

Submission to the National Museum of Australia

Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

Introduction

The Council is to be congratulated for providing members of the public with an opportunity to submit their thoughts and perceptions of the National Museum of Australia for consideration by the Review Panel. This submission is based on several extended visits to the NMA in late 2002 and early 2003 and it is hoped that it will be of use to the Review.

I believe that the observations and reflections contained in this submission are relevant to the Review's Terms of Reference. In particular, the issues I raise in this submission pertain to -

Examine the aims and content of the Museum's exhibitions

- and -

Whether the Museum has complied with its role and functions as set out in the National Museum of Australia Act, its Charter and other relevant documents.

Getting to know the NMA

The NMA has been controversial from the time of its opening in March 2001, but probably like many others I personally had not given the matter much thought until I visited for the first time in mid-2002. On first acquaintance many of the exhibits seemed rather banal in nature, and the commentary on the accompanying captions sometimes descended to the level of the inane. For example, 'Australians remain avid readers of newspapers and magazines'. After all, who doesn't? But perhaps that reaction does not reflect an understanding of the nature of a modern museum and contemporary standards of museology and curatorship.

Even on a first visit, however, the political tone of some of the exhibits was apparent. Anyone who grew up on the Left in Australia in the 1970's would have no difficulty recognising the political resonance of most of the items in the 'Snapshots of Australian History' display at the end of the upper level of the 'Nation' gallery. Personally, I agree with many of the implied messages (the folly of the Vietnam War, the triumphant rescue of the Tasmanian rivers, anger at the 1975 dismissal, and so on). But one can nonetheless feel uncomfortable that a partisan presentation of these events, even if one agrees with it, is being portrayed as the national story (albeit in 'snapshots'). What is presented is not the national story. It was a highly partisan perception of selected elements of it.

Then there are the omissions from 'Snapshots'. The only reference to the events of the First World War was the campaign against conscription. But surely most Australians would expect to see a reference to Gallipoli, or Ypres or the Somme and other battles, in which Australian troops were involved? Similarly, there is no reference to the exploits and execution of Ned Kelly, our greatest opera singer Nellie Melba, the death of Burke and Wills, the navigational feats of Matthew Flinders, the Desert Rats of Tobruk, the Menzies era, the Petrov defection, the ALP's Great Split, the institution and effect of the DLP, and years in the wilderness.

Fair enough to say that this is a 'Snapshots' exhibition, and as such cannot be all-encompassing. Nevertheless, for a national institution whose duty must surely be to present a vision of Australia that embraces at least to some extent the perceptions and aspirations of the people as a whole, the omissions are striking. It is very difficult not to conclude that those items that have been selected for inclusion are intended to serve a specific political purpose.

The 1970's revisited?

Subsequent visits only served to deepen this perception of partisanship. Far too often, the wording of the captions and the arrangement of the exhibits reveals a political motivation. And the political tone is oddly reminiscent of 1970's student radicalism. In those days people got a lot of (probably quite innocent) enjoyment out of ridiculing suburbia, its values and inhabitants, and thinking - possibly longingly - about wars of resistance and liberation in far-off corners of the world in which we could never hope to participate. Many of this generation never got over it, but continued to hanker for a political environment and associated moral certainties that belong to a world now long since past. I would not have expected to see such 1970's nostalgia appearing as a common thread in a national institution like the NMA, but the reflection of that world-view is quite unmistakable in many displays in the various galleries.

It is especially apparent, for example, in the 'Nation: Symbols of Australia' gallery, which treats common suburban artefacts like the Hills hoist - and indeed the concept of the suburb itself - with studied disdain. 'Love them or hate them,' the caption reads, 'suburbs are important to Australians' ideas about "the good life"'. Well, most of us - Australia being an overwhelmingly urban society - have no choice but to live in the suburbs, including migrants, many Aboriginal people, academics and museum curators. The jeering tone, unless I misunderstand the various captions entirely, seems quite misplaced. Who is it that 'hates' the suburbs, anyway? I don't. And if there is some point to the question (in 'The Backyard' panel), 'Is this where Australians are most truly themselves - sociable, relaxed, domestic and democratic?', I am afraid it is lost on me, especially the reference to 'democratic'.

This 1970's set of prescriptions is evident elsewhere, too. In 'Cities of the Edge', one of the 'Tangled Destinies' exhibits, we find a reference to urban houses in Sydney being destroyed to make way for freeways. Many people thought open spaces and native trees

were more precious, we are told, so 'some took up the fight to save them'. This is simply nostalgia for long-lost protests against the introduction of the freeway system in the mid-1970's. I suspect that 'fight' lives on only in activists' memories.

Anyone who lived through the 1970's recognises the iconic and symbolic values of the guerilla, particularly as expressed in the figure of Che Guevara.. It was a binding motif for student radicals and the admired subject of many 'protest' songs, as well as political exegeses (not least by Mao Zedong, but also by Sartre and Fanon) which were the staple diet of radical undergraduates, and often of their instructors as well.

The NMA relies heavily on this image and associated concepts in one of the 'First Australians' exhibitions, 'Contested Frontiers'. A reasonable reading of the early relationship of the European and indigenous inhabitants of Australia is that, at that stage, each confronted the other in a state of mutual incomprehension that led, on occasion and in tragic circumstances not necessarily of the making of either, to death and destruction on both sides.

But the NMA prefers the romantic notion of guerilla warfare, as 'British aggression and land takeover was met with armed resistance from Aboriginal people'. To a 1970's survivor, these are simply recycled clichés of standard liberation texts.

The NMA is an institution that projects itself as unafraid of controversy and which seeks to present challenging and divergent opinion. But challenging for whom? There is nothing in the various galleries that would remotely 'challenge' people who grew up with the portfolio of left-wing ideas that hallmarked 1970's and early 1980's suburban Australia. They are on very familiar ground throughout, and understand all the references.

Discerning the recurrent themes

On a single visit, or even two or three, some of these underlying themes are not readily apparent. After several visits, however, it becomes clear that a definite agenda is being prosecuted here. Wherever a radical activist perspective can be added to the national story, it is duly added. I have mentioned the inclusion of the references to opposition to the introduction of the freeway system. In similar vein, 'Quarrying for Wealth', in the 'Nation' gallery, contains a small sub-display that celebrates anti-mining sentiments, especially the anti-uranium movement and references to the Campaign for a Nuclear-Free Australia. There is a frequent injection of Aboriginal rights motifs and commentary into various displays (for example the item in 'Snapshots of Australian History' relating to the establishment of Canberra as the national capital which refers to the Aboriginal spectator).

What is manifestly clear, I think, is that the Museum's curators are consciously adding the activist slant to as many of the displays as they can find opportunity or cause to. They want to challenge the morality of mining, hence the commentary, in 'Quarrying for Wealth': 'Not all Australians share this vision. Some argue for different understanding of

the value of the earth'. Similarly, they deplore the unauthorised use of Aboriginal motifs in mainstream cultural artefacts like banknotes. So in 'Australian Dreaming' (in the 'Nation' gallery) we are told:

'Aboriginal culture and people have often been used to symbolise Australia. For many, use of such imagery is offensive and disrespectful. For others, it is evidence of the enduring power of these images as a source of inspiration in the creation of Australian symbols.'

This is presented as balanced commentary (the 'bad' perspective followed by the 'good'). But the display itself powerfully reinforces the negative message of the first statement, particularly the 'Appropriation' panel, which comments that 'there can be a fine line between admiration and theft'.

Also in this exhibition is the panel 'Aboriginal and Australian?' It reads:

'There can be tension between being both an Aboriginal and an Australian hero. Cathy Freeman's decision to carry the Aboriginal flag on her victory lap at the 1994 Commonwealth Games attracted both praise and criticism.'

This caption is carefully worded and there is nothing here that is technically inaccurate. But there was a lot more to this story than is conveyed by this display. The event excited great interest in the media, not because Freeman carried the flag, but because an insensitive official reprimanded her for having done so (she had broken some rule or other; sensibly enough, nobody much cared about that). In the outcry that followed, the overwhelming weight of public opinion was on Freeman's side, and considerable public anger was directed at the hapless official. It takes a fairly determined activist to translate what was near-universal support for Freeman into a question about whether one could be both an Australian and an Aboriginal, and use this as an illustration.

There would not necessarily be a problem with any of this were it not for the fact that it seems almost to be achieved by stealth. The Museum does not advertise itself as an institution with a radical agenda, although it has no problem with being controversial (see its 'Ethics Statement'). It projects itself as an institution for all Australians, irrespective of their political beliefs. But I think that to treat honestly with its public it needs to be forthright about the messages it is seeking to send. As I said, it takes a few visits before you begin to appreciate how the subtle insertion of the activist perspective is calculated cast doubt on perceived or received 'wisdoms', and suggest alternatives. This is not something the average visitor would expect from a 'conventional' museum and I think it should be incumbent on the NMA to make its intentions plain.

Because of these political undertones, I think it would be very useful if the Museum were to publish a consolidated list of its captions for all the exhibitions. Without such a list, it is very difficult to register the full impact of what is being said across the whole of the Museum. The public does not have the means of assessing the total message of the Museum, nor of determining its own response. In its 'Ethics Statement', the NMA makes

clear it is not afraid of controversy. That is a fair objective; but it must be balanced by fairness in the way it treats its public. Visitors should have the means of comprehending the whole of the NMA's message, rather than confront individual elements of it as they wander through the galleries.

For example, in the caption that accompanies the display on 'Kingplates' (I think in the 'Tangled Destinies' gallery) the text notes that kingplates were often treasured by the Aboriginal people who received them, followed by this reference: 'But they were also a way of controlling Aboriginal groups'. This is an assertion presented as fact, with no context or evidence being provided to enable us to assess its validity. A casual visitor would probably pause, surprised and somewhat confused by the reference, and then move on, wondering what the point had been. But this is, in fact, a common theme hinted at throughout the galleries: despite any 'comforting' appearances to the contrary, the Europeans were really malignant and oppressive invaders.

Experiencing the galleries: 'Tangled Destinies'

Entrances can tell you a lot about the intent and purpose of what lies within (witness the unforgiving caricature of John Howard that greets you as you enter the Hall). This is the case with the entrance to 'Tangled Destinies'. The visitor's first introduction to the Museum proper is a display that makes clear the underlying message of the gallery and perhaps the NMA as a whole: the failure of the Europeans to comprehend the nature of their new colony, and their despoliation of the land in which the unique spirituality of the Aboriginal people was rooted.

The 'Natures of Isolation' display informs us, 'Aboriginal people already had detailed knowledge gained over thousands of years [that] was sometimes accepted, sometimes not'. Close by, one sees 'Encountering Australia', which, of the European arrival in Australia, tells us: 'The result was biological invasion on an unmatched scale and the extinction of many native animals and plants.' It is the visitor's introduction to the European interaction with indigenous Australia. And the news is all bad.

The negative distinction between European and indigenous knowledge is reinforced by the exhibits about Europeans not believing that the platypus laid eggs, although the Aboriginals told them it did. And, backing up the charges of environmental vandalism, the 'Endling' display tells us that although the extinction of the Tasmanian Tiger had become the stuff of legend, 'many smaller animals and plants vanished unnoticed'. (How we now know that they vanished 'unnoticed' is not explained.) Follows a section on the rabbit-proof fence and an electronic wall-size display of all the pests the Europeans brought with them and the damage they wrought.

With the 'pest map', the NMA captures the visitor and obliges him or her to wait until it the full impact of the display has registered. The unmistakable message is that arrival of the First Fleet with its European freight was simply another species of pest infestation, and the effect was environmental devastation of the worst kind. Of course, this is not overtly stated, although, given the NMA's penchant for controversy, there seems no good

reason why it should not have openly articulated what is clearly implied. It is the unavoidable implication of the first series of exhibits in 'Tangled Destinies'.

It is perhaps unsurprising that many visitors, who have probably come expecting something rather different (for example, a 'real' museum, in the conventional sense), look completely bemused.

But it seems reasonable to question whether the one-dimensional picture painted by the Museum is entirely fair to the settlers, who after all had no idea that the pests they carried would have such a devastating effect on the land, the state of scientific knowledge being what it then was.

The NMA has nothing good to say about the voyage of the First Fleet or the society whose accomplishments made it possible. At that time, Britain had pretty much perfected the art of building a fragile vessel out of bits of wood and pieces of string and measures of sailcloth (figuratively speaking), held together by tar and iron nails, which was capable of safely transiting the great oceans. Such craft, powered by the wind, guided by the sextant, which fixed their lat. and long. relative to the position of the celestial bodies, were capable of navigating unerringly from Portsmouth to Sydney Cove - literally from one end of the earth to the other, neither getting lost nor sinking. No display that I saw in this gallery appeared to make any mention of the science, technology and social organisation that made such an extraordinary voyage possible.

There is little about the Europeans' art, literature, science, values or religion that appears worthy of mention, let alone approbation, by the NMA's curators. Indeed, it is difficult to see that the NMA regards Europeans as having a culture at all, unlike the indigenous people, whose own culture is elsewhere described as vibrant, resilient and unified in diversity. Europeans are presented as usually frail individuals, not as a people who were shaped by and emerged from an overarching system of powerful shared values, expectations and mores, with deep historical, political, moral and spiritual roots of their own. If Europeans had a collective identity, it was only as an invading and destructive presence.

This negative view of the impact of the arrival of the Europeans is, in view of the devastation of Aboriginal culture and society that followed, completely understandable, justifiable and defensible - from the position of a political activist. The question is whether a national institution should be projecting that interpretation to the world. This is especially so given that section 6 (2) of the Act under which the NMA was constituted states that, 'The Museum shall use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest.'

'Horizons'

Upstairs in the 'Horizons' gallery, the entrance is again instructive. Here the most eye-catching display among the first exhibits is an aggressive poster headlined 'SINK THEM!'. This anti-boat people poster is sourced from National Action, a little known and

politically irrelevant right-wing extremist group that opposes immigration into Australia by non-Europeans, and is presumably intended as a commentary on the current political debate about asylum-seekers. I suppose there is shock-horror value here, since the views expressed are particularly repugnant, but what is the point of the display? Is the NMA saying Australians in general share the deeply offensive position taken by NA?

As so often in the Museum, one senses a political agenda at work but it can be difficult to pin down. Given the tendency of the Museum to underline the activist contribution to the national story, and considering the strength of activist sentiment on this particular issue, my impression is the Museum is, indeed, saying just that. But the message is subtle, and achieved by implication, rather than straightforward articulation.

For example, the exhibit 'Questions of Loyalty' has commentary that tells us, 'While governments demand loyalty to the state, people living in Australia often hold a range of allegiances'. The implication is that there is a tension between people who come to Australia from other countries and what the government 'demands' (not 'asks', as might be expected in a democracy) of them. It is perhaps worth pointing out that this 'range of allegiances' has not prevented Australia from developing over the past 50 years into one of the most successful multi-cultural societies in the world, with few of the stresses and none of the violent episodes that have marked the European and British experiences. So what is the NMA trying to tell us here?

Searching for an underlying theme, it is worth considering the terms of the commentary in the display entitled 'Marketing Migrants'. This tells us that 'The Department tried to win support for the [post-WWII migration] program from the Australian people..[It] seized on publicity opportunities, pointing out how much migrants had to offer'. Although the obtuseness of the text makes it difficult to penetrate exactly what the NMA is getting at, the most reasonable interpretation seems to be (taken together with the SINK THEM! poster and other indications) that Australians really did not want or welcome migrants.

There is a similar, implied message in another display, this time from the 'Nation: Symbols of Australia' gallery downstairs. The 'Australian Way of Life' exhibit describes how migrants were encouraged to 'adapt as quickly as possible' to the values of the Australian way of life. The strong implication is that their own cultural values were neither wanted nor welcome.

Some of the material that supports the subtle 'unwelcome' theme is provided in a quite misleading context. For example, in the 'Exile' display, there is reference to an Italian, Illario Cappeluti, who had been interned in Australia - 'As war raged in Europe in the 1940's', as the text has it. There is no reflection of the fact that Italy was one of the Axis powers, along with Nazi Germany and Japan, with whom Australia, as one of the Allies, was then at war. At that time, the whole world was a theatre of war: Africa, the Soviet Union, East Asia, the Pacific, and the Mediterranean. Most of continental Europe (where 'war raged') was, save for the neutral powers, occupied by the Nazis. So the real context for Cappeluti's internment was entirely suppressed.

In 'Horizons', too, there are reminders of European racism and turpitude, just in case we had forgotten. The exhibit on Warrant Tench asserts that he was 'unlike many colonists who viewed Aboriginal people as a lower order of civilisation'. There are no references, no examples, no quotes to support what is (once again) an assertion to establish a plainly political point. We are left in no doubt that Tench was very much an exception to the rule, but we are not given the information to validate that assertion.

'Nation: Symbols of Australia'

This is perhaps the strangest of all the galleries that deal with the 'European' history of Australia. One can appreciate that it adopts a 'social history' approach to museology, and that may have merit. The problem lies in the curious mix of banality ('Australians remain avid readers of newspapers and magazines' is from this gallery) coupled with denigration that informs its commentary, and the intellectual methodology it adopts in conveying its messages.

The entrance is, once again, interesting and instructive. It juxtaposes a 'royalist' image of the Citizens' Arch against the gallery's introductory banner. The plaque on the Arch itself reads: 'Built to celebrate the 1901 visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall for the opening of the federal parliament'. The best comment the NMA can make on the occasion of Federation, it seems, is that Australians were regrettably royalist.

It is not even clear if the Arch was built to celebrate Federation, or the Royal visit. The Museum says the latter, but logic and intuition (even if not informed by an understanding of Australian history) would suggest otherwise. Here, the NMA's captions do little to assist the visitor or the curious student, but one has a strong sense of doubt about their reliability.

A characteristic of this gallery is the preponderance of post-modern descriptive techniques in dealing with what are putatively 'real' things. Post-modernism prefers to understand things as they are 'described', or as they are 'depicted', rather than as they 'are' (some post-modernists would dispute that anything actually 'is'). Thus the image of the Australian digger is no more than one of the most 'recognisable and cherished icons' of Australian culture. By describing the Digger as an 'icon', the NMA immediately makes him unreal. He has no actuality, no immediacy, no reason to call upon our imagination, let alone our respect. He is just a description.

Elsewhere, the Museum comments, to similar effect, that 'artists and writers created the image of the digger [which was] popularised in newspapers and magazines as embodying the Australian character' [*italics added*]. The implication is that he did not embody the Australian character at all; he was just imagined as such. Interestingly enough, this display is headlined 'A Real Character'. In view of the commentary, it is difficult to see this as anything but a conscious irony, since the text says he was not a real character at all. But presumably for added political effect, he is elsewhere said to be depicted as 'an independent, hard-working male Anglo-Saxon prospector' [*italics added*]. As for the

shearer, he 'was usually represented as a laconic, hard-bitten and hard-working white man' [italics added]. These images, the NMA seems to be saying, are just creations. They did not really exist, except as tainted cultural constructs (I say 'tainted' because of the cumulative - and intended - political impact of 'white', 'male', and 'Anglo-Saxon', all of which are otherwise purely gratuitous inclusions).

These techniques and methodologies are familiar to anyone who has undertaken formal studies in post-modernism, or otherwise has an interest in the subject (which totals very few people). I doubt they are recognised by – let alone have any explanative value to - anyone who has not. This means that the average visitor is not going to have the means of understanding how and why the artefacts are being presented in this way, and no means of deconstructing the displays. No wonder so many look bewildered. Indeed, I suspect that a visitor from Botswana, the Czech Republic or Thailand would find these references as easy to decipher as a cryptic crossword in Japanese. It seems a very questionable choice on the part of the NMA to use this methodology as its intellectual vehicle to explain Australia to itself and the world.

It is interesting to consider 'The Australian Way of Life' panel in greater detail to unpick both what it reveals, and what it obfuscates. It reads:

'She'll be right, cobber. Give a bloke a fair go. Ladies bring a plate.

'After the turmoil of the second world war, a new, unifying idea was promoted - the Australian way of life. This was a set of attitudes and behaviours that all migrants were encouraged to adopt as quickly as possible. Although the details were hard to define, its symbol was the idealised suburban family, relaxed and friendly, committed to prosperity and stability, but also modern and contemporary.'

'The Australian way of life', the Museum tells us, was not an actuality. It did not emerge from the shared experiences and values of the Australian community over many generations, as one might have been supposed. Rather, it was an idea 'promoted' for a political purpose (unity). Presumably the 'promotion' referred to was by the Government, but the NMA does not make that clear. It had a central 'symbol' - the suburban family - but even that symbol was not 'real'. It was an 'idealised' image.

Australians, therefore, were directed to think of themselves as relaxed, friendly, prosperous, stable, modern, contemporary. But these were not real dreams or aspirations born of their own experiences; they were elements of an 'idealised' image mandated by the Government. It surely cannot have been intended by the curators, but there are almost echoes here of Orwell's '1984' or Huxley's 'Brave New World', where a people's social and cultural aspirations were prescribed for them by external and malignant powers.

One wonders if the inhabitants of 'suburban' Australia in the 1940's would have agreed with this early 21st Century depiction of their 'reality'. They may have been too preoccupied with rebuilding lives and communities left traumatised by the greatest

conflict the world had ever experienced (described merely as 'turmoil' in the caption) to worry about symbols. And the average Australian family would probably not have found the 'details' of their way of life 'hard to define'. A half-century later, perhaps understandably, a post-modernist academic or curator could find them something of a mystery.

On the NMA's reading, there had not been an 'Australian way of life' as such before the end of WWII (it was 'new' and 'unifying' in 1945). This is a surprising conclusion, given that the Australian people had managed to get through drought, fire, frontier conflicts, flood, Depression and war for over 150 years, in the process accumulating a considerable literature, a distinctive linguistic idiom, and an impressive artistic inventory. Their political and cultural evolution had encompassed the growth of a strong union movement, an impressive sporting record, a vibrant immigrant community, and progression to a mature, stable democracy which, among its other achievements, accorded electoral rights to women far earlier than its European counterparts.

Through all of this, the NMA seems to tell us, Australians had still not managed to develop a unique sense of collective identity, based on shared experiences and common values, that could be regarded as a 'way of life'. This despite the NMA curators' unrivalled access to an extensive assemblage of national artefacts that could have been used to tell a very different story. But it is not the story that the NMA wants to put before its audience.

As a final comment on this display, it is perhaps worth pointing out the conceptual discontinuity between the three statements that headline the display, and the text that follows. The text tells the average visitor nothing about the meaning of the phrase 'Ladies bring a plate', or 'Give a bloke a fair go'. Perhaps 'fair go' is defined elsewhere in the gallery. It deserves to be. It is certainly not evident in the way the Museum treats those of its subjects of whom it does not approve.

More generally, for a gallery that seeks to create some kind of inventory of Australian icons, there are many conspicuous by their absence. I may have missed these references, although I looked hard: swagmen, bushrangers, stockmen, squatters, selectors, the Eureka Stockade, Burke and Wills, Ludwig Leichardt, or Matthew Flinders, Joan Sutherland, footballers and cricketers, Nellie Melba or Uluru, the beach or Cyclone Tracy. Perhaps they appear in other galleries such as 'Eternity'. But 'Nation' is about icons, and what it means to be Australian. It is reasonable to expect some of them to be here. If there were significant references to Australians' sporting achievements, I did not see them. There was no display on the Sydney Olympics, hailed as the best ever. I did not notice references to Australia's great writers, artists, poets, politicians (other than selected Labor Prime Ministers). Perhaps I shouldn't have expected to, and have somehow missed the whole point of the Museum.

Finally, although I heard the strains of 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' (not an Australian song) over and over again, I never heard songs that captured the more 'conventional' spirit of Australia, such as 'Waltzing Matilda' or 'The Overlanders'. Perhaps 'Tipperary' was a

favoured marching song of the Diggers, and is included for that reason. But it seems strange to fill a gallery entitled 'Nation: Symbols of Australia' with a song that recites the names of stations of the London Underground, unless the purpose is to demonstrate how 'British' Australia still was. Australia has a marvellous repertoire of song and dance which, though certainly derived from British and especially Irish precursors, is definitely and unambiguously Australian. Could we not hear something of this music, rather than a song long associated with 'imperial' Britain?

The 'First Australians' galleries

The contrast between the entrance to the indigenous galleries and those of the Europeans could hardly be greater. Nothing negative is said or implied here. One passes a display of wooden ceremonial poles, which are well presented and effectively positioned, and walks by (or through) a curtain of wall-high transparent screens into the lower end of a broad hall. On the walls you see projected displays of Aboriginal dances.

This is one of the few areas in the Museum which provides space and time for contemplation and reflection, and it is effectively and attractively done. The mood is serene and thoughtful, and the visitor is invited to pause and listen to the music and experience its particular resonances and sonorities. In fact, it is the only space in the Museum where I have actually seen people sit for many minutes and take in a display, instead of moving on within a few seconds (barring the interactive computer-based displays). It is very well executed. There is nothing like it in the non-indigenous galleries.

The first gallery that one enters, 'Since Time Immemorial', is also excellent. Artefacts are well-presented and explained, and there is a genuine sense of immediacy (no post-modernism here) in the way Aboriginal spirituality is articulated. The presentations both inform the visitor, and respect the wishes and customs of the artefacts' traditional custodians. Moving downstairs, the 'Paipa' gallery of the Torres Strait Islanders' culture is particularly good. These exhibitions have real impact and for the first time, visitors know why they are here and what the Museum has to tell them.

The words at the entrance of 'From Time Immemorial' remind us: 'We are the oldest surviving race of people, culture of people, in the world. We know that our people have been here from the beginning of time'. This is both apposite and moving.

The gallery recalls the great gift of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, and the extent which all others are in their debt - the later arrivals, who have encroached on their sacred spaces, and visitors from countries far away. Nowhere else in the history of the races of the earth has there been preserved the spiritual experience of the first people to walk the surface of the world and to know it: to comprehend the nature of their existence as human beings, to map their network of relationships with the environment, and to embody their knowledge of the universe in dreams. People from whose cultures that first understanding has long since been erased have much to learn from the indigenous Australians. These excellent galleries are eloquent of this process of learning.

Because of this, I personally find it difficult to criticise the indigenous galleries in any way. Even the best galleries, through the medium of video displays, contain elements of activism, sometimes a strident activism. Because one of the mandated functions of the Museum is to create a 'Gallery of Aboriginal Australia', and since the story of the relationship of European and indigenous peoples has been one of death, dispossession and destruction on the side of the Aboriginals, there can be no objection to that. It is part of the national story and must be fairly confronted and fairly told.

But one of the lower galleries, 'Negotiating Co-existence', at least arguably takes activism a step too far, and 'Contested Frontiers' leaves the Museum vulnerable to the charge that it manipulates images and events for political purposes. Throughout this gallery, the confrontational polemics are remorseless.

As you approach the central exhibits, you are confronted with the display 'Images of Co-operation' with the sub-caption 'The Artist's Eye'. The post-modernist tone intrudes again (only for the European, not the indigenous artefact): this is not what happened; this is the way the Europeans depicted what happened. The text reads: 'How Europeans interpreted the reactions of Aboriginal people to Europeans' [italics added]. The implication is clear that these images create a false image of co-operation between the Europeans and Aboriginals (although, to be fair, there is also reference to Aboriginals assisting Europeans).

The next display is a disturbing artwork, 'The Annihilation of the Blacks', depicting a row of hanged Aboriginals, and inspired solely by oral histories. It is clearly intended to dispel any impression that one might have gained that the intention, or at least the impact, of European settlement was anything other than murderous. Interestingly, the visitor is virtually forced to move from the 'Images' display to the annihilation image: the only alternative direction takes you to the exit. It is hard to say whether this is accidental or deliberate, but the effect is to entirely negate the impact of the previous display, which spoke of Governor Philip's instructions to maintain good relations with the 'natives'.

From 'Annihilation' one turns 180 degrees around to the 'frontier conflict' exhibition with its compilation of massacre stories. Here again, one must wait until the Museum allows you to investigate the individual incidents. First, the NMA builds a full map of Australia with the conflict zones – all coincident with the spread of settlement, to ensure that you don't miss the point. Nor do you have time to examine each of the incidents; when the map decides to rebuild, access to the individual displays is cut off.

It has to be said some of these 'massacre' stories have recently been shown to be false, others highly contestable, and the whole issue of frontier warfare is a matter of intense contemporary dispute. At the NMA, they are all presented as facts, although here is a small, inconspicuous wall plaque acknowledging that the events are subject to historical debate. A number of commentators have provided better argument for and against the 'truth' of these incidents than I could hope to do here, so there is no need to labour the point.

From the 'massacre' exhibition we are drawn to an exhibit that focuses on the 'Stolen Generations' theme, with its stories of suffering and heartbreak. It is difficult to criticise the display and it seems unfeeling to do so. The stories told here capture the cruelty of past policies and communicate their implications for the present.

Nonetheless there are things that have to be said, without compromising the integrity of the stories. These relate to the exhibition's overtly political message. The audio narration for this display continually speaks of white Australia's desire, or rather determination, to 'breed out the colour' of indigenous Australians, and depicts this as a conscious policy of the authorities. At time the NMA was opened, early in 2001, it was already clear from various critiques that there were grave doubts about this proposition - sufficiently grave to preclude it from being presented so unambiguously as established fact. The NMA's opening came after the findings of the Gunner-Cubillo case, in which Justice O'Loughlin spoke of the 'total absence of evidence to support' such a contention, at least in the post-WWII years, and only inconclusive indications in the decades prior.

The narrator then speaks of assimilation as a kind of second-order 'breeding out the colour' policy, by which of course the NMA means genocide, even if it does not use the word. Aboriginals, we are told, were made to 'act white' although they still 'looked black'. This policy was presented as an alternative to the earlier imperative, which was to 'preserve the purity of the white race from contamination by the blacks' (or words to that effect). An additional purpose of assimilation was to create an unpaid or poorly-paid domestic labour force for well-off whites.

This presentation is quite unfair to a past generation of reformers. In the middle part of the 20th Century, assimilation, despite its recent bad press, was the position that progressive people took. A recent, thoughtful book by the respected journalist Rosemary Neill ('White Out', Allen & Unwin, 2002) makes this clear. It was the decent alternative - then - to the old, repulsive, stereotypical attitude that regarded Aboriginals as ignorant savages who could be tamed but not civilised.

Whether right or wrong in their underlying assumptions, by today's standards, assimilationists believed that Aboriginal people were fully capable of participating on an equal basis in modern society, and totally entitled, as of right, to an equal place at the Australian table. Even if they were wrong about that objective, and self-determination is now accepted as the more just outcome, there is no need to impugn their motives, and attribute genocidal ambitions to them. To do so reduces the gallery's message to the level of aggressive propaganda.

It could have been otherwise. If there had been some specific indication that the gallery was intended to convey a state of mind (anguish, loss, grief, suffering, wholly justifiable anger) as much as a putative empirical 'history' of white-indigenous relationships, there would have been nothing (in this visitor's eyes, at least) to object to.

Appraising the NMA

In its 'Service Charter', under the heading 'What you can expect from us', the Museum commits itself, among other things, to 'provide high quality accurate information'. This submission has sought to demonstrate it does not meet that commitment; certainly, it does not do so consistently. Rather it presents information that is tendentious, slanted, politically-loaded and, in some cases at least - for example, the frontier war displays - demonstrably inaccurate.

I don't think the Museum's 'willingness to present contingent and conflicting views' (articulated in its 'Ethics Statement') is adequate to answer this criticism, because the 'conflicting views' so clearly are aligned with a discernible political agenda. Nothing, for example, is offered to balance the negative impact of the 'frontier wars' exhibitions - of which the Museum's tendentious account is only one of a number of possible readings. Nor is there any reflection of the genuinely conflicting views on the Mabo judgement - for example, the fears of pastoralists about the security of their leases. If they are mentioned at all, they are dismissed as being anti-Aboriginal, and thus having no legitimacy.

In the same document, under the heading 'Rights and responsibilities', the Museum commits itself, in recognition of the rights of visitors (among others) to the proposition that: 'In our work you will: be made to feel welcome and at ease; be treated with respect.'

I think this is only the case with a subset of the Museum's visitors; that is to say, those who share and respond to the political perspective that it embodies and which it prosecutes at every opportunity throughout the various galleries. I think many people outside that subset, who nevertheless recognise the political messages, will feel anything but at ease, and have every reason to feel that their feelings and beliefs are not being treated with respect; rather, with contempt and derision. Certainly, in around a dozen visits, I have very often seen visitors walking determinedly out the galleries, their stony-faced expressions indicating very clearly that they have not at all enjoyed the experience in which the Museum has obliged them to participate.

The issue of the Museum's mandated function is also important. By section 6(2) of the National Museum of Australia Act 1980 it is provided that 'The Museum shall use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest'. Not to put it too highly, this was the will of the people with respect to the NMA as stated by their elected representatives, the Australian Parliament. Of course a phrase like 'the national interest' is open to interpretation, but the concept itself is not really negotiable, given that is what Parliament has required of the NMA. It is reasonable to suppose it can be taken to imply what most Australians would understand by the phrase, not what post-modernist theory or contemporary trends in museology would make of it.

If this is so, and if the arguments put forward in this submission have merit and go to the issues the Review has under examination (which is a matter for the Panel), then there are two serious matters to be considered. One relates to the outward impact of the NMA's message, and the other to the inward impact.

Thousands of people from overseas pass through the Museum's galleries every year and at some level they must take away the kind of negative impression of Australia, its culture and its past, that the Museum propagates, and which I have tried to describe in this submission. As noted, the galleries are infused with a political ideology, born of a tired 1970's world view, that portrays Australia in the worst possible light from the time of the initial European settlement up till the present.

Such visitors are likely to assume that a 'national' institution like the NMA expresses a consensus of views about what Australia is and means to its people. Indeed, there could be a presumption that it is the Government's own position, given the NMA's public funding and its position in the bureaucracy. As such, those that discern the political undertones will wonder why Australia as a nation needs to make such a public business of castigating itself for the benefit of an international audience. It must seem a very peculiar form of public masochism.

But, of course, there is nothing at all consensual about the image of Australia that the NMA presents to the world. It is an ideological interpretation of Australia, past and present, that very few Australians would agree with - certainly not in its totality, though many more would agree with individual elements. The national identity and story, as presented by the NMA, is derived from political interpretation, sometimes false, often doubtful and, all too often, highly tendentious. Its presentation not derived from information presented fairly and objectively, nor based on dispassionate scholarship, which qualities are the least its visitors should reasonably expect from it. It is not fair either to Australia or its people, who have funded the NMA to the tune of \$155 million, that a national institution should project so misleading an impression to the world.

The internal dimensions of the problem are, if anything, even more serious. It has been clear for many years now that the study of history in the schools and universities is in critical decline. It is likely that for some schoolchildren, a tour through the galleries of the NMA will be their first introduction to Australian history. The negative impact likely to register as a result will not be offset by serious study of reputable texts in the classroom, since such teaching is less and less available to them.

Such children, lacking much, or any, knowledge of Australian history from formal study at school, will have neither the necessary information or the intellectual courage to challenge the highly questionable nature of the stories being put in front of them by the Museum. As a result, they are likely to take unquestioningly on board, at an early stage of their intellectual development, a view of Australia's past that is distorted, presented through a conscious ideological window, and overtly politicised.

Australians might reasonably wonder if the nature, scope and extent of the likely impact of the NMA's negative message, both internally and externally, are compliant with its legislated responsibility to 'make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest'.

A final view of the NMA

The Museum should have constituted itself as a conventional institution whose permanent exhibitions were an impartial, objective source of information and cause for contemplation by all Australians. The political messages, which are viable, valid and worthy of exhibition, should have been the subject of separate, specialised exhibitions so that people would know exactly what they were in for and for which they would, if appropriate, be asked to pay. They should not have been insinuated as an unacknowledged sub-text throughout the galleries of the Museum to subtly alter the meaning and impact of the national story.

If the Museum had got it right, it would have met both the needs of the Australian people for a genuine national museum that captured and communicated the national identity, and still, at the same time, provided space for more particular and politically-oriented messages which could be presented as such.

As it is, Australia's 'national museum', with the exception of the best of the indigenous galleries, is so thoroughly contaminated with ideology – it is even embedded in the structure of the building itself (the Holocaust reference in its 'lightning bolt') - that it is difficult to see how it can be rehabilitated without deconstructing the building and re-constituting the majority of its exhibitions.

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