

NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL

SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

reviewnmasec@dcita.gov.au

The National Folk Festival organisation has had an excellent and mutually supportive relationship with the National Museum since the Museum's earliest days at Yarramundi Reach. Increasingly, the Museum has participated in the Festival by providing museum storytelling at the festival and targetting the Festival's audience as potential visitors and, increasingly, the Festival has reciprocated by providing Festival performers and displays for special thematic presentations on the Museum site. In 2000 the Director of the Museum, Ms Dawn Casey, did us the honour of opening the Festival. We and our ever-growing Festival audience enjoy the Festival's links with the Museum, and we look forward to a strengthened partnership between us.

We strongly support the principle that the National Museum of Australia must be a scholarly institution of excellence. It must be financially secure, able properly to develop its collections and its research base. Its public displays be underpinned by extensive research, and by a publications program that draws on this research and brings it to a wider audience than is possible within the constraints of an on-site display.

While the Museum must be sensitive to the existence of different perspectives on history and society, it is a fundamental principle that it be able to challenge its audience, and on occasion judiciously to take people out of their comfort zones. (And, of course, where it takes a stance on a contentious issue it must be prepared to defend that stance objectively.) It must be given the academic and budgetary independence necessary for it to do all these things. It would be a tragedy, not just for the Museum, but for the Australian community at large, if the Museum was made - either through direct political pressure or indirectly via the appropriations process - to conform to the dictates of political correctness, as interpreted by the government of the day.

In making these comments we are conscious, for example, of the public debate regarding the Museum's depicting of the 'stolen generations' and 'Aboriginal massacres' issues. We find no fault with the Museum presenting confronting displays on these issues. Indeed, given the subject matter, it would be disturbing if the displays were not, to some, confronting. The only issue therefore in regard to these matters is the capacity of the Museum to demonstrate the quality of the research underpinning of its displays.

On a separate matter, we believe that the current policy of free entry to all but specially mounted exhibitions is a principal that maximises public access and should be continued.

Regarding the design of the building itself, we note that the acoustics in the foyer seem disappointing, as we have found a problem with echo in the sound system. Otherwise, we have no adverse comment in regarding the building itself.

Lastly, we take this opportunity to note that Festival-goers visiting the Museum have reported to us a very positive response among black American visitors (in relation to Indigenous displays and videos in particular), excellent involvement of visitors particularly through the Circa revolving theatre, encouragement of participation by visitors of all ages and an excellent program of launches of special exhibitions.

We appreciate this opportunity to express our support for the Museum and its independence from Government direction, and look forward to the results of your Review.

If there is any matter in this submission on which you wish us to elaborate, then please do not hesitate to contact us

Keith McKenry Phil Spring
President Director
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Phil Spring
Director
National Folk Festival
ABN 96 058 761 274
EVERY EASTER IN CANBERRA AUSTRALIA
17-21 April 2003
8-12 April 2004
61 2 6249 7755
61 2 6247 0906 fax
PO Box 156 CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608
E-mail director@folkfestival.asn.au
visit our website <http://www.folkfestival.asn.au>