

PO Box 1095
Fyshwick ACT 2609

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NMA Review Secretariat
DCITA
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Dr Carroll, Dr Jones, Mr Longes, and Dr Vickers-Rich,

I wish to make a personal submission to the National Museum of Australia review.

My comments within this submission will be limited to areas with which I have some experience – the Museum’s permanent and temporary exhibitions and public programs.

I am not familiar with the National Museum of Australia Act 1980. My understanding of “the Government’s vision” comes from statements made by the Prime Minister, Mr Howard, and the Chairman of the Museum’s Council at the opening of the Museum in March 2001.

These were to the effect that the Museum should seek to tell the story of Australia and Australians. Both Mr Staley and Mr Howard observed then, as I recall, that it was important – and that it was expected – that the Museum should foster discussion and debate. They mentioned that they expected it would, at times, be controversial.

In my view the Museum should be evocative to Australians, so that it tells an Australian story. The permanent exhibits that I particularly enjoy in this regard are the Federation display, the Eternity gallery, and the displays about immigration to our country.

As an Australian, I can relate to them, which is an unusual experience for me in a museum – and they give me a better understanding of our recent history.

The Gallery of First Australians is an important exhibition in the learning process, as it has given me a lot of background and understanding of Aboriginal culture and history. This includes the experiences of Aboriginal people when Europeans arrived on this continent.

I have been to a number of temporary exhibitions and public programs, and count myself lucky to be a Canberra resident so that I can attend them. Especially informative were the programs on bushfires and Frontier Conflict. I am glad that the Museum has been able to make proceedings of such programs available to a wider audience.

The recent exhibition on political cartoons and the programs organised around it were enjoyable, amusing and stimulating. For many years, my family and I have visited the cartoons display at Old Parliament House. This year, seeing them in the new Museum provided for more lively and broader exhibition.

Since the opening of the Museum, we have had a number of interstate and international visitors. Nearly all of them have made a point of visiting our National Museum, and all of them have enjoyed it, and have been enthusiastic about the exhibits. Even more so, for those who were accompanied by young children.

The Museum has also produced a number of quality publications, the most memorable of which are the two books on Aussie English. I have sent a number of copies of this book to friends overseas – they have been amused by it, and some have asked for extra copies!

For all of these reasons, I believe that the Museum is doing an excellent job of bringing aspects of Australia to Australians and overseas visitors. As I have said, this view has been echoed by all the visitors we have talked to.

I wonder why it has been deemed necessary to hold a review of the operations of the Museum so soon after its opening. I would like to believe that you will make every effort to listen to the people who go to the Museum, and to consult and understand the surveys of visitors I believe the Museum has conducted.

You have a responsibility not just to a Government and its department in this review. This is a Museum of and for the people of Australia.

I look forward to your review being conducted in an open and public manner, so that the Museum's visitors can see whether their wishes are being appropriately considered.

Yours sincerely,
R.A. Forbes