

SUBMISSION TO THE 2003 REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

By the Historical Society of the Northern Territory Incorporated

1. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY (HSNT)

The HSNT was founded in 1964. It is a voluntary organisation with membership open to individuals, families or institutions interested in history, particularly Northern Territory history. The Society is administered by a Council that is elected from a substantial, mainly Northern Territory based, membership. Among the Society's functions are the editing and publication of manuscripts dealing with Northern Territory history that may not otherwise be published and the publication of an annual refereed journal.

2. HSNT INTEREST IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA (NMA)

The HSNT interest in the NMA is based on the following broad issues and it is within this framework that a submission is made;

- . The NMA is the only Australian institution able to acquire or borrow materials, conduct research, document items and present displays from a national perspective. State and Regional institutions are for the most part narrower in scope.
- . The NMA is formally and informally linked to a range of other prestigious national institutions (such as the National Library) that overlap with the collection of 'Australian History' as defined by the NMA Act 1980.
- . The capacity of the NMA to obtain cooperation from State and Regional sources is very much dependent upon its objective, professional and independent reputation.
- . Northern Territory material contributes substantially to current NMA collections and presentations

3. HSNT INTEREST IN THE NMA REVIEW TERMS OF REFERENCE

The HSNT interest in and capacity to respond to the Terms of Reference is constrained by some of the structural aspects of the References themselves.

1. Aims and Content of the Museum's Exhibitions

The HSNT believes an exhibition aim and content review two years after the Museum opening to be premature and that at this stage an objective analysis would not be possible.

- (i) A review of the NMA Act would have similar difficulties although this would not necessarily deter from the preparation of Act amendments.
- (ii) This reference is ambiguous. There would seem to be a linkage, although perhaps not intended, between infrastructure funding of the Museum and the 'vision' of the Government of the day.

2. Future Priorities Including the Relevance of the Act

In some respects this Reference would face similar difficulties in achieving an objective analysis. This would not however deter the process of determining priorities from being reviewed.

4. HSNT SUBMISSION

Within the constraints of the brief existence of the Museum as an operating institution and the short time for the preparation of a submission, the HSNT has the following recommendations to make in relation to the Terms of Reference.

1. Aims and Content of the Museum's Exhibitions

- (i) For many institutions, particularly scientific ones, a formal external review of the institutions work every five or ten years, by a panel containing appropriate skills, is written into the organisations Charter or Act. We believe this would be a suitable model for the NMA. This would remove any suggestion of whim from the review process. If the NMA Act is to be reviewed or amended perhaps such an obligation could be written into Section 7, The Powers of the NMA.
- (ii) The HSNT believes the funding of the Museum and the 'vision' of the Government of the day are separate issues. The funding should be suitably appropriated and preferably in a block grant of several years to provide stability. The consideration of the 'vision' of the 'developing' Government would be more appropriately located in a formal external review.

2. Future Priorities

The HSNT believes it would be more appropriate for the current review to consider the process of determining the priorities for NMA exhibitions and programs rather than the actual priorities themselves. Interests in the process within and without the NMA and the Federal Government could be identified. Arrangements for their incorporation into the determining process could be constructed. The process should be relatively transparent. A similar transparency could be applied to the design of exhibitions and programs and the selection and documentation of materials

5. CONCLUSION

The HSNT believes the NMA is a new level of research, collection and display of 'Australian history'. It complements like institutions at State and Regional levels. It was launched some two years ago with enormous goodwill throughout the nation. That goodwill is critically dependent on the quality of its collections, its research and its presentations. The presentations at both an academic and a popular level need to be able to be substantiated. For that to happen, the processes involved needs to be transparent and to be regularly externally reviewed.

Darwin 5 March 2003