

**Humanities Research Centre  
Australian National University  
Submission to Review Committee on National Museum of Australia  
March 7 2003**

**The Humanities Research Centre is pleased to contribute to the Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the National Museum of Australia. The HRC, however, would like the opportunity as a major partner of the Museum in many scholarly projects and a University Centre designated to liaise with National Cultural Institutions, to meet with the Review Committee in order to elaborate the points below.**

**Background:**

**The Humanities Research Centre (HRC) was founded at the Australian National University 30 years ago as a National Humanities Centre. It has an international reputation for the excellence of its research and has served as a model for similar institutions overseas, including the Cambridge University Centre for Research into the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Part of the HRC's national role has been liaison between the University and the National Cultural Institutions. The HRC has had long term and extensive links with many National Cultural Institutions, in particular the Museum's sister institutions, the National Library of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia, with whom we have had joint conferences, publications, exhibitions and other scholarly research projects over a number of years. Since the opening of the National Museum of Australia the HRC has also become involved in similar joint projects with the National Museum of Australia.**

**Joint Projects and Scholarly Research between HRC and National Museum:**

**Joint projects include intellectual and scholarly advice for the exhibition and the publication to complement the Gold exhibition (book published by Cambridge University Press, 2001); Advice on the exhibition and contributions to the conference "Outlaws" to be held in 2003; and scholarly and public program advice and assistance to the conference for an exhibition on British Immigration to be held in 2004. The HRC has shared Visiting Fellows with the National Museum, in particular contributors to the conference on archaeology of Latin America and the exhibition and conference on Deserts of the Southern hemisphere (the HRC shared two specialists from Latin America as Visiting fellows—from Chile and Argentina- who are contributing to these projects and co funded other conference Visitors). The HRC and the National Museum have a shared Australian Research Council Grant for research into Minority and Indigenous representation in Asia-Pacific Museums and a shared appointment (Professor Stephen Foster who is developing joint Museum Studies Courses). The HRC and its sister institution, the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR), are partners in CRIO (a new technology research consortium ) with the National Museum. These activities with the National Museum parallel the activities we undertake with the National Library and National Gallery.**

## **Comments on the Museum's Current Projects and Exhibitions and Public Programs:**

Without question the Museum has fulfilled its brief of making research facilities and collections available to scholars, students (The HRC currently has a PhD student working on a thesis involving the Museum's collection and is involved with the National Museum in developing joint a museum studies course for which the Museum will be a laboratory) and communities "for research and interpretation".

Our joint projects with the Museum all indicate a great desire on the part of the Director of the Museum to bring in scholars from around the world who are experts in their field and in particular to work with Australian scholars to develop exhibitions, conferences and public programs. Our two Latin American scholars for example, proposed by National Museum staff member, Dr Mike Smith, made a major contribution to the life of the University and, as well contributed scholarly input into the Museum's exhibition program, and spoke on heritage issues in Latin America at a public forum at the Museum and on the ABC.

The Museum's development of a style of scholarly consultative committees for Exhibitions is extraordinarily wide ranging and effective in bringing together scholars and experts with a wide range of backgrounds and knowledge. For "Gold" and "Outlaws" committee meetings included a team of Australian scholars, many from outside Canberra, who were brought together by the National Museum and who could link Australian history to international contexts.

The Museum is also open to proposals from outside scholars. For example, our sister institution, the CCR, was involved through its Director Professor Morphy, a renowned expert in Northern Australian anthropology, with an exhibition for the Opening of the Museum. The HRC has recently proposed that an HRC Visiting scholar, Dr Michael Mel, who is from the highlands of PNG, assist with a performance related to Pacific art using the Museum's excellent Pacific collection and the Museum has agreed to this proposal.

Such links with Universities are effective both in intellectual and financial terms through shared costs. They enable the University to reach wider audiences with research by its scholars and they enable the Museum to bring cutting edge research into the Museum context. Ms Dawn Casey, Director of the Museum, is to be commended for her vision and the enthusiasm with which she has sought such links with scholars. (This extends to shared appointments with Universities and bringing University scholars such as Dr Ann McGrath, recently appointed to a Chair at the Australian National University, into the Museum as research staff members). I might add that as far as the HRC is concerned we regard these links as joint intellectual projects not as consultancies and the budgetary commitment is not on the basis of large consultancy fees paid by the Museum to us but genuine partnership and shared financial contribution in most cases.

**From the perspective of the HRC, Ms Casey and her staff have done a magnificent job in a very short time to make the Museum a vibrant contributor to Australian life and learning. It is with regret we understand that Ms Casey may not be continuing at the Museum. This would be a great loss because her vision and openness to scholarly enquiry is combined with a public face for the Museum which is equally open to non scholarly visitors and promotes the Museum to all age groups and to audiences beyond Canberra**

### **Comments on Museum's Future Priorities:**

**As the French Ambassador to Australia, His Excellency M. Pierre Viaux, observed recently, diversity in approach to understanding our common humanity is an important function of Museums. The National Museum has made a magnificent start and needs to continue to bring exciting and diverse exhibitions, based on sound scholarship, to the Australian public and to continue to interpret those exhibitions and its permanent collections through appropriate public programs for all - from school children to scholars.**

**In one sense Emeritus Professor John Mulvaney is right when he suggested this review is a little early. The Museum is only now bringing to fruition its own exhibitions researched and curated by its own staff – the opening exhibitions set a model for collaborative scholarship but were largely developed by Art Exhibitions Australia. Some of the current exhibitions on the drawing boards – for example the “Deserts of the Southern Hemisphere” which will be extremely important in terms of a greater understanding of our environment in the context of similar natural environments overseas - are not complete and will go on show in the next three years. A review in three years time would be a more accurate evaluation of the scholarship and originality of the Museum's exhibitions and public programs. That said, the exhibitions in the planning give a good indication of the style of exhibition envisaged by Ms Casey and her staff and the HRC is impressed by the diversity of the projects and the careful planning which is going in to their preparation. Collaboration with other institutions within Australia is much in evidence – for example the National Gallery of Victoria with its rich collections formed from the prosperity of the Gold fields.**

**The issue of international “blockbusters” as a route for the Museum as envisaged in the Act is a difficult one in the wake of September 11. All Australian Museums and Galleries, along with colleagues overseas, are finding it much more difficult and expensive to bring blockbuster international exhibitions to their Museums. The National Museum is able, by its strategic and scholarly partnerships, to get around this problem by utilising Australian collections eg the NGV, working with Museums abroad on joint research projects to result in exhibitions eg Deserts and a number of other long term strategic approaches which are already beginning to come to fruition. Loans are built on trust and respect – both have to be earned by a new Museum. Putting together important international exhibitions today takes enormous diplomacy and an ability to earn the respect of colleagues through long term serious partnerships. Ms Casey has shown that she is doing this- for example with the Chinese Museum partnerships she is developing. These will have great potential benefit over the next few years.**

Such endeavours also give staff training and experience and contribute to Australia's pool of skilled and talented Museum staff through their exposure to working with colleagues in different countries.

The Asia-Pacific partnerships being formed suggest one important future direction for the Museum. The National Museum also has the opportunity to play a leadership role in the Asia-Pacific, a role which as the National Museum of Australia it is appropriate that it do and a role that will benefit other Australian museums, including regional and local museums, by opening more contacts and partnerships.

The Museum is already playing an important role in tertiary education through developing new museum studies courses and the HRC has also seen the exemplary programs developed for school teachers and school children. The HRC worked with the Museum on our HRC summer school for history teachers from around Australia to which the Museum generously contributed. This partnership approach in education and public programs should continue and undoubtedly will continue under Ms Casey.

Clearly the Museum does not have sufficient space – a problem which cannot be solved in the short term but may be eased by making more funding available for staff to develop touring outreach exhibitions from the collections. Such exhibitions are already touring but more funding for the Museum may boost the material able to be viewed. Such exhibitions are labour intensive especially in education programs but offer very worthwhile ways of extending the National Museum audiences. Objects are important and the Museum cannot fulfil its role with new media technology alone. More funding is an essential prerequisite to more services. This could be done jointly with State Museums to assist those museums in their Statewide mandates. More funding should also be available for original research such as archaeological projects. Many museums worldwide have augmented collections through joint national and international research in areas such as archaeology. New finds not only contribute to human knowledge but are exciting for audiences who share those discoveries through displays.

The Museum, as it recognises, needs to bring more overseas specialists to work with its collections and develop exhibitions and public programs from those collections. This has already begun as a policy of the Museum but in such a short period obviously this concept is in the embryonic stages yet offers enormous potential for future use of the collections. The Museum's commitment to such projects should continue and it should also continue to utilise the resources available through partnerships with other institutions such as Australian Universities. The ANU as one example has the best resources in the world of Asia-Pacific specialists – the National Museum and the National University are and should continue to work together in the national interest to educate Australian audiences about our own country, the dynamic region in which we live and to educate those audiences to create a better understanding of Australia in the context of our changing world. In other words the National Museum should have an international focus not necessarily so appropriate to State and regional museums.

**It is vitally important that the Museum continue to engage with issues of critical significance to Australia's future and open such debates, as it has already done, to input from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives. It is important also that issues of contemporary controversy not be avoided. All over the world museums are opening up issues of controversy. At the Shanghai Museum for example, as joint research between Museum staff member Margo Neale and HRC Deputy Director Caroline Turner, has shown, Minorities are being given space and coverage and intangible heritage and appreciation of Minority cultures is being included in that Museum's displays. In Japan, the Ainu are similarly receiving long overdue recognition as an Indigenous group at Museums such as the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. While the issue of the Second World war is still very difficult in Japan, the National Museum of Japanese history is treating the colonisation of the Ainu in Hokkaido and the outcast nature of Burakamin in Japan's past in ways which do not shrink from controversy. It would seem extremely strange if museums in neighbouring countries such as China and Japan can deal with issues of controversy if the National Museum of Australia, a liberal democracy, cannot deal with such issues. As Professor Graeme Davison has said it is non negotiable that the Museum encourage debate and not avoid controversial issues.**

**Such policies in fact earn the National Museum respect. Margo Neale, for example and another National Museum Indigenous staff member, have both been invited to Japan by Japanese Government Museums as Indigenous experts to engage with issues related to Ainu displays. The Japanese Museum of National History recently sought advice from the National Museum of Australia on how to deal with controversy in Museums. If we accept that every country has areas of controversy in its history surely it would be extraordinary to assume that the National Museum of Australia (unlike its neighbours such as Japan) could not admit to controversy. It is how controversy is handled and the openness and freedom with which issues can be raised that is important. How does a member of the Burakamin group feel going into the National Museum of Japanese History – undoubtedly much more confident since the Museum put up its displays pointing to the discrimination which was part of Japanese society. Non Japanese audiences also respect the Japanese National Museum for putting those issues on display. It is also important that through openness and willingness to engage with debate as the National Museum of Australia has shown itself to be able to do, Australians with many different viewpoints can feel comfortable within the Museum as a welcoming institution, open to diversity and thus open to the future in its approaches.**

**All this is confirmed by the number of visitors (surely past all Government expectations) of 1.3 million in eighteen months and with 91% "very satisfied" with its contents.**

**HRC March 2003**