



The From Little Things Big Things Grow exhibition.
Photos: Lannon Harley, National Museum of Australia

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

and the story of Indigenous Australia

Director Andrew Sayers responds to a newspaper report suggesting that a museum interpreting the Stolen Generations story should be built in the parliamentary triangle.

Looking back on his achievements as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd rightly pointed to his government's apology to the Stolen Generations as a profound and lasting contribution. In the massive amount of subsequent media analysis that moment has been universally acknowledged as a defining one.

But was the former Prime Minister really contemplating building a Stolen Generations Museum, reported in last Friday's *Canberra Times*, as a major second-term project? Perhaps we will never know how seriously this idea was being considered.

I must confess a slight unease reading the story.

I wasn't concerned that a Prime Minister was floating an idea with close colleagues – every Prime Minister does that and has to be able to do that. Neither was I worried at the prospect that Questacon would be bulldozed to create a site for the new museum. Such an idea is surely fanciful – governments are always conservative when it comes to trashing perfectly good buildings.

No, I was unsettled by the idea that a new museum specifically devoted to the Stolen Generations should be contemplated when we already have a museum – the National Museum of Australia – that already has a deep engagement with the Stolen Generations. The National Museum has a record of working with people to tell their stories and specific programs of collecting and preservation that relate to these chapters of Australia's past.

What is more, the National Museum has a mandate to present Indigenous Australia to the Australian community and that includes a responsibility to address the history and consequences of government policy in the lives of Indigenous Australians.

Whilst it may appear to the casual visitor to the Museum that the permanent displays are unchanging, they are regularly updated and have included, now, many stories of the Stolen Generations. The National Museum has brought many items into its collections in recent years with a view to being able to effectively communicate these stories.

Two on-going Museum projects are linked closely to the Stolen Generations. The powerful exhibition, *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, currently touring to the Melbourne Museum, tells the stories of people who fought for the recognition of Indigenous Civil Rights from the 1920s to

the 1970s. And the Museum is working with the National Library of Australia on a federally-funded Forgotten Australians Project. The aim of this project is to document the experiences of children removed from their parents and placed in institutions. A lasting legacy of this project will be an archive and an exhibition to be held at the National Museum in 2011.

The National Museum's responsibility to work in these areas derives from the role as set out in the *National Museum of Australia Act*. Firstly the Act specifies that the Museum is to include a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, part of which would be a collection of historical material relating to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Secondly the Act sets out the functions of the Museum and they are described principally as developing, maintaining and exhibiting a collection of historical material. The Museum is expected to 'exhibit material, whether in written form or in any other form, that relates to Australia's past, present and future'.

The expectations embodied in both of these aspects of the Museum's legislative mandate clearly embrace a role in telling the stories of the Stolen Generations.

Since I took up the role as Director of the Museum in June I have been looking over the *National Museum of Australia Act* to give some shape to discussions within the Museum as to where we should put an emphasis in terms of future programming, research ideas and collaborative platforms.

There is a remarkable clarity in the Museum's functions as stated in the legislation. Perhaps this clarity has not always been matched by a sense of the Museum's purpose in the wider community. To re-state a leadership position in carrying out its role is one of the pressing agendas for the Museum. The tenth anniversary of the opening of the building on Acton Peninsula gives us a great opportunity to pose questions about the Museum's role and areas of focus into the future.

In looking closely at the Museum's place in our culture I want to focus on three questions about our work. Is the Museum relevant? Is it coherent? And is it responsive?

Matilda House (right) greets Lester Bostock in the From Little Things Big Things Grow exhibition.



Relevance can be distilled into a question about the social good of the Museum. Museums must not simply see themselves as amassing collections but primarily as cultural agents working across a very wide range of areas of the life of our community.

In his recent and widely-read book in the museum profession, rather portentously titled *Museums in a Troubled World*, the American museum specialist Robert Janes lists six unique qualities of museums. It's a pretty good list. Firstly, Janes contends that museums are uniquely free to choose and act. In a democracy a museum should be free to chart its own course. Secondly, museums are seed banks – storehouses of collective memory. Thirdly, museums are (or should be) diversity personified. There is always more work we could do and do better in this area. And it was great, last week, to see the work the National Gallery of Australia and Wesfarmers have committed to in assisting the training of a new generation of Indigenous gallery and museum workers.

Fourthly, according to Janes's list museums are the keepers of locality (in a globalised world). Then museums are the bridge between the two cultures. The two cultures the author alludes to here are those of the sciences and the humanities that C.P Snow famously diagnosed as having been fatally separated in modern culture.

Finally, Janes contends, museums *bear witness*.

This last point has real relevance to the National Museum of Australia's role in collecting and sharing stories of Indigenous dispossession and dislocation. The National Museum is well placed to work with communities and individuals to tell these stories. But, importantly, the National Museum is also able to set such stories within the contexts of Australian history and against a background of Indigenous cultures – and it is here that we are most powerfully confronted with the twin realities that so deeply inform Indigenous lives – loss and survival.

Andrew Sayers, AM
Director, National Museum of Australia

This article first appeared in the Canberra Times on 8 July 2010.