Hurd

p.1of4

Submission to Panel of Inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority [NCA] in respect of management of the National Carillon, Canberra
April 2008

Executive Summary

Having been associated with the National Carillon in various capacities since October 1984, this writer was engaged as its first Director (Principal Consultant) by the National Capital Authority in July 2001. The specific commission comprised restructuring every operational aspect of National Carillon, improving the quality of public musical performance and providing continuing policy advice on effective transformation and marketing of the well-known Canberra landmark.

The express intention by NCA in creating the Carillon Director position was to raise public awareness of the National Carillon and to enhance the instrument's reputation locally, nationally and internationally. This has been achieved through a combination of systems analysis, streamlining of existing administrative procedures and fostering finely-tuned teamwork. All these activities are underpinned by an enduring commitment to raising performance standards. In short, the National Carillon in Canberra has experienced a quantum leap in its effective day-to-day operation and management, matched by a vastly-improved professional approach by its contact carillonists.

Under the management of the National Capital Authority, complete physical upgrades and retrofit of tower and carillon instrument have been undertaken, again with the key priority being revitalisation of public interest in this significant Government asset. These recent improvements and program advances arising from same have also facilitated a wide range of new, successful promotional initiatives, including international outreach through the annual Visiting Artist Exchange Program. The Carillon is now a proven success, acknowledged as one of the finest installations of its type in the world, with an annual program of performance and events second to none.

As a musical centrepiece of Canberra, the National Carillon tower on Aspen Island in Lake Burley Griffin has become an iconic symbol for, and of, the capital city. As a form of marketing and 'branding', the Carillon's distinctive image is immediately identifiable both at home and abroad as a focal point, one centre of excellence signifying the very best Australia has to offer.

Recent budget cuts required of the National Capital Authority by the Labour Government have severely disrupted the operation of the National Carillon. The professional & artistic momentum gathered in the past seven years is now at risk of grinding to a complete halt.

As part and parcel of the current review of the statutory responsibilities and activities of the National Capital Authority, measures should be considered by Government to ensure the long-term viability of the National Carillon, including:

- A) Alternative management structures and strategies
- B) Protection of the physical and acoustical environment of the Carillon
- C) Provision of a secure, quarantined funding base

A) Alternative management structures and strategies

Since its installation in 1970, the National Carillon has been administered by a vast number of different management bodies. These have included various federal and local government agencies, a private consortium, music conservatorium and even a local radio station. At one time in the mid-1980s, its capital works and maintenance portfolio was briefly entrusted to the ACT Department of Housing and Construction, only to be jettisoned in short order to the Department of Sport and Recreation [!] Like the proverbial unwanted baby, the Carillon was repeatedly passed from hand to hand, with each new administration trying in turn to address the peculiar physical and artistic requirements of this exotic instrument. Many previous management regimes have failed in either one or both respects.

Under auspices of the National Capital Authority, the Carillon has fared considerably better than ever before in its thirty-eight year history. Capital works and maintenance issues have mostly been dealt with, effectively if not always quickly. The physical working environment of the Carillon, as well as provision of new information to the public, has also been vastly improved.

However, the National Carillon has continually been lumped together with many other Canberra 'attractions' under NCA's National Capital Promotions unit. The artistic progress of the Carillon has been hampered by an inconsistent, somewhat chaotic marketing and media approach by NCA. Indeed, the litany of repeated promises & ensuing setbacks has been characterised by best of intentions being hamstrung by lack of follow-through, operating on a starvation diet of inadequate resourcing.

Rather than acknowledging the Carillon's unique identity and compartmentalising the asset as a 'stand-alone' entity, the NCA has continually relied on heavy cross-subsidisation and budget 'piggy-backing' for marketing and advertising of one-off events like film festivals, jet boat races & fireworks displays. It has been difficult to decipher from week to week just where the Carillon figures in overall NCA promotional strategy.

Unlike virtually every other NCA promotion, the Carillon is most assuredly NOT a one-off event: it is the single longest-running 'free-to-air' artistic endeavour in the capital, perhaps in Australia. Its long history of musical excellence requires BOTH quarantined funding AND protection from revolving-door staffing of government departments or the vagaries of partisan politics. Among the management structures that could profitably be explored are: specific dedicated legislation (new) and/or establishment of an independent National Carillon Trust.

B) Protection of the physical and acoustical environment of the Carillon

The National Carillon is, first and foremost, a ***concert musical instrument***. It cannot be otherwise *and* it certainly cannot move. To preserve its form and function, it therefore requires certain specific protections. I note with concern the following:

1) In this writer's professional opinion, the NCA has scored considerable success with the National Carillon since 2001 on the capital works and maintenance front. Yet despite the exponential growth in scope of the Carillon's performance and public events calendar in recent years, the NCA has repeatedly failed to embrace and endorse the success of the Carillon's artistic program with commensurate investment and resources.

2) If the Carillon is to maintain and protect its hard-won artistic position, this attitude (no.1, above) by NCA must change. Particularly alarming is the apparent reluctance (inability?) by NCA to protect the acoustical environment of the National Carillon pro-actively: i.e. from a planning/development point of view, once the acoustical environment of the Carillon is eroded or lost through encroachment by competing institutions, new construction, unsympathetic activities or adjacent, non-random noise sources, it will be next to impossible to regain the repose necessary for public enjoyment of the music.

This pertains not only to permanent development work around Lake Burley Griffin, but also to 'sonic collisions' (of which there have been many) between the music of the Carillon and competing, NCA-endorsed activities on or near Aspen Island. Carillonists are constantly advising NCA management about such collisions, but it appears little is being done to avoid their recurrence.

3) Another area of concern has been the retro-fitting of the Viewing Level of the Carillon tower as a quasi-commercial, revenue-generating meeting venue (and convenient private 'boardroom') for the NCA, i.e. CHIMES. Disruption of normal Carillon operations by allowing simultaneous competing activities on or around Aspen Island and particularly *in the tower*, is simply unacceptable. Upper level management at NCA has repeatedly turned a deaf ear to pleas of middle managers to remember the Carillon's primary function (=musical instrument), much to the consternation of carillonists. Cancellation of scheduled carillon recitals due to conflicting meeting & NCA function scheduling in CHIMES has been a worry for some time.

In long-term planning of the Capital, the specific spatial and sonic requirements of the National Carillon need to be protected and considered as ***inviolable***. This will require continual vigilance, preservation of institutional memory, cooperation and effective communication across diverse Government departments.

C) Provision of a secure, quarantined funding base

An American author and commentator once observed:

“The Carillon is neither a timid nor neutral creation.
It speaks with a clear voice – it means to be heard.”

Much like a computer, the carillon is all about ‘hardware’ plus ‘software’. In and of itself, a carillon is like a collection of (rather expensive) bronzes, i.e. *hardware* – a potential universe of musical nuance and delight, but which can do nothing by itself. The sparks of musical potential must be coaxed into life by the attentive efforts of highly-trained performing musicians, i.e. *software*. Just as a computer’s software must be maintained and upgraded, so the personnel playing the Carillon must possess a clear strategies and incentives for continual improvement, in order to serve the public most effectively.

The incentives to learn and perform music in public (and the Carillon is the most ‘public’ of all musical instruments) are many, including making a reasonable financial return on effort. Under the current NCA management, carillonists have been offered secure, annual service provision contracts. However, the level of fee payment for these services is still approximately only one-third to one-half what professional musicians elsewhere in the world regularly command. This needs to be re-examined.

Most disappointingly, the recent draconian budget cuts have collided head-on with the spirit of stability and continuance that has been carefully nurtured at the National Carillon since 2001. When the Labour Government required the NCA to make cuts to its overall budget, there was no specific direction given as to where such cuts would or should be made. The National Carillon simply ‘went along for the ride’ under Events and Promotions and NCA decided to cut the Carillon budget to a demoralising, unheard-of level. The operation of the Carillon is consequently in danger of coming to a grinding halt; there is little or no remaining incentive for current carillonists to continue promotion of the instrument. As with the acoustical environment, if the carillonist skill base is lost, it will be next to impossible to build again from scratch. The experience of the carillonist team is just as important a strategic asset as is the National Carillon, proper.

In consequence: long-term, quarantined funding for the National Carillon needs to be identified and secured if this national asset is to retain its standing as a centre of excellence in the national capital and in the hearts of all Australians.

Respectfully submitted,

Timothy Hurd MusM QSM CLJ
Director - National Carillon, Canberra

