

SUBMISSION FOR THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA REVIEW

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A national museum of Australia's social history is an essential element in the national cultural landscape.

A national museum in the national capital is in the prime position to tell the story of Australian life on this continent over its many thousands of years. It is uniquely positioned to tell the story with a genuinely national perspective on our indigenous history, the story and impact of colonisation, our growth as a modern nation and as a member of the world community, and what we have learned about ourselves and our land along the way.

The Commonwealth Government's report in 2000 into the condition of history education in Australia, *The Future of the Past*, pointed to the parlous state of knowledge in schools and the teaching profession (at all levels of the school system and across state and independent schools) in teaching Australian History.

The report indicated that the discipline of History had been substantially eroded by its integration with social sciences and their emphasis on normative research practices. The result has been a generation of students trained to arrive at 'closed' answers to questions rather than the potential of research to open conclusions incorporating multiple perspectives, or to provide tools to better observe and understand broad patterns of change over time rather than simple (and isolated) cause and effect scenarios.

The most unfortunate effect has been the loss of contextual knowledge as a domain within which young Australians can come to appreciate their own heritage, however diverse in origin and experience that heritage in this land might be.

Similarly, the project to re-energise the teaching of Civics and the processes of Australia's constitutional democracy in schools was recognition of something which had been lost in our training of young Australians in taking up the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

The state-based and private museum institutions in Australia each tell parts of the story relevant to their states and communities. A national museum must have the capacity in its research program, collection development strategies and resulting public programs to provide a national perspective for audiences visiting the national capital. It must be able to tell a story about Australia which is of national significance, internally coherent, and in its story-telling, embrace the processes of change in our social and cultural development.

The First Peoples Gallery achieves a coherence, authority and purposefulness which is not always apparent in the National Museum's telling of the story of colonisation and our national development. The First Peoples gallery is able to achieve the goal of linking thousands of years of heritage with the contemporary lives of Indigenous Australians today, and to present the impacts of colonisation on indigenous communities with great power.

Feedback from visits by Sovereign Hill senior staff and Board members has found a consensus that there is a disconnectedness and narrowness in the layering of some topics being interpreted under the over-arching themes: Tangled Destinies, Nation, Horizons, Eternity.

Those themes are bold, challenging and intriguing. But the content supporting them too quickly loses connection to the themes and to the broader patterns of our history which wrap around those case studies or topics. The result is a feeling that the galleries lack a unifying grand narrative.

A most noticeable gap is a narrative discussing the significance of social, political and economic change through the nineteenth century, with particular reference to the importance of rural activities and regional centres as the economic engines in our national development in that period, and the subsequent shift in the 20th century to our predominantly urban and cosmopolitan ways of life in the major metropolises. That transition has been such a significant one to understand in our perception of ourselves.

The treatment in Horizons of immigration—one of the most important aspects of our national growth and cultural life in intense periods in the 19th century, especially in the goldrushes which transformed many parts of Australia in so many ways—is particularly focused on the Convict period and the post WWII immigration experience. The opportunity to tell a more significant story of the continuity of the migration experience in Australia could be much stronger.

Symbols (with the aim of focusing on the expressions and symbols of national identity) and Eternity (telling stories from the emotional heart) could draw much more strongly on the depth of Australia literature and artistic expression which address our growing understanding of the land in which we live and our ways of relating to one another in defining ourselves as a nation, whether through formal institutions or informal associations. The focus on the intensely personal stories of a few individuals does not take up the opportunity to discuss the ways in which larger groupings of people have found a unifying common—national—interest to unify their endeavours.

The Review's outcome should not be used to attack either the National Museum as an institution or its management. Previous reviews have confirmed the high-quality of scholarship in the Museum's programs.

The Review's findings should be applied to ensure that the Museum is properly supported, and that its programming outcomes are of truly national significance in telling the Australian story and of international significance in quality.

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