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Dr John Carroll  
Chair

**National Museum of Australia: Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs**  
GPO Box 2154  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Dr Carroll,

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to your Review.

**Political context of the Review**

Many of us who work closely with the Museum would have welcomed your Review had it been established with a less questionable rationale. I share the widely-felt public concerns about the political origins of your Review, and fear that your committee will be unable to separate itself from such an unfortunate and disturbing birth. Certainly I feel sympathy for you in being given such a compromised brief.

It is well known that the Museum's Council – two members of it in particular – has recently had an antagonistic relationship with the institution it guides. Public criticism of the Museum by Council members has focused particularly on Aboriginal matters - from a general distaste for the high level of attention given to Aboriginal history in museum exhibitions to specific irritation at the use of Aboriginal protocol at some museum events and conferences. These criticisms have been assessed and debated again and again with courtesy and patience, through expert advisory committees, public seminars and private meetings. Some of the criticisms have been accommodated in changed museum displays and practice, while others have been rejected on the grounds that they have proven false or unwise. Yet Council members have maintained their criticism without amendment and, having failed to win support from the scholarly community or the general public for their campaign, seem now to have turned to your Review as a more private, more controlled way of enforcing a particular ideological agenda upon the National Museum of Australia. Your Review is in danger of being seen as another example of energetic Howard Government historical revisionism. You will understand why many of us making submissions to you do so with deep scepticism and little hope.

I therefore urge you, in your report, to explicitly repudiate the narrow and prejudicial circumstances of your creation, and to seize the opportunity to conduct an

independent and open-minded review of the National Museum of Australia, and particularly its Council, two years after its opening to the public. And I hope you will do so with an awareness of the institution's long history of reviews of various kinds over some decades.

### **Current membership of the National Museum of Australia Council**

A crucial and urgent reform required at the National Museum of Australia is a reconstitution of the Museum Council. I recently wrote to the *Canberra Times* ('Shortening of museum director's term disturbing', 13/12/02) in support of Professor D J Mulvaney's argument (*Canberra Times*, 11/12/02) that the Museum Council currently lacks balanced membership and, in particular, historical expertise. I also support the views of Dr Bill Gammage ('Deplorable situation', *Canberra Times*, 9/1/03), who was the last historian on the Museum's Council (1995-98). Dr Gammage observes the 'crippling effect' of the Council's current policy not to appoint council members who are expert on the museum's content, and its tendency then to reject the advice of the expert panels it is obliged to create! I stand by my statement in the *Canberra Times* (13/12/02) that 'In the face of many difficulties, the National Museum of Australia has done everything necessary to establish itself as a great museum – except that it lacks a council with balance, integrity and scholarly expertise.'

*I believe, therefore, that the first priority of your Review is to remedy this embarrassing situation by recommending the urgent reform of the Museum Council.*

It is relevant at this point to note that I distance myself from the Australian Historical Association's public criticism of your Review Panel on the grounds that it includes no historian. On the contrary, Philip Jones is a very fine historian with the added advantage of long experience in museums.

### **A deeper sense of institutional history is required**

Much of the criticism which has prompted your Review seems to me to be based on a poor understanding of history – the history of Australia, and also the history of the institution we now call the National Museum of Australia.

Published critics such as Keith Windschuttle (e.g. 'How not to run a museum', *Quadrant*, vol. 15 (9), Sept 2001, pp. 11-19) have made comic and seriously misleading errors because they seem unaware of the prehistory of the Museum. They seem to think that the Museum is largely a product of the late 1990s, the years immediately preceding the public opening in 2001. In fact, as I'm sure your panel is aware, the Pigott Report of 1975 is the critical foundation document. And for half a century before the Pigott Report, the fate of the National Museum of Australia was to be found in debates about the likely form of various national institutions in the emerging national capital (see Libby Robin, 'Collections and the Nation: Science, History and the National Museum of Australia', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 14 (3), June 2003, forthcoming – I believe a copy of this paper has been submitted to your Review).

The critical point is this: the National Museum of Australia's current emphases on Aboriginal history and social history, and its unusual status as a major museum that does not directly include natural history or science, have their origins in the 1920s and

the 1970s, not the 1990s. That is not to say that the emphases are necessarily right, but it is to make very clear that they are not a product of current 'political correctness', as some critics have argued.

### **Frontier conflict**

I was a contributor to the National Museum of Australia forum (2001) and book (2003) entitled *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, edited by Bain Attwood and S G Foster. The forum was an enormous success, the envy of any museum. Debate was vigorous and stimulating, and the Visions Theatre was full on both days, and there was a waiting list for available seats. The Director of the Museum, when opening the conference, stated that the Museum was fulfilling the aims of its planners in 'stimulating legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion'. I agree with her and am certain that the members of the Pigott Committee would have been delighted with such a realisation of their hopes.

My view of frontier conflict historiography is contained in my essay for the conference proceedings (pp. 135-149). Critics of the Museum's exhibitions on this theme disparage and dismiss oral evidence from Aborigines and settlers alike. I argue from considerable professional experience that oral culture needs to be treated with seriousness as well as scepticism. The National Museum of Australia, because of its unusual brief to represent Indigenous histories and world views, has a particular obligation to seek this balance, and has so far achieved modest success. The Museum's willing and constructive responses to criticism about its representation of frontier conflict have provided some of its finest moments as a national institution.

### **Environmental history**

Council members and museum critics have been so preoccupied with rejecting the Aboriginal emphasis of the Museum that they have completely overlooked other innovative aspects of Museum policy and practice. Because of the path set for the Museum by the Pigott Report, and due to the unusual configuration of science institutions in the national capital since the 1920s, the Museum has some of the most innovative displays in Australia about the environmental history of this continent.

In 1999, two years before the opening of the Museum's permanent exhibitions, I offered this analysis of the institution's intellectual history and opportunities:

When visions for the Museum first evolved over two decades ago, social history, Aboriginal history and environmental history were all neglected or undeveloped in large Australian museums, because their focus remained on those nineteenth-century concerns of natural history, ethnography and technology. And so the National Museum of Australia, jockeying for position amongst the big, century-old players, was wisely conceived of as something completely different: a social history museum. Historians were more consciously involved in the conceptual foundation of this museum than any other in Australia. But plans were put in suspension, the building was delayed and, as the decades have gone past, the rest of Australia has caught up. A social history museum is now just as essential, but less pioneering. In the interim, Indigenous studies and Aboriginal activism have infiltrated and revolutionised museums around Australia. But I suggest that that third proposed strand, environmental history, remains undeveloped, and its potential

to work creatively across Aboriginal and immigrant cultures also remains relatively unexplored. And it has remained undeveloped partly because the other two strands, social history and Indigenous studies, are currently neglectful of, or antagonistic to, deep time. ('Social history and deep time', *Public History Review*, vol. 8, 1999, pp. 8-26.)

Environmental history, in my view, uniquely seeks to connect social history and deep time, and the development of this perspective remains the chief opportunity and promise of the National Museum of Australia. The 'Tangled Destinies' Gallery has made a wonderful beginning in this task, and has been the subject of widespread scholarly appreciation. I would like to see this dimension of the Museum's research, collections and displays better recognised and even further strengthened.

In 1999, the National Museum of Australia and the Australian National University together hosted a rare and extraordinary gathering of expertise in the field of environmental history – including archaeologists, anthropologists, ecologists and historians – to discuss Museum research and exhibitions, particularly as represented in the 'Tangled Destinies' gallery. This event was one example of the kinds of public reviews constantly initiated by the Museum itself in its quest for public and scholarly accountability and stimulating collections and displays.

### **The culture of research**

From my perspective as an academic historian who has worked in and with museums for over two decades, and who has closely watched and worked with the National Museum of Australia over the last 6 years, I have been in sympathy with all the efforts made by the Museum's directors and staff to foster a research culture in an institution which, until recently, has had an ephemeral physical form. The contrast with major state museums with their hundred and more years of collections, research and infrastructure, is stark.

I therefore think it is greatly to the credit of the Museum that it has quickly built such a positive and creative relationship with scholars. The current Director, Dawn Casey, and the Director of Research, Dr Mike Smith, have been outstanding in this regard. They have established an enviable record with ARC grants, secured enduring and meaningful research partnerships with academic and other institutions, and have encouraged an open and stimulating environment for research and debate.

The Museum does not need an academic or active researcher as its director. But it does need a director who, like Dawn Casey, is prepared to empower curators and research staff, and to foster links with scholars and academic institutions. The Museum is especially fortunate to have someone like Dr Mike Smith on its staff, especially as Director of Research. He is one of Australia's outstanding archaeologists and researchers, working creatively across the sciences and the humanities, and with a formidable commitment to the Museum and the cause of scholarship within it.

The single greatest impediment to the growth of the National Museum of Australia as a research institution is its current Council. In terms of scholarly sympathy and expertise, its composition pales in comparison with the councils of other major museums. The NMA Council seems to have gone out of its way to insult, disparage

and bypass scholarly involvement in the Museum. The current Council is an enormous handicap to the scholarly standing of the National Museum of Australia.

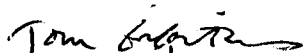
I believe that the Councils and Directors of national and state museums need to invest in their research staff and curators and then trust and respect their expertise. One would hope that there would be robust debate across the institution – after all, controversy and debate are written into the very constitution of the NMA – but Council members conducting a kind of war on their institution, curators and expert committees is reprehensible and counterproductive.

### **Summary**

I recommend that your Review Panel:

- ◆ Repudiates the political circumstances of your creation and conducts a more open-minded review.
- ◆ Recognises that the National Museum of Australia has a long history, and that its character is more a result of decades of institutional prehistory than a product of recent intellectual fashions.
- ◆ Addresses the debate over frontier conflict by assessing the role and status of oral evidence in a National Museum that has a particular brief to represent Indigenous histories and cultures.
- ◆ Acknowledges the unique emphasis on environmental history as the chief opportunity and promise of the Museum and urges further research and education in this field.
- ◆ Strengthens the research culture of the Museum through accepting the necessary expertise and intellectual autonomy of curatorial staff, and
- ◆ Criticises the current composition of the Museum Council and urges the appointment of a more balanced and scholarly advisory body.

Yours sincerely,



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