

Submission to the National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

1 The need to be informed about our social history:

Australians have a need to be informed about their social history so that we can participate in discussions and understand the different positions put forward in such matters as the dispossession of our indigenous people. In past years, we have been given a one-sided, white man's version of indigenous history. For the non-specialist, it is often difficult to hear the views of indigenous people, without misinformation and without bias.

The Exhibitions of the National Museum of Australia has provided us with this opportunity on our many enjoyable visits there. This clearly fulfils its function under the Act and contributes to a national debate on indigenous matters as was proposed more than 20 years ago as a necessary function for a National Museum by Professors Geoffrey Blainey and John Mulvaney. It has been intended, even before the appointment of the present Director, that the museum would be innovative and entertaining, and portray the social history of the common people as well as 'great men'. The Pigott Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, 1974-75, and later decisions, all opted for a museum that would not show 'stuffed hides and articulated skeletons' but concentrate on social history.

2. The Review Process:

We have some misgivings about the present process of review. Although we accept that such a review should take place at this time, our experience is that Review Panels are rarely convened unless the convenors are confident of the outcome they want. In this case, our Prime Minister, has a strong, controversial, and largely unpopular position in relation to the history of our indigenous people and would certainly disagree with many of the exhibitions at the Museum. We do not know the attitudes of the Panel members but we trust they are objective and fair, and take into account how biased and extreme are the positions taken by two members of Council. We share the concerns of Professor Peter Read, in his presentation "Contested Frontiers" on Radio national on 20/2/03, when he said "... it is extraordinary that since at least a third of the whole museum is devoted to Indigenous themes, and since the interpretation of Aboriginal history has attracted most of the criticism of the exhibits – why on earth is there not a senior Aboriginal figure on the Committee of Inquiry?". We share his opinion of the importance of having a strong indigenous voice as for example in the First Australians exhibition. Surely 40,000 years of a living culture deserves, indeed demands, a significant space and an equal voice. We desperately need in our society the balance this institution is providing.

3. Support for the Museum and its Director

We have lived in North America for 14 years and traveled widely, visiting many museums and art galleries around the world. Our opinion is that the present National Museum of Australia is of world standard with an essential role in presenting aspects of aboriginal history, life and culture that would otherwise not be accessible to most Australians. The present Director is to be congratulated on the results she has achieved and our strongest wish is that she continue her excellent work. Her leadership and guidance are essential.

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