

REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA'S EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

THE AUTHOR

This Submission is the work of one who cares greatly about the National Museum and its future; it therefore looks at the operations of the National Museum of Australia (hereafter 'the Museum') from the point of view of an interested observer. It was my privilege to work within the Museum from December 1983 to September 1993, from days of a staff of six to a staff of 60, and for much of that time to work closely with the Council of the Museum and Director in attempting to create a significant national institution within the constraints imposed on the Council and Director from time to time.

During that period there were a number of serious attempts to curtail the Museum's operations completely, at both the political and administrative levels, by Ministers of the government of the day, and by officials, mostly from the Department of Finance, who well may have been working to Ministerial 'wink, wink, nudge, nudge', and who seemed not to be concerned in the slightest that the Museum was operating in accordance with valid Commonwealth legislation, the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* (hereafter 'the Act'). The Ministers and officials seemed not in the least bit worried that the legislation was adopted with the support of all political parties and patently represented the will of the people of Australia.

SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The Act is the ultimate fallback. As with most Acts of the parliament it is couched, in parts, in broad terms which are subject to interpretation, but which enable the duly nominated Council and the Director appointed under the Act to go about their business in the best possible way. Accordingly, this submission attempts to address the terms of reference of the current Review by constant reference to the Act, as amended.

From the publicity documentation that has been seen it appears that the Review Committee is evidently a Committee of the Council of the Museum, with a brief to report its findings to the Council, but with its own Review Secretariat located within the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. If the Review Committee is a Committee of the Council, established under the provisions of Section 21 of the Act, then the Committee is improperly constituted in accordance with the requirements of Section 21(2) of the Act, as there do not appear to be any members of the Council on the Committee.

As a related point it is noted with regret that, while the Committee comprises eminent people from various fields related to the role and functions of the Museum, there is no practising or eminent social historian on the Committee, nor is there a member with some known heritage as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander. While it can be expected that the existing members will bring to their work rigorous academic and professional insights, and undoubtedly will seek advice as and when desired or required, those omissions are regretted.

The Museum is very much a social history Museum, envisaged from its very beginning in that role, as clearly set out in the reports which led to its establishment, not least of which being the 1974 report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia chaired by Professor D J Mulvaney. All reports have made it clear that the vision was principally for the Museum to discuss the human history of Australia, its natural history being well covered by the existing State based museums which have significant collections of relevant material. It is noteworthy that the State based museums have redirected their own exhibitions and scholarship to a marked degree to the human, and human impact on the environmental history of Australia since the original 1975 Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections pointed the proposed National Museum of Australia in that direction.

Human history (as well as natural history) is not an absolute discipline. History is a subject always open to re-interpretation in the light of new work being done, new records uncovered, better understanding of known records, and for other reasons. In the field of anthropology, for example,

the length of time there has been human habitation of Australia progressively has been extended with better science, more detailed field work, and other effort. Yet in only recent weeks other eminent scientists have published material that perhaps reduces the time there have been humans in Australia. In the field of human history there are any number of examples of significant change in the published record as a result of better access to archival material and revised interpretation. Two readily accessible examples will suffice:

- a) the decidedly different biographies of Sir Henry Parkes, the so called 'Father of Federation', one the 1896 effort by the sycophantic Charles E Lyne, and the other the 1980 seminal volume by A W Martin;
- b) the two biographies of Sir Edmund Barton, the first by John Reynolds in 1948, written without access to family papers, and the second in 2000 by Geoffrey Bolton, who had total access to a huge range of official and private family documents.

A third example would be the current debate about the accuracy of certain writings of Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan in relation to Tasmanian and broader Aboriginal history. Who is right, and who is wrong, is not a judgement many people are able to make. All these examples clearly demonstrate the imprecision of history as a science, and the possibility of change in interpretation as time goes by.

The social milieu also is relevant in the interpretation and portrayal of history. Words, nomenclature and other descriptives that may have been acceptable a mere twenty years ago may not necessarily be acceptable today. The enabling Act itself refers to 'the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia', which term embraces also the aspirations of the Torres Strait Islander peoples who refuse today to be encapsulated in the generic term 'Aboriginal Australia'. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies changed its own name to 'The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' some years ago for that very reason, even though the more generic term was acceptable, and a marked step forward, at the time the Institute was created about thirty years ago. Our own use of language equally has gone through similar marked change. Another simple example is that of orphanages, to which many children were transferred for reasons that were considered right, and proper, and praiseworthy in years gone by, and the people who ran them regarded almost as saving angels. Today, such institutions are treated as anathema, awful places, and the people who worked in them regarded almost as pariahs. Who knows what concepts and things that are acceptable to us today will be totally unacceptable a mere twenty years hence.

The National Museum, as with all the other national collecting institutions, has national leadership responsibilities, and ought also take on international representational and leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities must be accepted within the constraints and realities of Australia's federal system, such that the major State based institutions are not pushed out of the way, as they long have had significant international connections. The approach must be co-operative and complementary. The rest of the world does not necessarily understand or comprehend our federal system, but does understand the significance of the word 'National' in an institution's name. Those national and international responsibilities may not be prescribed or specified in the enabling legislation for each of the several national institutions, and the Museum particularly in this context, but must be understood as given. It is impossible to think of the National Library of Australia, for example, not taking the incredibly important leadership role it does in the whole of this hemisphere.

Accordingly, in looking at the performance of the Museum today, and how it has performed since its inception, one must take into account variables such as those mentioned.

RESPONSES TO THE FIRST PART OF THE FIRST TERM OF REFERENCE

The first part of the first of the terms of reference reads as follows:

- 1. Examine the aims and contents of the Museum's exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs.**

And report on:

- (i) Whether the Museum has complied with its role and functions as set out in the National Museum of Australia Act 1980, its Charter and other relevant documents**

A. Compliance with the role of the Museum

The role of the Museum is prescribed in the Act. That role is:

- a) to establish a National Museum of Australia (Section 4(1));
- b) to establish a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, which shall form part of the Museum (Section 5(1));
- c) in relation to the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, to pursue a policy directed towards securing, under the Council of the Museum, the development and maintenance of the Gallery, and the exhibition of specifically identified historical material by persons who are Aboriginals, Torres Strait Islanders, or descendants of Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders (Section 5(4));
- (d) to do all things necessary or convenient to be done for or in connection with the performance of its functions (Section 7(1)).

Observations

In relation to parts (a), (b) and (c) it has to be observed that the Museum certainly is performing its role as prescribed. It appears evident that the Museum very clearly has set out to make the content of its exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs, meets those aims. The Museum has reported that its surveys of visitors consistently have indicated that the visitors have learnt something from visiting the Museum. Some of the exhibitions have caused degrees of controversy, but that is a legitimate result of presenting exhibitions about events that cause some visitors a degree of discomfort.

In relation to part (d) it is a judgement that the Museum is doing all it can in relation to the performance of its statutory functions within the limitations of its budget and other constraints. In terms of budgets it undoubtedly could be possible to do more by way of static exhibitions, by reducing the numbers of staff employed, or expanding the numbers of staff employed by reducing exhibitions. It seems that the Museum has achieved a proper balance during its first year of operation, and the presence of competent, helpful, informative staff has been a valued part of the visit experience for many who have come through the Museum's doors.

B. Compliance with the functions of the Museum

The functions of the Museum are prescribed in Section 6(1) of the Act:

- (a) To develop and maintain a national collection of historical material;

- (b) to exhibit, or make available for exhibition by others, historical material from the national historical collection or historical material that is otherwise in the possession of the Museum;
- (baa) to exhibit material, whether in written form or in any other form, that relates to Australia's past, present and future;
- (ba) from time to time as the occasion requires, to exhibit, by itself or in collaboration with others, in Australia or elsewhere, material, whether in written form or in any other form and whether relating to Australia or to a foreign country;
- (c) to conduct, arrange for or assist in research into matters pertaining to Australian history;
- (d) to disseminate information relating to Australian history and information relating to the Museum and its functions; and
- (e) to develop and implement sponsorship, marketing and other commercial activities relating to the Museum's functions.

Observations

In relation to parts (a), (b), (baa) and (ba) it has to be noted that the Museum obviously is meeting the requirements as prescribed. It appears evident that the Museum very clearly has set out to make the content of its exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs, meet those aims. The current permanent exhibitions contain material from the Museum's own collections, from other publicly held collections from around Australia, and from private collections. The exhibitions are comprised of objects in all forms, supported by oral material, music and other media.

In relation to part (ba) the Museum must be accorded a tick. The initial 'Gold' exhibition, and the recent 'Beyond Mars' exhibition are good examples of the use of material relating to the histories and destinies of countries other than Australia. Those exhibitions clearly have met the aims prescribed.

In relation to parts (c) and (d) it has to be noted that the Museum has been active in research and the dissemination of results of research since its inception. Having been a part of the Museum's staff in those first 10 years I can attest to that, and happily could cite examples if requested. In most recent years the attentions of curatorial and other staff who might be involved in research have been diverted necessarily to the development of the opening exhibitions, for which extensive specifically focussed research was required. It could be expected that, as new exhibitions are developed, broader areas of research may well be opened up.

Research is an ongoing and co-operative issue. While it may be, and ought to be primarily object based, relating to material within the Museum's collections, all the members of the Committee will know and understand that good research is broader than the objects in front of the researcher, and that the application of the results of research are not always patently obvious and applicable in the short term. Some research takes years of effort, sometimes with little tangible result. Those realities are not reasons to curtail research.

C. Compliance with the Charter of the Museum

The terms of reference do not make it clear to what 'Charter' the Committee of Review is referring. There is the original Charter adopted by the Museum, as set out below, but recent Annual Reports refer to a 'Service Charter', a lengthy document that really sets out what the Museum intends to do for its visitors, and what its visitors may expect from the Museum.

The original 1985 Charter

The Charter of the National Museum was a recommendation of Interim Council in its November 1982 report to Government entitled *The Plan for the Development of the Museum of Australia*. Interim Council made it clear that the proposed Charter was its own development used by Interim Council 'as a basis for recommendations that would translate the Museum of Australia into a physical reality'.

The Charter proposed by Interim Council was formally adopted by the first Council of the National Museum at its February 1985 meeting as follows:

RESOLVED that the 'The Charter' developed by the Interim Council of the Museum of Australia be adopted as 'The Charter' of the Museum of Australia. (Resolution CLR4/85)

The Charter as adopted by the Council of the Museum reads as follows (note that the paragraphs are not numbered in the original):

- a) The Museum of Australia will establish, augment and conserve a collection of artefacts, natural specimens and objects of all kinds, representative of or relevant to Australia's past, present and future, in order to increase our understanding of Australian society and Australia's natural environment at all stages of development.
- b) The Museum will exhibit its collection in such a way that the visitor is both entertained and informed, maintaining the highest standard in the components of its exhibits, the display techniques it uses and the accuracy and relevance of its information.
- c) The Museum will increase knowledge of Australia by scholarly research, so that it becomes an international focus for material-based research in Australian history; it will disseminate that information so as to become a source of accurate and significant historical information about Australia for all, whether serious scholars or casual visitors.
- d) The Museum will reflect the development of the Australian nation in all its cultural diversity. In particular it will create, through the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, a focus for the cultural aspirations of the Aboriginal people.
- e) The Museum will emphasise that the histories of the Australian environment, of Aboriginal people and of non-Aboriginal people, and the interaction between people and the environment are closely related; that no action of any part, in either the past or the present, has been or is taken without an impact on the other parts: people on people; people on environment; environment on people.

The 1998 Service Charter

The 1988 'Service Charter' is a document published as Appendix 13 to the Museum's 1998-99 Annual Report setting out in lengthy detail a number of statements of the Museum's aims and ambitions in relation to itself and its interface with the Australian public. The Annual Report does not say whether the document is an official policy of the Council of the Museum, or simply a statement by the Director and staff. It therefore is difficult to comment on the extent to which the Museum has complied with the spirit and intent of that document.

The 2002 Service Charter

The 2002 'Service Charter', published as Appendix 12 of the Museum's Annual Report for 2001-02, is different from the 1998 Service Charter, and there is a notation in the body of the Report

that there will be further change, as 'it had been intended to review the current Charter in the light of operational requirements following the Museum's opening to the public'.

Observations

The observations already made in relation to the Charter as originally adopted by Council in 1985 equally apply to the propositions set out in these two versions of a 'Service Charter'. As noted, the original Charter was derived as the basis for development of the Museum and its activities and outreach.

While it always is possible to argue that more emphasis ought be placed on particular components of any Charter, the reality is that the Museum is complying with the principles set out in the original Charter. Equally, it would seem that the Museum has set out to make the content of its exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs comply with and meet its self imposed commitments to itself and the public through the medium of the alternative Service Charters so far published. Undoubtedly there will be individuals who might believe the Museum has failed to meet specific parts of the Service Charter, but everything published seems to suggest there has been overwhelming support for what the Museum has attempted to do, and the way in which it has tried to do it, within the limitations imposed on it.

D. Compliance with 'other relevant documents'.

Not being conscious of, and in the absence of clear directions by the Review Committee to documents that fall within the category 'other relevant documents' it has been presupposed that those documents fall into one of several categories, as follows:

a) Directions by the Minister in accordance with the provisions of Section 12 of the Act

Directions by the Minister must be obeyed. They must be disclosed in the Annual Report of the Museum in accordance with the provisions of Section 38(4) of the Act. The only Directions made by the Minister in the years since 1980 to 30 June 2002 are:

- i) On 16 August 1981, that at a meeting of the Interim Council for the Museum of Australia a simple majority of members of the Interim Council shall constitute a quorum.
- ii) On 8 October 1984, to accept the Australian Institute of Anatomy on deposit and to care, house and keep it in a manner the Council thinks fit.
- iii) (Undated, but taken from the Annual Report 1998/99, page 52), to only approve material for inclusion in the National Historical Collection based upon criteria and guidelines approved by the Minister on 27 February 1992.

A continuing effect of this last Direction by the Minister is that the Council of the National Museum of Australia is bound by these criteria and guidelines in assessing the suitability of material for inclusion in the National Historical Collection.

Observations

These are management matters on which it is not possible to comment, but there is no reason to believe that the Museum has failed to comply with any of the Directions.

b) Decisions by the Council of the National Museum from time to time

As part of its normal processes the Museum's Council will have made any number of decisions which are to adopted as policy or practice within the Museum. Whether there is a published list of such documents is unknown, so it is not possible to make comment.

Observations

Decisions made by the Council of the Museum are internal matters that require compliance by the Director and staff. Unless a list has been published by Council of those of its decisions properly made and not complied with by Director or staff it is impossible to comment on such matters. It must be presumed that the Council maintains a constant review of the decisions it has made to ensure compliance.

From time to time there may have been reports in the media of decisions supposedly made by Council in formal session, and reportedly not followed. 'Decisions' possibly made by individual members of Council outside of meetings of Council, or at meetings of Council members not formally meetings of Council in accordance with the Act, have no legal application or binding force and are not worthy of consideration, if there are any such 'decisions'. Again, it is impossible to comment on hearsay, and any comments made by individuals based solely on hearsay, and without having first checked the validity of any decision supposedly made, must be ignored completely. To do otherwise would be wrongly to impugn the Council, the Director, and the staff.

c) Recommendations by recognised international and national museological bodies

Recognised and reputable international and national museological bodies make comments and recommendations from time to time on museological issues of interest to them and their constituents.

Observations

Any suggestions made by recognised international and national museological bodies simply are that, recommendations, which a prudent Director would receive and consider on their merits in making operational or policy decisions in relation to the matters embraced by the recommendations received. Such a prudent Director is lawfully entitled to make decisions that may not embrace the recommendations made.

d) Recommendations made formally by suitably qualified individuals whose views ought properly be taken into account in arriving at any decision or decisions

Appropriately qualified individuals whose opinions ought properly be respected and taken into account, whether solicited or not, make comments and suggestions from time to time on matters of relevance to the Museum and its activities.

Observations

As with recommendations received from international or national museological bodies the Director of the National Museum undoubtedly receives from time to time recommendations and suggestions from such respected individuals. As with recommendations or comments from appropriate international and national bodies the Director is entitled to make decisions that may not conform to those recommendations or suggestions received, and to do so without having to justify the decisions finally made to the individual who has made such recommendations or suggestions.

e) Recommendations formally made by the Friends of the National Museum

The Friends of the National Museum was established in 1989 to care about the establishment of an operational National Museum. By the very nature of who the Friends are and represent, their comments and suggestions are worthy of consideration.

Observations

Over the years the Friends of the National Museum have been consulted by the Museum about a wide range of issues, and the Friends willingly have attempted to respond with positive recommendations. The Museum has seen fit on occasions to do other than as recommended by the Friends. The Friends undoubtedly are conscious that, ultimately, it is the Museum which must make its own judgements.

RESPONSES TO THE SECOND PART OF THE FIRST TERM OF REFERENCE

The second part of the first of the terms of reference of the Review reads as follows:

Examine the aims and contents of the Museum's exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs.

And report on:

(ii). Whether the Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realised

I am not aware of any definitive 'Vision Statement' by Government that needs to be reviewed. Certainly there have been no Directions by the Minister in relation to such matters, as detailed above. Ministerial pronouncements by Media Release or formal speech simply are that, Ministerial pronouncements. The reality is that Governments come and go, and it is up to the Council of the day to interpret as best as is possible the wishes of the particular government of the day, and decide if it will try to meet those wishes, assuming they are consistent with best practice and scholarship. In such matters it is the will of the Council in formal session that matters, not the predilections of the Minister of the day expressed directly or through others, or individual members who may have decidedly different views from the majority of their colleagues. A wise Council, and a wise Director, will always attempt to take note of the views of the government of the day, and individual minority members of Council. Certainly, having been closely involved at times with early Councils, I can attest that there were occasions where decidedly different views of certain matters were evident around the table, but almost always the Council and Director reached positions acceptable to all.

RESPONSE TO THE SECOND OF THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The second of the terms of reference of the Review reads as follows:

2. Recommendations on the future priorities to be addressed by the National Museum in the development of permanent and temporary exhibitions and schools and public programs.

It is very easy to run off a list of things that seem like good ideas for the future. All those ideas require long term planning, access to funds, access to objects for exhibitions, and the like. New technologies are being developed daily. They need to be tested for suitability, friendliness and capacity to be accessed by all Australians before they can be considered as tools for use by the

Museum. What is planned in detail today may be superseded almost overnight by unexpected success in areas regarded originally as being of lower priority.

An example of unexpected success and value has taken off in recent months within the National Library of Australia. An innovative small project was begun with the co-operation of a number of State libraries, and some others, to facilitate access to a reference librarian during normal business hours using the internet, with access through the National Library's home page. There are many time zones in Australia, so various libraries across the nation take it in turns to be the answering point for queries on a virtual reference desk, where the enquirer deals directly with the librarian to whom she or he is connected. This experiment has become an overnight success, engaged State and regional libraries as never before with the National Library and with readers across Australia. Key New Zealand libraries are now considering participation. With the New Zealand time zone two hours ahead of Eastern Australia the hours when readers may connect directly with a reference librarian could expand markedly. The whole project has made it possible for remotely located Australians to deal with trained and qualified reference librarians, regardless of where they (both enquirers and librarians) may be located, and obtain help not possible within their own small communities.

All the evidence so far published by the National Museum suggests it is thinking ahead, and successfully engaging with its clientele, including school groups.

Observations

It is not intended to make lists of things the Museum could do in the future. The Museum appears to be well aware of its forward commitments and responsibilities, and its professional staff must be given every opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. What is important, however, is that the Museum must be funded to the extent necessary if it is to meet all the hopes and aspirations articulated for it at all levels.