

**2020 Vision  
The National Museum of Australia over the  
next decade**

**Talk by Craddock Morton, Director,  
National Museum of Australia to the  
Friends of the National Museum of  
Australia Foundation.**

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I have called my talk this evening 2020 Vision – The National Museum of Australia over the next decade. In it I want to think aloud about the sort of museum we might have and the things we might be doing between now and the twentieth birthday of our opening, if the gods (or more importantly the Government) are kind to us.

Of course 20/20 vision is also perfect vision, and works best in hindsight. So I will, when the opportunity arises, spend a little bit of time talking about what has gone well for us in the last ten years, and where we may have been in danger of losing the plot.

The American philosopher, George Santayana, famously said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

So we need to be careful about the lessons we take from our past endeavours – there is no room for false triumphalism; but equally there is no need to rush out and cut our throats.

Let me start then by saying, if I could have known when I arrived in 2003 where we would be with the Museum in 2009, I would have settled for that quite happily.

We have made good progress in what is in reality a long term task. And importantly, we have always had an eagerness to learn from museum best practice world wide (and a hope of going on to set it ourselves), and the flexibility to adjust when we have realised that the paths we have ventured down have been false trails.

I talked not so long ago about the circumstances in which the National Museum in this physical manifestation came about. I do not intend to traverse that ground again. You can find the talk on the Museum website, or in our journal Re-collections.

Some of you may be aware that my talk found little favour with my former boss, Paul Keating, who objected strenuously to being characterised as indifferent to the creation of the museum.

Elements of his article in The Australian require an answer.

The first is his description of the Museum as a lemon. Nothing could be further from the truth. The National Museum of Australia is an uncompleted task – but what is here today can hold its place with confidence both nationally and internationally. We have no need to apologise for its failure – it hasn't failed. I am confident that it won't.

So it follows that I am not repenting after going along for the ride with Mr Howard and the previous Government in their building of the museum. In fact, let me be quite explicit – I have enjoyed immensely the opportunity to be part

of the development of the National Museum of Australia – I have absolutely no regrets.

Next I have to say that the article in which Mr Keating complains about my accusing him of indifference to the building of the National Museum seems to me to absolutely drip with indifference towards building a national museum.

As he puts it, there was no great rush to do so. Other collecting institutions, such as the National and State art galleries, were augmenting their collections to present exceptional exhibits, and that was his priority. The site at Acton was too good for a heritage museum. What the project needed was an indifferent quasi-industrial building at the southern end of the lake, which could adequately house a collection of the many ordinary, and sometimes, great things, which the museum, over time, could scoop up.

That doesn't sound to me like a red-hot commitment.

The fact is that we could have lived with an indifferent building on a second grade site which could be built in stages.

We mightn't have preferred it, but it was genuinely the case that any building would have done. The important thing was to have a physical presence. The Acton site wasn't our preferred site anyway and needed to be the subject of a land swap – The Commonwealth already owned the old Printing Office site – where? On Wentworth Avenue at the southern end of the lake!

Mr Keating claims that our museum is deficient (the lemon reference) because we built the building before the collection was substantially completed. Before, as he put it, we got "the schematic right."

He is clearly of the view that the shape and character of the collection should determine the form of the building, and he argues that he was holding off on agreeing to a building precisely for that reason.

Now to some extent he is right. There is not much point in building a museum without having a collection to put into it. And few museum directors would want to be saddled with a building designed to house paper objects when the bulk of their collection turned out to be heritage machinery.

I imagine though you could probably find plenty of examples of successful museums which initially made the wrong call about their ultimate focus, or which started from scratch without much of a collection at all.

But this was not the situation that we were in. We had a substantial collection, well in excess of a hundred thousand objects. We had an Act of Parliament which had been in place for more than a decade, and itself provided the schematic for the museum.

And this schematic had been based on the recommendations of a major inquiry into the future of heritage collections in Australia and the role for a national museum – the Piggott report, which was delivered in the 1970s.

Mr Keating also claims that he was more concerned to provide additional budgetary funds for the NMA to grow out its collection, rather than building a building.

I have spoken to a number of colleagues who were here long before me about this. They cannot remember such funding.

As far as I am aware, and I'm pretty sure I'm right, the National Museum of Australia did not have an acquisitions fund until it was provided with one by the Howard Government in 2004. Prior to that its capacity to acquire objects was almost non-existent, unless they came from donations or the transfer of already existing collections.

I have no doubt that there was little support for this hoarding approach that Mr Keating favoured. People wanted to see our objects as soon as possible, rather than wait until some undetermined future time, ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred years hence. They wanted to learn about them, they wanted to learn from them.

If they were members of Indigenous communities in particular, they wanted them on display so that their stories, and the stories of the communities that created them, could be told, rather than swept under the carpet. They wanted to be able to teach their children, to commemorate, to celebrate, and, if necessary, to mourn.

Ask Aunty Phyllis Pitchford from Tasmania whether she was in no hurry to get a museum in which she could tell Australians that "We're here". Ask the Yorta Yorta people whether they thought it was important to recreate and display their possum skin cloaks as a process of cultural renewal.

Or talk to people from our multicultural community. Ask the Vietnamese boat people if their story needed to be told. Ask the people who built the Snowy scheme or worked on the prototype of the first Holden. Talk to our rural supporters.

Reading Mr Keating's article, I can't help feeling that his real interest was not in a national heritage museum, which he implies is a lower order enterprise. As he says "heritage museums, unlike art galleries, do not focus on a number of exceptional exhibits."

Mr Keating's interest was more in the encyclopedic museum, with a collection of international treasures, antiquities and so on, where the aesthetic value of the object was supreme and their interpretation as an historical object secondary.

In such a case, there is perhaps more of a nexus between the building and the collection it contains. Think of the great European palace and house museums.

But this is not what we were about. And that explains, I believe, why Mr Keating prefers the art museum format, because, in the Australian context, it gets closest to the European model.

Despite what Mr Keating claims, I believe that we have a lively national museum which addresses its themes in an appropriate way.

Certainly we have made changes as we have gone along. All museums do. And I will talk about a couple of these which are of particular importance to me when I come to talking about the future.

But before then I should briefly mention what we have been doing in recent times to enhance the museum.

As will be most obvious to you, we are in the process of re-doing the galleries; the high standard we have set in the first one, Australian Journeys, bodes well, I think, for what we will do with the others. And we have vastly improved the Circa experience, which works much better now as an introduction to the object based approach to Australian history that you encounter (or will encounter) within the permanent galleries.

We have re-energised the research function of the museum, which largely had to be put aside during the focus on getting the museum up and running. We now have a Centre for Historical Research, a much improved library and much more opportunity for our curators (and other staff) to take time out to finish degrees, books or research projects. We now have a much greater capacity to host visitors who wish to explore our collection.

Our conference program is now much more extensive, and better tied in with our exhibition program. An excellent example of this is the Barks, Birds and Billabongs Symposium, an examination in depth of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, which will take place at the Museum and in the Northern Territory in November. I believe that this symposium breaks new ground in its approach, and will provide a template for future action in this area.

We have a scholarly journal, re-Collections, which has filled a noticeable gap in the museums area and a museum press with a publishing program of which many other institutions would be very envious. Even better, the majority of publications come from our own staff.

Our web presence is increasing exponentially, and the amount of material we can provide to virtual visitors is growing, even if it is not growing as rapidly as we would wish.

Our temporary exhibition program is the most extensive in Australian museums, both in relation to those we attract from overseas and those we generate in-house. And we are almost the sole provider of travelling exhibitions to regional and rural Australia. We have had success now in travelling an exhibition overseas and have generated interest in providing more exhibitions for international touring.

We are now known as a major player in the object acquisition process, and the amount of funding that we allocate each year for acquisitions has increased steadily over the past five years.

Dealers, auction houses and increasingly individuals now approach us as a preferred destination and/or bidder. And while I have yet to be knocked over in the rush of people wanting to donate material to the Museum, I can at least see the beginnings of a queue! The Friends are of course playing an increasingly important role in this process and I thank you for it.

Our public programs have been reviewed, and are much the better for that. We now have a real connection between them and the core business of the Museum, although it must be said that the demands on us for favours on the basis of the most tenuous of connections still arrive daily. And our wonderful public programs staff hates to let anyone down!

I am particularly pleased that we are successfully exploring new connections between the Museum and other art forms. You are all familiar with the highly successful concert we hold each year using the A E Smith instruments from our collection. This year we have taken the musical connection a step further.

For the Canberra International Music Festival we commissioned a new major work of Australian music. It is a response by a wonderful composer, Elena Kats-Chernin, to our galleries and the objects in our collection. A sort of antipodean version of Mussorsky's Pictures at an Exhibition.

Some of us were lucky enough to hear the work have its world premiere here at the Museum during the recent International Music Festival. It is an absolute stunner, and I look forward to its eventual recording and public availability. It will become a standard piece in the Australian repertoire, and of course a great seller in our shop!

We are already a leader in the education field, and I expect us to maintain our position.

Unfortunately, time prevents me from talking about how well we are going back of house. But I can assure you that we have a robust governance structure, and very well managed facilities. We have first class human resource services, and our relationships with our other service providers such as cleaning, guarding and catering work well.

And last but certainly not least, we have an amazingly good front line to the Museum provided by our visitor services staff.

All in all, we are now in a position where we have a product which we can confidently pitch to potential donors and philanthropic supporters, and we are now putting more resources into this important task.

Let me now turn to the future. I will not be exhaustive, and hopefully not exhausting. But there are a few areas I want to cover.

Why, you might reasonably ask, when it's all going so well do you want to see things change?

The answer is simple; for us to be a world class museum requires us having things we don't currently have and doing things we don't currently do.

I'll divide these things into first, matters concerned with our building and its contents, next our national presence, and finally our international role.

But I want to stress two things at the outset.

First, when I talk about this, I don't have in mind radical change – I am not talking about tearing down and rebuilding. Most of the things I hope to see in place in ten years time are already in our thinking, if not in our formal planning.

Second, we will not become a world class museum by trying to be an encyclopedic museum. The days of creating a new equivalent of the British Museum, the Smithsonian or the American Museum of Natural History are gone.

We are not going to acquire collections of antiquities, or dinosaurs or ethnographic dioramas. We will not have rooms of fine jewellery or costumes or furniture or silverware.

What we will have though, is a museum of Australian history which explores in a dynamic and innovative way the national and transnational elements of our history and which brings these to the public both here and overseas in ways which are new and exciting.

So, first of all, the building.

To put it bluntly, this Museum is too small to be a national museum; and by a considerable way.

A few weeks ago I had a visit from the wife of the Korean President, who presented me with a volume on the National Museum of Korea. It was built not long after ours. It has more than forty-five thousand square metres of exhibition space, compared with our five thousand odd square metres. That's a huge difference.

If we look at other museums in the Asian region, not just other national museums, we are very much on the small size. Regional museums in China, such as the Younan Museum, or the National Science Museum in Taiwan are much larger.

When we get to North America and Europe, the situation is just the same. I can't tell you the floor size of the American Museum of Natural History, but I can say that it has twenty-five interconnected buildings that house forty-six permanent exhibition halls. The British Museum is fifty-four thousand square metres.

In this part of the world we lag behind too. Our New Zealand counterpart, Te Papa, has twelve thousand square metres of exhibition space and thirty-six thousand square metres of space open to visitors.

Even some of our State museums substantially exceed our exhibition space.

It is not the case that the Government, or its advisers, were unaware that size mattered. As early as 1975 the Piggott Committee, which recommended the establishment of the National Museum, proposed that the Museum should have three exhibition halls, to present its three themes of the history of the environment, the history of Indigenous Australia, and the history of European settlement, and, importantly the linkages between the themes.

It recommended that each hall have an exhibition space of 20,000 square metres, I repeat, 20,000 square metres each, with a mix of inside and outside exhibits. The whole complex should be located within a site of approximately 20 hectares.

Comparisons were drawn in the report with other museums around the world. And the opportunity afforded by an Australian national museum was directly stated. I quote:

“Virtually every nation has its national museum but here the argument for a national museum is particularly powerful. For the nation covers a whole continent; and moreover that continent, because of its long isolation from the other land masses, has had an unusual natural history and human history. A new comprehensive museum offers – for the first time – an unsurpassed opportunity to display the geological, climatic, natural and human histories of an entire continent.”

I think that there was an air of unjustified optimism from the Piggott Committee about what the Government would be prepared to fund, even though it proposed that the museum should be built in stages.

I doubt too that we really need a museum of that size. I would settle for a trebling, or even a doubling of our current size.

But we will not be taken seriously unless we get larger.

I well remember Howard Raggatt, the lead architect of the museum project, coming to me often to beg for more funding. It was impossible, he said, to build a proper national museum for the price. But there was no more money to be had.

And so we ended up with a small, and if truth be told, not even a perfectly formed building.

While this is sorely trying, it is not the end of the world. Acton Peninsula is a big space, and there is plenty of room for a stage two and even a stage three of the National Museum.

And we now much better understand how a museum works, and what it needs to have in it.

By 2020 I would like to see two things in particular. The first is a new stage of the museum. In the original plan there was room made for a second stage, and we have a crying need for it to be developed now.

I am not too concerned about where exactly it is placed. There has even been a suggestion that we could turn the Garden of Australian Dreams into a roof garden, and build two levels of the museum beneath it. This is probably the most expensive option, and given the amount of available space on the Acton Peninsula, probably not needed within our lifetimes.

But it would certainly capture the public's attention, and more dramatically than the Immigration Bridge, which I also happen to favour as an important link between the East and West cultural precincts. There was a bridge in the original design for the Museum, but we did not have sufficient budget to proceed with it.

A new stage would enable us to get our large objects out on the floor. I don't need to tell you how popular that would be.

It would also enable us to remodel our Centre for Historical Research, and, importantly, provide a new and more spacious library where staff and visitors could research our material history in less cramped surrounds.

Allied to this, I think we need a better visitor flow in the Museum, particularly on the lower floor, where there is the potential to turn into exhibition space areas which are not currently used for that purpose. We need to make it possible for a visitor to be able to do a complete lap downstairs without having to go in and out of the building.

Doing so would also enable us to create a number of new galleries to complement those which currently exist. So in addition to the forthcoming Creating a Country gallery, we could add a new gallery concerned with sports, arts and leisure, where South Back of House currently is. On the other side of Creating a Country we could have a gallery which dealt with urban life. Next to

our Gallery of First Australians, following on from the sports gallery we could bring into being a gallery which dealt with our history in the Pacific.

We can apply some of our reserve funds to this purpose, but we would also need the Government to provide new funding for the fitout, as it has already for Circa, Australian Journeys and Creating a Country.

We have made a start on all this by planning to get our staff who currently occupy South Back of House out of there and into an extension we are proposing to build to our existing Administration Wing. We have the planning pretty well complete, the funds required are there within our budget, and we are hopeful that the Government will give us the go-ahead very early in the new financial year. The project should take about eighteen months.

One important aspect of a redesigned lower floor will be a new Discovery Centre which we plan to locate in the undercroft at the northern end of the Garden of Australian Dreams; it will run from the exit of the Torres Strait Islands gallery through to the existing Kids Space, which it will incorporate.

A Discovery Centre is a significant omission from the current operations of the museum. I do not believe that the Boab Tree and the Cubby House space works as well as an educational space should. Kids Space, popular though it is, is now out of date with outmoded technology.

We urgently need an area in the Museum where people can not only get up close with objects with the assistance of expert staff, but also where they have the opportunity to access our database and associated material, once again with expert assistance.

We are currently researching best practice in this area, and we have asked a designer to come up with some options.

I want to stress at this point that we are not proposing to restrict young people's activity to the Discovery Centre alone. We must have scope for young people throughout the exhibition areas. Similarly, the Discovery Centre will not be just for kids. We approach learning as a lifelong process, and the Discovery Centre will need to cater for this.

It is at this stage that refurbishing of the lower ground floor gets more tricky. Between the stairs leading from the Main Hall and the beginning of the lower Nation Gallery is a space which is currently given over almost exclusively to function catering.

In my view it should be reclaimed for exhibition purposes when circumstances permit.

This would be a major change for the Museum, but I believe it is a necessary one.

Let me explain.

It's my view that the Museum was built at a time when interest was at its highest in the Museum being a competitor in the overall entertainment market.

To attract people, the argument went, we had to provide a total experience, particularly for young people and families. We had to compete with the video arcade, with computer games, with the fun-fair. We had to be at the cutting edge of the IT and communications revolution. We had to be able to compete in the catering business as well, with fine dining experiences, and classy function spaces.

No-one realised how hard it would be to do this and to do the other (and more traditional) things that museums did too. Like display our collection.

So we've ended up with a huge (and it must be said, magnificent) main hall. It's almost as big as our largest exhibition gallery. But we are very limited in what we can put into it because it has to perform first of all as a functions space. Objects, particularly large objects for which the lux levels in the main hall are least harmful, get in the way of setting out tables and chairs. So do showcases. We also devote a good percentage of total museum space to other catering functions (eg the Peninsula Rooms, the Backyard Café and the preparation spaces that support them.)

Now there is no question, in these difficult economic times, that the revenue that we earn from the catering lease is very welcome. But it is not enormous. And the time has now come, I believe, to think about the use of the space, and whether it could be better used.

This does not come from any dissatisfaction with our current catering partner, with whom we have a first class relationship. Rather it comes from a more mature and experienced reflection on what museums are all about, about what is really our core business, and where we want to be in the future.

And if you compare the revenue we get from catering with the cost of building the equivalent amount of exhibition space, you will quickly see what I mean.

I do not believe that providing a space for non-museum related functions is part of our core business. And the amount of use that the Museum gets out of the Peninsula Room in its current form is minimal.

We need to be clear what is at issue here. It would probably change the whole catering presence at the Museum. My understanding is that catering profitability resides overwhelmingly in the function side of the business; it is unlikely that the café and the restaurant of themselves would generate enough income for a major caterer to persist in the absence of functions revenue.

Good caterers do not grow on trees. Our current one, who has been with us since opening, would not easily be replaced. It would be a long and arduous process to rescope the catering function; the fine dining restaurant may well

have to go. But I think we probably need to make a choice and I do not see how we can fail to choose more exhibition space, even though the reconfiguring of that space would undoubtedly be a challenging exercise.

Let me now turn to storage.

Like me, I am sure that you are all delighted that we have been given permission, in the recent Budget, to proceed to the next stage of the process of getting funding for major capital works, in this case the building of a new Centre for Collections.

We will be funding from within our own resources what is known as the second pass business case, where we get down to the fine detail of the project's design and costing. This hopefully will be considered in the 2010-11 Budget context.

It is unfortunate that we have to investigate non-preferred options as well as our preferred one, which is a new purpose-built facility at Yarramundi Reach, which sets new standards of environmental responsibility for a museum store. This will add to the bill for the exercise, but is, I believe, an acceptable price to pay to get to the next stage.

I am not going to talk about why we need the Centre. If you don't know, ask the Friends to organise a visit to our Mitchell sites and/or read the relevant Audit Office report on Safeguarding the National Collections. But believe me, we do.

Even if we do manage to make next year's Budget consideration there will still be much to do after that before we have the new facility up and running.

We will have to get the agreement of the Parliamentary Works Committee and the National Capital Authority. We will have to complete final design and construction and fitout. We will have to move from our existing leased premises (all five of them).

And most crucial, we will have to learn how to operate a new centre so that all of its clients can maximise the benefit from it.

For this will not merely be a store. It will be a site for a major open collection which I hope the public eventually come to know well and which they will be able to visit on a regular basis, when planning requirements are met. It will be another research facility.

At the site people should be able to see the collection operating, where it is able to do so. They should be able to gain an understanding about what our conservation and registration staff does, and see them in action.

My hope is that by 2020 we have become the benchmark for the handling of collections in a "green environment".

Next I want to talk about content within our permanent galleries and to do so I need to step back a little and return to my remarks about the museum initially having been seen as being in the entertainment market.

The construction of a building for a museum seen as a venue for entertainment, I think, carries some implications for the sort of content that goes into it.

So I want to suggest that our approach to our permanent galleries was governed, not only by our collection, or rather the limitations of our collection, but the shape of our spaces and the totality of the activities that we thought we wanted to pursue.

What approaches come to mind when you think of entertainment as a primary *raison d'être* for a museum? When you have to work in a space about which, as the architects said, there was a good element of frivolity?

I suggest that fun, humour, quirkiness and so on become the keys; that a more serious historical approach is subsumed under a more emotional response.

Hence the Eternity Gallery, and a view of some that the rest of the permanent display was more or less an Eternity gallery writ large.

Sober reflection, didacticism, reverence in this context almost seem out of place.

If you think in terms of Charles Dicken's great novel, *Hard Times*, we went for the circus rather than the classroom. Mr Gradgrind, with his focus on facts and more facts, and his dismissal of fancy, would not have felt too comfortable at the Museum (although of course, Mr Gradgrind eventually came to see the need for both!)

This was combined, in my view, with the other great museological fashion of the time. The idea that pretty well everything in the museum was contestable, and that, as well as entertain, the other main function of the museum was to provide a safe civic space where this contesting could be carried out. Where the public could cheer or boo the contestants. The historical debate as a spectator sport, if you will.

For some people this was just the sort of museum they wanted. But for others, including some members of our Council and many of our visitors, it was rather a venue for dismay.

My view when I arrived at the Museum was that we had gone too far in being the "open" museum. I thought then, as I think now, that the great majority of the public wanted more from us. They wanted what the historian Mark McKenna calls a conversation about hope - to see things which they believed were crucial to their understanding of Australia and how it came to be, treated

with seriousness and respect. They believed in a hierarchy of events. They believed that the Museum should provide an authoritative view.

This does not mean that they saw no room for community involvement; for allowing voices hitherto unheard to have their say and bring their perspective to bear.

No-one wanted just a godlike curator, handing down the truth from on high. Not even our curators. In fact, what the curators particularly didn't want was to hand down the Government's view of how Australian history should be presented, or, to put it another way, to be conscripted into the Government's forces to fight the history wars. No matter who formed the Government.

I think there was a bit of tilting at windmills here. Despite the predilections of some Council members, I have never thought of the Government as having an agenda for the Museum in that sense.

On the contrary, the Government was probably more unsure than most about what the Museum was for. If it wanted anything it wanted accuracy and evidential backup for what the Museum put forward.

What everyone wanted was a balance.

And they wanted the balance mediated by a range of numinous objects, as well as ephemera.

We have started to redress the balance. I believe the Australian Journeys Gallery is a great illustration of this and I congratulate the curators who have understood the need for this approach and implemented it.

Over the next ten years we will be applying this approach to our other galleries as they come under refurbishment. As I said earlier, Australian Journeys has set a high benchmark, and I expect the standard to continue into Creating a Country, and from there to the eventual refurbishment of Old New Land and the Gallery of First Australians.

The refurbishment of Old New Land is something to which I am particularly attracted. It occupies an awkward space and the content is not as rich as it might be.

Here I think that we have an excellent opportunity to work in relationship with the CSIRO. They have a superb collection and limited opportunity to display it.

This could be a marriage made in heaven, as they say.

I am not suggesting that we should become more of a natural history museum, in the traditional sense. That role is adequately filled by other Australian museums.

But there is the potential to take a leading role in environmental history, both national and transnational, and to give real attention to a history of deep time.

I hope we seize the moment.

I want to move on now out of the building, and address some matters to do with our national presence. Being a national museum, as opposed to a state or regional one, carries with it some unique responsibilities.

We have to address the whole nation in our exhibition content, rather than only a part of it. And we have to reach out to all parts of Australia in what we do, and not rely on Australians to come to us.

In doing so during the next decade we need to both extend and refine our reach. We need to put more work into understanding the ways in which the communications revolution is affecting museums, and position ourselves to take advantage of the possibilities that fast broadband through fibre to the home will deliver.

If we don't, it will be like being in the manuscripts business after the invention of the printing press and moveable type.

We must become a producer capable of going direct into peoples' living rooms, and a receiver of information from the same source.

We have put a lot of effort into our web presence, and in the last couple of years our web visitors have trebled, to around two million a year. This is the prime area for future attendance growth, but we will miss out unless we can satisfy people's changing needs.

It's not just a matter of historical content, which I will talk about in a moment. It's just as much a matter of understanding that the public is learning to approach content in a different way, and indeed learning to produce its own content, and we need to be more responsive to this.

What used to be the province of the CD Rom can now be delivered online, and delivered in ways that allow people to approach learning interactively - to create their own learning paths which incorporate their own material. We need to focus more on creating multiple pathways to information and learning, where we get away from the compulsion to present a final product or completed story and become more relaxed about being less in control.

I want to stress that this does not mean that anything goes. We should not sacrifice quality for variety or depth for breadth. There is still the same need for an authoritative approach. But we need to be careful to ensure that we are not bound by an idea of history as something the museum provides as a linear, single directional narrative structure.

We also need to incorporate a variety of information within a unified frame – hitherto we have thought of the traditional forms of book, picture,

documentary, oral history, photographic archive and so on as separate forms; we now need to approach them as related factors in a spatially realised environment.

We also need to utilise a variety of delivery methods or networks, and recognise the valid part that each plays in the communications arena. As well as the standard web page, the blog, Twitter, Facebook, Skype and a range of other forms of social networking will provide opportunities for us. I am much too old and uncool to canvass how this might develop over the next decade, but develop it will and we must be ready to utilise such progress.

Maybe we will end up with an NMA site on Second Life, or its successor!

A recent article by a Visiting Fellow in our Centre for Historical Research, Paul Arthur, explains all this much more effectively than I can in this context. Read his excellent paper on “Exhibiting History” in volume 3 no1 of our Journal *re-Collections*.

So how might all this cash out for the Museum? Well, one program which is currently underway for us – Defining Moments in Australian History, provides a bit of a clue.

We intend to facilitate a national discussion which focuses on the above topic. But rather than the usual approach of an authoritative exhibition and a conference of intellectual heavyweights, we propose a discussion generated by smaller forums held in several locations and conducted primarily on-line.

These forums would stimulate and inform the debate. Small panels involving Museum staff, historians and public commentators, would discuss the events or episodes that have helped to shape particular periods or regions.

We want to span the entire history of the continent, and recognise that the events that shaped, say, South Australia are often different from those which shaped, say, the tropical north, just as we do in our permanent gallery displays.

Popular participation in the venture would come primarily through a Defining Moments website. It would encourage and allow participants of many kinds across the nation to contribute responses, commenting on forum participants’ views, proposing their own defining moments (ones relating to individuals, families, communities, regions and states and territories), as well as those relating to the nation as a whole, and commenting on other contributors’ posts.

The website would, when working properly, constitute a gigantic national conversation in which Australians aired and shared their views about Australian history.

Our own role would be to provide leadership by framing the discussion, stimulating and facilitating it, and starting it by suggesting events and ideas.

But we would not want to limit the debate to a fixed menu – an overly authoritarian approach would, I believe, quickly kill interest.

I am delighted to say that we have approached the ABC to partner us in this enterprise, and they have given us a positive reception. Much detail of course, remains to be worked out, but it would be the icing on the cake to have the national broadcaster on side, particularly with its reach into every home in Australia, and its experience in ‘best of’ programming.

If this all goes to plan, over the next decade I can see the National Museum becoming recognised as the key institution in encouraging Australians to reflect on, talk about and debate their history. That Australians will see the Museum as a first port of call for their historical enquiries; and that the end product of this project would be a sort of giant peoples’ history of Australia.

Speaking of new histories brings me to the next aspect of our future which I want to address.

We have debated for a considerable period of time what counts as evidence for museum exhibitions and how Indigenous evidence, in the form of painting, dance, music and so on should be weighed against the more formal accounts which we are used to in the western world, such as the official record, the European eyewitness account, the police notebook and so on.

Things which are in writing against things which are not.

This came to a head a couple of years ago when Council, whose role includes recommending for and against objects to be included in the National Historical Collection, declined to add a Queenie McKenzie painting, Mistake Creek Massacre, to the collection.

Council were of the view that the event the painting portrayed, that is, the killing of Indigenous people by the police, was at odds with the official police record, which characterised the event as a conflict between two groups of Indigenous people. In such a situation Council believed that the official record had to prevail.

In the Council’s view, it was not appropriate to give what amounted to an untruthful record of an event in our history the same status in the National Collection as the truthful record.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the massacre was a well established part of the Indigenous oral history of the region, and that the former Governor-General, Sir William Deane, had travelled to the scene of the alleged massacre, to apologise to the Indigenous descendants for the police killings.

While there was undoubtedly an element of the history wars resurfacing in this case, more importantly it did raise the larger question of how to acknowledge that there were often other accounts of our (shared) history other than the

European record, even though they may not have been written down, and how, in the event of conflicting information, to decide between them.

After all, one does not dismiss the official record lightly.

Part of the answer is clearly to be able to understand better the other side of the argument. We have to get these non-written forms interpreted by the relevant Indigenous people themselves, and made available to other Australians.

The National Museum holds a lot of such material, and we are increasingly using it as an alternative history of country, with the approval and assistance of the Indigenous communities.

Our temporary exhibitions on Papunya and Utopia (Emily) were forerunners for us, as are the individual community modules of the Gallery of the First Australians. And we are now engaged on a major new project, the Canning Stock Route project, which illustrates perfectly our progress in this area.

The project is a collaboration which shares and explores the art, cultures, histories and connections of the people, country and communities surrounding the Canning Stock Route.

When we think of the Canning Stock Route, we think of Alfred Canning, and the North/South route he pioneered to get cattle to market at the beginning of the twentieth century. It's almost 2000 kilometres long, about a third of the length of Western Australia.

We think less about the Indigenous communities of this area, and the millennia that they have occupied the land; of the interactions between them, which were more East/West; of the spiritual significance of the land and the cosmology, which provided a body of traditional law which governed all aspects of Indigenous life. All of these aspects are revealed through the items in the collection.

It's not that one history is right and one is wrong – it is more that the Indigenous history, when added to non-Indigenous history, provides a so much richer understanding. It tells the history of the same area through Aboriginal voices, and Aboriginal eyes. It fills out the record.

The collection is a peerless archive. It is not just an art collection, beautiful though it is, but also an extensive artefactual and documentary assembly of Indigenous histories that might otherwise be unknown or ignored.

We intend to use the model of the project, with its elements of collected oral history, dance and music, film making and other cultural forms, in other Indigenous communities throughout Australia to detail their histories too.

The end result, I hope, will be a history of Australia through Indigenous eyes. This will be of incalculable value to all Australians, and will provide a model for other museums in other countries to follow.

In doing this I think we will also have to rethink our approach to Indigenous recruitment.

First of all, we will need to employ more Indigenous staff. I hope that, by 2020, we will have at least doubled the number of Indigenous staff we have, even though we are already well ahead of the public sector average. In numerical terms we can and must do better across the board. We need to become a destination of choice for Indigenous employees.

We can only do so if we put in place new employment terms and practices which are more attuned to Indigenous cultural imperatives.

We have made a beginning on this I am pleased to say. But I look forward to the day, for example, when we can happily accommodate our Indigenous employees working for us from within their communities, rather than having to embrace the delights of living in Canberra.

We must also abandon the idea that the nine to five, five days a week model is the only way we can employ Indigenous staff. Some staff will prefer to work under this arrangement, but we must also make room for other approaches such as permanent periodic employment, for group employment or other forms of job sharing, for sanctioned movement between employment locations on either a regular or ad hoc basis.

Perhaps we need to think about a much greater use of consultancies where the tendering process and the deliverables are not quite as clear cut as we would expect under normal Commonwealth financial requirements.

Such an approach would enable us to work productively with those Indigenous people whose preference is to remain on or return to their homelands or outstations and indeed to unlock their knowledge and ensure its transfer both within their own communities and to the wider Australian population.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we need to employ only those Indigenous people who have access to special Indigenous knowledge. We also need to train, develop and employ to a greater extent Indigenous people in normal employment categories.

But one thing we can do that other employers can't, precisely because we are a museum, and it is part of our core business, is to employ people who have these special skills and knowledge which don't fit the normal employment market profile.

I am very pleased that we are working closely with a new body at the Australian National University, the Institute for Professional Practice in Heritage and the Arts, which I have the honour to chair. IPPHA will provide

training, registration and professional recognition and development for people working in these fields and has a primary concern with the promotion of Indigenous heritage development.

This is an important future direction for Indigenous economic progress and it is appropriate that we are in there from the start.

Let me turn now to the ever-increasing international presence of the Museum as an integral part of our future as a national and international institution.

We hope to take the Canning Stock Route exhibition overseas after we have toured it in Australia. I have recently been in Japan, where our collaborating partners from the Emily exhibition, Yomiuri Shimbun, have expressed interest in this being the next Australian exhibition they will sponsor.

Our relationship with Japan, and other countries in the Asian region, is of great importance to us.

There is no doubt that cultural diplomacy is a tool of choice in any diplomatic kitbag, and that having a deeper understanding of each others countries can only help develop our bilateral relationships. Such an understanding can readily flow from an exchange of exhibitions, and a range of research collaborations, and I believe that the Government is increasingly recognising this.

One such collaboration could be with the National Museum of Japanese History, a research oriented museum in Tokyo with substantial similarities to our own Centre for Historical Research. During my visit there we spoke of the way in which we were looking at similar topics, such as the relationship between people and the environment and the place of Indigenous minorities in historical development.

The idea here is that rather than tell each other about what goes on in each other's country, we would develop topics of mutual research interest, and investigate them together, along with other international partners.

The National Museum of Japanese History has already developed a number of MOUs with international museums, such as the Smithsonian in the United States of America, to this end. We will certainly be looking at whether we can have a similar arrangement.

I also met with the Directors of the National Museums in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara and spoke to them about future collaborations. They are very happy to explore the possibilities.

It seems that the success of our groundbreaking Emily exhibition in Tokyo and Osaka last year is well known, and is standing us in good stead.

I think developing our Japanese relationship provides us with the basis of extending our collaborative interest into other countries in Asia, particularly China, Korea, Singapore and India.

I want to do this not least because of a need to strengthen our future international exhibition program. A strong and varied international program is, I believe, essential to any world class museum.

One thing we are finding is that it is becoming harder and harder to attract world class exhibitions to Australia, because of distance and cost. We need to find a way around this.

With the growth of major museums in Asia, and the development of their capacity to enter this market, I think the opportunity exists to create an Australasian exhibition circuit, where five or six museums could agree with major exhibition providers in the United States and Europe to take a series of touring shows, for which the focus would normally be their home markets.

Such a guarantee would be too financially attractive to ignore, particularly now that these providers are much more in the business of creating duplicate exhibitions which could travel in both parts of the world simultaneously. It would be much easier to achieve than trying to talk the British Museum, say, into sending a show from London to Canberra with nothing in between or following.

And just as we could band together to seek material from Europe and the US, if we each agreed to produce one show which could travel to each others' museums, that would mean that each partner would be guaranteed five or six international shows in addition.

I hope that we can work towards this over the coming decade.

Just as important as our Asian relationships are those with our Pacific partners. Here I believe we have to exercise a leadership role.

A leadership role is not a supervisory role; hopefully we have gone past being the policeman of the Pacific – we need to be an enabler, a consultant, a purveyor of best practice. We also need to be a listener, and to develop a better understanding of what the Pacific museums want, rather than acting only on what we think they need.

The National Museum of Australia already funds activity in this area. Not only do we allocate our own funds to the Pacific program run by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), but we also act as an agent for other Australian museums in seeking funding from AusAid.

I have to say that the program has to this point not been as successful as we hoped.

No-one is to blame for this. Rather we, and our Australian colleagues, underestimated the degree of difficulty that this program would involve. Political uncertainties and unrest makes progress difficult, and the capacity of our colleagues to use the funds that we provide has not been as great as it might be.

But we have to persevere.

Over the next few years the National Museum of Australia will be embarking on a major project in New Guinea, working with arts practitioners, universities and museums to produce a show which links contemporary New Guinea cultural practice back to traditional forms.

While the most visible outcome of this project will be a major touring exhibition, which will travel both within Australia and we hope throughout the Pacific, there will be much else besides.

For example, there will be the commissioning of new art and artefacts, and the skilling of new practitioners as we encourage intergenerational transfers of cultural practice, including the collecting and passing on of intangible heritage.

There will also be a formal training aspect, where we invite our New Guinea colleagues to Canberra to work with us to enhance their curatorial, registration and conservation skills, as well as the other aspects of education and governance that are essential for the development of the modern museum.

We also intend to send our own staff on short secondments to New Guinea so that they may have first hand experience of the issues with which our colleagues have to deal on a daily basis – this will help to inform our approach as we further develop this project.

And hopefully it can become a model for our future involvement in the Pacific.

I think that while it is always dangerous to generalise, we can say that many of our fellow museums in the Pacific are not in the shape in which they would like to be – lacking in differing extents expertise, security, collections or facilities.

We can do little about security as an individual museum, although we are strong supporters of measures taken through umbrella organisations like ICOM and Blue Shield. And I have already foreshadowed how we intend to help on the expertise side.

When it comes to collections, I think that increasingly we will face a problem that manifests itself around the world in various ways - repatriation.

There is no doubt in my mind that many Pacific countries have fewer “treasures” than they would wish to have remaining in their collections.

Here I am thinking not so much about human remains or secret/sacred material. We already have policies in place for dealing with these matters and I think we can rightfully claim a place as a world leader in this area.

I am referring more to material in our collections which we have come to possess through legal means such as donation or purchase.

We will come under growing pressure, I believe, to repatriate some of this material. I hope we can amicably resolve such matters, and not find ourselves in an antipodean version of the Parthenon Marbles stand-off.

I say this because I think the focus of the debate will change over the next few years from the legal aspects of the possession of objects- who owns the past – to the moral aspect of where things are to be best located.

The National Museum of Australia is in a good position to exercise the moral leadership in this area which could provide a benchmark for the rest of the world.

We can do so precisely because we are not a universal museum with an encyclopedic collection that we cannot afford to lose. We have not had, in the way that such museums have historically taken as their role, an aim of civilising humankind through the objects in our collection.

Because Australia, rather than being a major and longstanding colonial power, has itself been subject to its own colonisation, the opportunity exists for us to behave towards others in the way we wish our own Indigenous people had been treated. We should behave to our Pacific colleagues the way the National Museum already does with regard to our own Indigenous communities and their cultural property.

We should be a strong proponent of the proposition that objects are best viewed in situ, in this case meaning the countries from which they came, where they become for the inhabitants the material conveyors of a history which would otherwise be sorely deficient or eventually even lost.

I might add that they also become an important source of income generation in countries whose capacity to earn national income is already circumscribed. Why should London, Paris, New York, Berlin, or indeed Canberra, gain the benefits which accrue from the cultural tourism which these objects encourage?

Certainly we will lose part of our collection, at least in terms of owning it. But there will always be enough objects available, and loans will be forthcoming from those to whom we return their core material.

Rather than knocking ourselves out acquiring a larger pan-Pacific collection, increasingly in competition for objects with the Pacific countries themselves from which the objects came, we can focus instead on being a centre for the

display of pan-Pacific history. Our current exhibition Vaka Moana and the very successful Cook show of a few years ago provides us with the lead.

I think the friendship and co-operation we could generate, and the relationships we would develop from working co-operatively with other museums on such projects, would be considerable aids to our standing in the museum world.

Now I know that in the case of the Pacific museums their physical circumstances, in the main, leave a lot to be desired. But we should not use this as a figleaf.

Rather we should encourage the Australian Government to work actively at a Government to Government level, through our substantial aid program, to provide a capital works program which would see the refurbishment to acceptable standards of existing museum premises, or the construction of new ones.

I venture that this would vastly improve the regard in which Australia is held in this part of the world.

So there you have it – The National Museum of Australia can grow towards greatness not by radical change, but by focusing on and developing further things which are already underway.

We need a bigger building, new galleries, and the continuing application of an authoritative approach to content. We need to continue putting into practice the realisation that being a national museum carries special responsibilities to take all Australians into account, but also unique opportunities to do Australian history in a more comprehensive way. And at an international level we need to accept that our most important relationships will be with our colleagues in the Asian Pacific region, and that we need to put a high priority on building them up. We also need to continue to build and exercise a moral authority in the area.

What we don't need to do is to try and become a British Museum at the other end of the world.

You have been more than generous in listening to me for this length of time, and I will spare you any further ear bashing, except for one final remark.

You may have heard me say, often, that it is a disgrace that we have not had an Indigenous member of the Museum Council during my time here as Director. Happily I do not believe that we will need to wait another decade for this to change. But I do hope that in ten years time we will have more than one Indigenous member, and that they will be appointed either for their expertise in governance, or because of their Indigenous knowledge, or both.

So there you have it. Some of the things that are happening now, and some of the things I would like to see in the future, from wherever I am.

Most of all I hope the Museum will continue to operate in line with its values and behaviours which you can find set out in our Strategic Plan.

It is worth repeating them here.

“The National Museum of Australia operates with the highest ethical standards. It embraces truth and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and recognises the importance of aesthetic considerations. The Museum acknowledges the contributions of all Australians to the country’s historical development and accepts a fundamental requirement for fairness and equity in its activities.”

I hope people will never say of the Museum, as Winston Churchill said of his predecessor as Tory Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, “he occasionally stumbled over the truth but hastily picked himself up and hurried on as if nothing had happened.”

I am confident this will not be the case.

Thank you.