

# Podcast 62 – Canberra – Australia's Capital City

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,  
with Rob McCormack

*Podcast Number 62 – Canberra – Australia's Capital City*

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Hi,

When people think of the most important cities in Australia, they think of Sydney and Melbourne. They certainly are the two biggest and each has around 4 million people. But neither of these cities is the capital of Australia. Canberra is the capital of Australia and is where our national parliament and the government is located. Canberra has around 380,000 people and is the 8th largest city in Australia, so it's not very big. However, it is where all the big decisions are made.

Canberra is a very special place for my wife and I, as we lived there for nearly 3 years in the late 1980s. We loved our time there. We only left because of my job.

Unlike most other cities around the world, Canberra is very young, construction only having started in 1913. It was created to be Australia's new capital city when the nation came into being in 1901. For the first 26 years of Australia's nationhood, Australia's parliament was in Melbourne, in Victoria. In those early years, there was great disagreement about where the nation's capital should be, in Sydney or in Melbourne. They just couldn't agree. So finally a different location was chosen, about 280km from Sydney in the state of New South Wales. A special area of 814 square kilometres was set aside and it later became known as the Australian Capital Territory, or ACT for short. And so the argument was settled. It didn't belong to New South Wales, or to Victoria, it

belonged to Australia. The city to be built there was to be called Canberra.

Also unlike other cities, Canberra was a planned city. They wanted to design the best possible city, so an international design competition was held, with entries from all around the world. The winner was a design by Walter Burley Griffin, an American. He designed a city which aimed to be grand and beautiful, while also being a garden city. The idea was to preserve the beauty of the countryside and have lots of open space between and around the city. The centre of the city was planned to have a huge man-made lake as well as the main parliament building for Australia's national government, along with other important national buildings.

I think Canberra today reflects really well these great ideas from Walter Burley Griffin's winning design, around 100 years ago. One of the things I like about Canberra is the way it is spread out. Everything feels open with plenty of space. Canberra is organized into 7 areas, each with its own town centre with shopping, businesses, transport and of course people's homes. We call these satellite towns. Travelling between the satellite towns is easy and quick, with wide freeways and very few traffic lights. In the centre of it all is the main area called Central Canberra, where the nation's parliament and other government departments are found.



Canberra viewed from Mount Ainslie

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The main focus of Central Canberra is of course the National Parliament. It is a huge building which rests on Capital Hill in the very centre of Canberra. Like Canberra's design, the design for the parliament building was selected by having an international design competition. The winning design came from the architecture firm of Mitchell and Giurgola from New York. The building is built into Capital Hill, rather than on top of it, so that it blends in with the countryside. What an amazing building it is. It was opened in 1988 when we were still living there. That was an experience I'm glad we were part of. Queen Elizabeth II came from England to open the building. The building cost around \$1.1 billion dollars, an amazingly large amount back then. In fact, it was over budget by quite a large amount. But I think it was worth it. The building and its surrounding gardens take up 32 hectares – it's huge. I'll talk more about our National Parliament building in a later podcast. One of the most impressive things about it is the gigantic Australian flag which flies above it. The mast for

the flag is 81 metres high and weighs 220 tonnes. The flag which flies from this mast is 12.8 metres long and 6.4 metres high. It has to be replaced every 4 to 6 weeks, due to damage from the weather. It's an impressive sight on a windy day.



Parliament House at Dusk

By JJ Harrison (jjharrison89@facebook.com) (Own work)

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Besides the parliament, there are many other important buildings in Canberra, including the Australian War Memorial, the National Museum, the National Gallery and the High Court of Australia.



## The War Memorial

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They are all worthwhile visiting if you go to Canberra. The man-made lake is also very beautiful. It is named after Canberra's designer, so it is called Lake Burley Griffin. I remember well the many hours of fun my wife and I had when sailing our sailboat on Lake Burley Griffin.

I love the way Canberra has so many gardens and parks. There is always a place close by where you can have a barbeque and enjoy the outdoors, including on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin. I can remember when we first went to Canberra in 1986. They were building lots of new suburbs at the time, putting in the roads and footpaths, ready for the houses to be built. I can remember that the first thing that was built in each new suburb was a child's playground, even before the

houses. That, to me, says what Canberra is all about. It is a place for people, where the people and their environment come first. I have fond memories of Canberra and will always enjoy visiting there.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at [rob@slowenglish.info](mailto:rob@slowenglish.info). I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

## Podcast 62 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

[Start quiz](#)

### Vocabulary

aimed = when you try to reach a goal or a target

along with = together with

amount = how much there is of something

architecture = the study of building design

argument = a discussion where two or more people cannot agree about something

artificial = man-made

belong = when something is owned

billion = 1,000 lots of 1 million. 1,000,000,000

blends in = when something looks like its surroundings

came into being = when something is created for the first time  
capital = the main one  
certainly = to be sure of something  
competition = when people or teams try to win a prize  
construction = the making of a building  
countryside = the land outside of a city or town  
created = made for the first time  
damage = when something is broken  
decisions = when you choose something, to decide  
departments = a section of a larger organization or a part of the government  
design = to draw a picture of how something will look after it is created  
disagreement = when people have a different opinion about a topic  
environment = the natural world, or part of it, in which we live  
focus = the part which you look at most often  
fond = nice, good  
footpaths = a path where people can walk  
freeways = wide roads where traffic does not have to stop. Traffic travels freely  
gigantic = very, very large  
government = the people who make decisions for the country, who make laws  
grand = when something is large and of high quality  
hectare = an area 100 metres long and 100 metres wide  
huge = very large  
impressive = when you find something to be very, very good  
international = from countries outside Australia  
located = where something is found  
man-made = made by people, not by nature  
mast = a tall pole  
national parliament = a place where the government of Australia meets to make laws  
nationhood = being a nation  
neither = both things are not included

organized = the way things are set up  
over budget = when you spend more \$ than you planned  
possible = something that can be done (impossible means something that can't be done)  
preserve = to keep  
reflects = shows  
replaced = when something old is taken away and a new one put in its place  
satellite = something smaller which stays near to something bigger  
selected = chosen  
short = not tall  
spread out = when things are not close together  
square kilometre = an area 1 kilometre long and 1 kilometre wide  
suburbs = places in a city where the people have their homes  
surrounding = the space around something  
traffic lights = the green, amber and red lights which control traffic  
transport = how you get from one place to another. For example, bus, train, car  
unlike = not the same as  
winner = the person who wins a prize  
worthwhile = when it is a good thing to do