

Is There Any Bush In The Capital's Future?

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The Impact of Canberra's Development on Rural Communities



Canberra's reputation as the "Bush Capital" predates the city itself. The term, that was initially intended as criticism of the underdeveloped site chosen to become Australia's Capital City, has become a point of pride for those who live here. The open rural spaces, large blocks of land and small town feeling are what have made Canberra unique.

Canberra has undergone significant changes since its foundation, developing the sheep paddocks into a budding metropolis now home to over 400,000 people. The changes have only just begun, as the Australian Capital Territory is projected to welcome in 170,000 new residents between 2018 and 2041, requiring 100,000 new dwellings to be built.

To prepare the city for the influx of people, the ACT Government has outlined a system in the [The ACT Planning Strategy](#). This strategy focuses on *infill development*, replacing low density accommodation such as free standing houses with medium to high density options including apartments, townhouses and subdivided blocks. Fears that historic traits that have defined the nation's capital are being taken away, have fueled criticism of this scheme.

As the city continues to grow, the biggest effects are felt on the fringes of Canberra. Traditional rural communities are compelled to change whilst farmers are forced to give up their land to make way for new development.

The Village of Hall

One such community is Hall. Located inside the Territory's north western border, it is known for the monthly Hall Markets where local vendors have sold their wares to the public for the last 33 years. The establishment of the Centenary Trail brought new attention to Hall, with businesses such as The Daughters at Hall offering refreshments to those who complete the One Tree Hill walk.

Long before the Australian Capital Territory existed, Hall was an important hub for farmers within the area. Built on Ngunnawal land, the first colonial development of the One Tree Hill Hotel opened in 1864. Twenty two years later the village was proclaimed, and by the turn of the century, Hall was an established service hub for the surrounding region.



Alistair Crombie, Honorary Curator of the Hall Museum, came to Hall in 1976. Purchasing his home for a bargain price compared to what was on offer elsewhere in Canberra, he moved to the village as it was still beginning its transformation from rural to

residential. “When we bought this place there was a much greater feeling that you were leaving the city and getting into the countryside. Once you left the 2CA radio mast, you were in the country.”

Alistair sees the village as more than just a place to live, it represents a part of Australian history that is slowly fading away. The can-do attitude of those who chose to remove themselves from the newly forming hubs in Australia to work hard at creating a better life for the generations to come after them. “It’s quite different from a public servant living in Weetangera. Suburbia doesn’t really have that ethos or spirit about it.”

In the last 44 years, Alistair has seen Hall and its surroundings change to what they are today. “You had a transition from a district populated by old sheep farmers. Hall was still a service centre to them. The mail run was very important, their kids still went to the school and they got their farm machinery serviced in the village.”



When Canberra’s population has boomed, Hall has experienced the consequences. Between 1960 and 1976 the population of Canberra tripled, triggering the development of suburbs now neighbouring Hall, including Spence, Evatt and Melba.

Canberra's population growth has since slowed down, but Gungahlin has grown significantly since the 1990s. With only 455 residents in 1991, Gungahlin now houses 71,000 people, nearly one fifth of the city's population. This boom in the area has posed the most significant threat to Hall's rural seclusion, with the creation of the suburbs of Palmerston, Ngunnawal and Nicholls in the early 90s, followed by more recent addition of Casey that now borders the village.

As new suburbs encroached, the previously isolated village of Hall changed significantly. A community once deeply connected with the surrounding farmland was now populated by people working in the city.

Since relocating to Hall, Alistair has experienced these changes firsthand. As Canberra continues on its development journey, he believes it is important to maintain the soul of the village. "A village has got a certain integrity, if you put 15,000 new suburban dwellers right up against it you've got no hope really. Anything that was special or distinctive about the village would just get wiped out."



Jenny Berron's ties to Hall date back to 1970, when her father purchased commercial land within the village. Now the owner of *Daughters at Hall*, she has benefited from the surrounding urban development.

When Jenny took over the business in 2014 it still resembled the general store that had been operating in Hall since 1889. “Within the first six months we realised it couldn’t be a grocery store anymore, nobody even wanted to buy a can of dog food off us. Locals only really wanted a bit of milk, bread and the paper.” Making drastic changes to the business, Jenny created the boutique cafe offering coffees, breakfast, lunch and hand baked goods. “It was a struggle - a big hard struggle. But it’s kind of paying off now.”

The creation of new suburbs in the region has been critical for the growth of Daughters at Hall. “It’s been a massive help. In the beginning I thought oh no, they’re going to have cafes and everything up there but Hall is like that getaway destination so we still maintain that popularity.” Initially servicing mostly people from Hall village and surrounds, Jenny has seen a steady increase in visitors from all around Canberra.

New urban growth surrounding Hall has increased her customer base, but Jenny believes that keeping the integrity of Hall as a unique rural village is just as important when it comes to keeping businesses running into the future. “I know that there’s a few people who would really like to see a lot of change and a lot of businesses come to the main street and for it to look like Federation Square... but Hall wouldn’t be the village that it is if you did that to it. And I don’t think that the residents, that’s not fair on them, because that isn’t why they’re here.”

Canberra’s Rural Landholders

On the opposite side of the Territory, I drive along Canberra Avenue. The *Canberra Outlet Centre* is directly behind me as I turn onto a small path through the median strip so subtle that you would miss it unless you were not searching for it and cross a cattle grid before being met by a dirt track.

My surroundings immediately change from urban to rural, engrossed by open paddocks I pass a small stable that’s made out of recycled materials - corrugated iron, chicken wire and repurposed timber. I’ve only been driving off of one of Canberra’s arterial roads for two minutes but it feels like I am hundreds of kilometres away from what we generally know as our city.

I’ve come to talk to Tom Allen, the president of the [ACT Rural Landholders Association](#).

Unlike most of Australia, all land in the ACT is *leasehold land*, belonging to the Crown. Introduced before federation, the leasehold system was intended to raise revenue to develop the newly conceptualised capital city, but by the 1970s having leasehold property was synonymous with having freehold property, unless you are a farmer.

Leasehold land can be taken back for *crown purposes*, including the expansion of Canberra. The additional land required comes from farmers within the Territory, who have their land forcibly bought back, or resumed, by the Government. The ACT Rural Landholders Association, or the RLA, serves as a united front advocating for fair treatment of rural landholders within the Territory.



Tom and Nina Allen have farmed on their property for over 40 years. During this time they have witnessed the struggles that farmers within the ACT have faced as their properties are resumed.

Tom Allen explains that although rural landholders now get appropriate compensation, that has not always been the case. “Now is the first time since 1911 that farmers have been properly compensated for looking after that land for 110 years. That's why the ACT Landholder's exists, so that when the government does resume a place, the government pays proper compensation.”

Due to the sparsity of farmers within the ACT, Nina Allen says that the RLA performs a key role in connecting the rural community. “The culture of farmers in the ACT is quite different to New South Wales. In New South Wales on Friday afternoon everyone goes to the local pub. And that's where they did their networking and helping and assisting each other whereas here were just so dispersed so we don't have a local pub. That's why the association is so important to Canberra. So people can meet once a month or every three months so that they do have that connection and support for each other.”

As Canberra continues on its development journey, Tom Allen worries that the government has lost sight of what is important for this city. With the implementation of strategies like infill development, he thinks that even residents in suburban areas don't get to experience Canberra city as they should. “Leasehold land was put here in 1901 to stop land speculation. Now land speculation is being done by the government. Look at the people now, they're forcing them all to live in these apartments. They've ruined a good city.”

Gold Creek Station



Two farms border the road into Hall from Canberra. One of those properties holds Gold Creek Station, offering a taste of rural Australia to tourist groups and holding functions. Operating for 30 years, the business is now owned by Craig Starr who took over from his father.

As I get out of my car, I am greeted by Davo, the younger of the two working dogs on the farm. He's a kelpie who still has his puppy-like playfulness and seems to lack a bit of the unfaltering attention and dedication to work that the older dog, Digger, is known for.



Once a large scale sheep and cattle farm, most of the land that made up this property has now been resumed to house Gungahlin's 70,000 new residents. Craig Starr has developed Gold Creek Station into a tourism and events business, the only way it can now operate. "If we didn't have the functions and weddings then we couldn't make money off the farm. As the farm got smaller, the carrying capacity of sheep got smaller too. If you're going to run 1000 sheep or 2000 sheep, the work isn't much different but the profit is double. Running 160 sheep you can't make any money."

What land is left of the property is controlled by strict Government restrictions which make it difficult to use for farming, despite being the responsibility of the Starr family to maintain. "We've leased the land from the government, but then they go and do

something else with it. Is that legal? It doesn't seem legal to me. If you were renting a house off me and I just said *oh, by the way. I'm just going to put some chickens in the spare bedroom, don't worry about it, you'd think, aren't I paying for this?*"



For over 50 years John Starr has worked at the *Gold Creek Station* property, and has encountered change in the surrounding Hall community. As a long serving member of the *Progress Association*, he has helped shape the village to be what it is now. “The theme of the village has changed. It used to be if you didn’t have a horse you were a nobody. It was just dominated by horses, and now I don’t know what it’s dominated by. Bloody native bees, I suppose”

Canberra continues to change, and the surrounding naturescapes, large residential blocks and vast farmlands that make the city special are all at risk of being replaced.

As I finish talking to John Starr, he tells me a story. “I was walking down there to check on the little native bee hive and I got ambushed by one of those bees. He landed on my shoulder and he started to talk to me, and he was trying to work out why we chop down their homes, uniquely designed by longicorn beetles and cockchafer beetles that tunnel and bore into the trees. We burn them, then we get recycled timber, put it together and

bore straight holes in it, high density flats for these native bees. And they're pissed off with that. They don't like that. Why don't we burn the recycled stuff and keep their good stuff?"

As development continues, only the future will reveal if Canberra's journey of progression preserves its naturally formed charm, evading the fate of becoming just another unremarkable city.