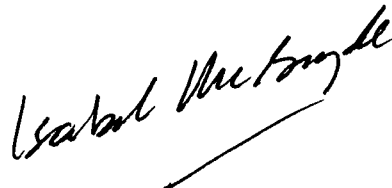


SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA, 2003

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

1. INTRODUCTION

The opportunity to comment on matters before the Review Panel is one I greatly welcome. In this I am sure I am not alone, given the significance of the Panel's brief, matters seminal to any museum, and fundamental to one with a national role.

My association with the Museum, though not formal, is of long standing. It has convinced me that in spite of years of uncertainty the Museum and its staff have established important roles in the educational, intellectual and social spheres, both nationally and locally, with increasing international standing. These have been consolidated with distinction in the years since the opening of the new building on Acton Peninsula. The creation of impressive permanent exhibitions and associated programs using the spaces offered in the new building constituted an achievement for Director and staff. The size and strong continuity in visitor numbers over the last two years bear witness to this. So also do the records of mean time spent in the museum by visitors (remaining at least several hours over the two years). Its materials and programs are obviously judged worthy of serious attention, and appreciated.

2. ADDRESSING THE FRAMES OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

Two major concerns are raised for consideration by the Panel's Frames of Reference:

1. the aims and content of the Museum's Exhibitions and its public and school programs.
2. future priorities to be addressed by the Museum in developing exhibitions and programs.

The first has two identified aspects:

- whether the Museum has complied with its statutory obligations defined in the Act (1980) and as elaborated in the later Charter (1982/1985);
- whether the Government's vision in approving funding for the Museum has been realised or implemented in the Museum's performance.

Given that I have not been able to locate any explicit public statement of ‘the Government’s vision’ other than that implicit in the Act itself, my comments will be directed to the first of these aspects.

2.1 Exhibitions and public programs

– Compliance with statutory obligations under the Act and Museum Charter

For the Museum’s role and functions the major relevant sections of the Act are 4.1 and 6.1. They are clearly delineated, but in general terms. Given the Act’s date and ‘enabling’ status, they define areas of action, but not their specifics. The Museum will be established, with a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia; a ‘National Collection’ will be created. In addition the Act stresses the exhibition of materials, research, and the dissemination of information relating to the Museum and its functions, also the development of linkages for sponsorship and commercial enterprise.

In referring to the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia (in Section 5.1) the direct involvement of Indigenous people is enjoined. My own feeling is that the Museum has met this last well, in terms of staffing provisions as well as in community consultation. However comments from Indigenous respondents will be valuable here and should be sought. Section 5.1 also raises another question: Why is there no Indigenous member of the Review Panel to provide that perspective? Why was the perspective not seen as vital to the Panel’s deliberations? The Charter’s comment that the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia should create ‘a focus for the cultural aspirations of the Aboriginal people’ is also relevant to my concern on this point.

However I would note here that the Museum throughout its period of operation has shown admirable sensitivity to its obligations to members of the creating cultures. Indigenous staff and consultants are employed, and relevant communities are consulted and involved in collection management as well as exhibition or program development. On one occasion I joined the Willandra Lakes Elders on one of their visits to discuss presentation of materials from their area. It was moving to see how much the visit, and being involved, meant to this custodial group.

Given the major thrust of statements in the Act on role and functions of the Museum, it seems to me that the Museum has clearly not only demonstrated compliance, but done so at an impressive standard, especially during the demanding recent years. The Director’s leadership

has been outstanding, and supported by a dedicated staff. With innovative energy they achieved not only the physical establishment of the Museum on Acton Peninsula (on time and within budget!) but also of its first permanent exhibitions. Soon after the opening an important international exhibition, 'Gold', was staged, with accompanying lectures, and programs.

The format of exhibitions of shorter duration on current, or significant issues, as well as small travelling exhibitions in addition to the permanent gallery exhibitions has continued.

Recently a major exhibition has been mounted in China, a significant international cultural event. Each exhibition is accompanied by appropriate public lectures, panel debates, school programs or conferences exploring the contexts and issues associated with the exhibition theme. These are extremely valuable. For example one could cite the January 2003 international conference on the cultural and environmental histories of deserts in the Southern Hemisphere (23° South). It was an outstanding success bringing together professionals in the archaeology and landscape history of South Africa, South America and Australia to debate current issues and the results of recent research. A major exhibition on the theme is in preparation.

2.2 Exhibitions and Public Programs – Aims and Content (i)

The exhibitions and associated public programs supplement the permanent exhibitions. Whether for schools or general audiences, and whether including conferences, lectures and panel discussions, these have been developed to address questions of current concern or debate. For example, this month's day of presentations on fire and vegetation, the conference on frontier violence in Australia (2001) and on the roles of national museums (1999). They present issues broadly, from a wide range of perspectives. In this way people not only gain more from the Exhibition itself, but also establish informed understanding of the underlying issues.

The exhibitions and their associated programs therefore constitute a carefully structured response to the functions outlined in the Act. They also meet the requirements stressed in the Museum's Charter (and see also the Museum's Annual Report for 2001-2002, p. viii). The Charter, originally a set of recommendations from the Interim Council (1982), in 1985 was accepted by the Museum's Council as a formal Charter. The Charter stresses:

- that the Museum's collections are made with the purpose of increasing understanding of the histories of Australia's people and environment;
- that exhibitions should both inform and entertain, maintaining the highest standards in presentation and in the accuracy and relevance of their information;
- that the Museum should increase knowledge of Australia, functioning as a base for research, and that it will disseminate that information;
- that it will have concern for the interaction between different groups in Australian society, and between society and the natural environment;
- that the Museum will reflect Australian cultural diversity and through its Gallery of Aboriginal Australia 'create ... a focus for the cultural aspirations of the Aboriginal people'.

2.3 Exhibitions and Public Programs – Aims and Content (ii)

The range of activities offered by the Museum represents a dynamic expression of the role and functions anticipated in the Museum's Act and its Charter. It is vital to an Institution which focuses on social history, meanings and interactions between social groupings within society, and between people and landscape. Further, it recognises the value of involving diverse interest groups within society. It also uses the Museum's expertise and resources to provide the public with informed, educational debate on current and continuing issues of significance.

It has been my experience that the exhibitions, lectures, and conferences have been carefully structured to offer a wide range of viewpoints on any issue. People are thus free to establish their own viewpoint, but on the basis of informed debate. To cite the recently much contested issue of Aboriginal history and frontier violence, a conference was organised and a volume of the papers presented recently published. Some three hundred people attended the conference. Both conference and published volume included a wide spectrum of interpretive approaches to the historical events discussed. There were also analyses exploring the complexities and ambiguities of the evidence on which studies of such historical events depend. Theoretical stance may introduce further complexity; this problem was also explicitly examined and speakers with diverse views invited to present them.

Considering the Museum's role and functions in the context of a National Museum raises issues of representation, image and identity, at many levels. National Museums, if their focus

is social history and understanding, rather than curation of ‘national treasures’ or the material collections of science, must address such contested areas of national history. They should not ignore their complexities. So, as Graeme Davison has pointed out, the museums themselves become ‘vigorously contested sites of national history’ (in *Negotiating Histories*, p. 12), as well as sites for ‘a renegotiation of national identity’.

The Museum is addressing these significant challenges in recognising the diversity and complexity inherent in such issues. It is also recognising its obligations (under Act and Charter), to use its expertise and resources to serve its clientele. It is aiming to assist visitors to acknowledge those contested pasts and resolve their own responses on an informed basis from the results of scholarly research.

This approach to the Museum’s national role has long been part of the Museum’s philosophy. It reflects the broad sense of history that is implicit in the Act and explicit in the Charter. It accepts the challenge of contested interpretations, of divergent voices in both past and present. It also accepts the entangled, dynamic, demands on a museum that aims to engage the perspectives of environmental, Indigenous and settler histories. Comments from contributors to the *Negotiating Histories* volume published by the museum are pertinent here:

Gaye Sculthorpe:

The opening of the National Museum (and the Centenary of Federation) provide an important occasion to remember the realities of Australia’s past (p. 81).

Rooksana Omar

The museum is a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate (p. 142).

Carson quoted by David Lowenthal

Visitors often fail to understand ‘the vital importance’ of ‘exhibits that encourage public discussion of controversial and unpalatable truths’ (p. 167).

Peter Stanley:

Historians must be free to develop and express interpretations, and not be intimidated into expressing a palatable line to avoid offence. But we should also recognise that

we are dealing with aspects of the lives of real people and to that extent bear (an ethical) responsibility (p. 66).

The volume from which these significant statements come is the Museum's publication (2001) of its 1999 international Conference on the roles of national museums. The papers could almost be seen as a vital text for the current Review. I hope copies are available for members of the Review Panel.

The volume presents sensitive, expert and experienced exploration of the roles and functions of museums designated as 'national'. Particularly relevant in the context of this Review are those of Davison, Lowenthal, McDonald, McKenzie, Sculthorpe, Stanley and Tapsall. They present differing perspectives, but all stress constant renegotiation.

The Conference itself illustrated the way the Museum meets its statutory obligations and its sense of its responsibilities to the public. It grew out of a collaborative research project focused on the Museum's exhibition program undertaken with two University Research centres. The three-day conference pulled together the results of this study, situating them in wider contexts.

From my experience I would judge that in both aims and content the Museum's exhibitions and associated events and programs of various kinds meet with distinction the vision implied in the Act and Charter. Further, they meet this with sensitivity to the dynamic demands made of a 'national' institution that takes its social history format seriously in serving a multi-cultural society. The Director and staff are to be congratulated on this achievement.

2.4 Exhibitions and Public Programs – School's Programs

It is worth stressing that the Museum has also developed an active, on-going Schools' program with the educational functions enjoined by Act and Charter. It aims to provide context for the permanent exhibitions and those focused on tropical issues. The activities presented have proved very popular, with parents, schools and pupils. They range effectively across the entertainment/ education spectrum offering new events each week and during school term breaks. They offer an attractive choice, and alternative to the traditional family visit to a museum on a wet weekend or another classroom teaching session.

As I lack expertise and experience in school education it would not be appropriate for me to critique these programs. But I must note my admiration for the range of activities offered, and the number of school groups and young people seen in the Museum whenever I visit. It is also evident that they respond positively to the building and its spaces as well as to its style of presentation.

3. QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

3.1 Recommendations for consideration on future policies for exhibitions and programs

The Frames of Reference addressed future priorities. Regarding exhibitions and programs continuity with the present policies, and focus on a wide-ranging social history role, with awareness of, and response to, current issues would seem an excellent priority in itself. Careful consideration for the strands of interaction between the histories of the natural environment, of Indigenous histories and those of settler and post-colonial Australia is important. It would be easy for these to fragment into separate areas, losing the understanding of the interaction that shaped each. Careful concern should be directed to the perspectives that emerge from groups within each strand, such as the Aboriginal stress on regional and local cultures and histories rather than the 'pan-Australia' merging of these into one artificially created entity (Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal history).

3.2 Questions of advice to Council on the issues under consideration

The number of reviews and advisory consultancies that the Museum seems to generate raises the question of permanent advice to Council on Museum or disciplinary matters through advisory committees. Given the limited range of expertise or Museum experience that can be represented in the small current Council membership, and given that most members have other demanding commitments this would seem a beneficial development. Three small advisory groups, one for each major strand of the Museum's focus – environment, Aboriginal histories and cultures (with predominantly Indigenous membership), Australian history (settler and post-colonial). These would form a permanent body of relevant advisers (membership in terms of 3-5 years) to whom matters could be referred, e.g. aims and content of exhibitions, proposals for conferences, collection acquisition and management. They should also be regarded as a pool of expertise with:

- the power independently to raise matters for consideration with the Council or another Advisory Committee;
- provision for occasional joint meetings between Committees, given the importance of 'interaction' between the three strands in the realities of Australian life and history stressed in the Charter and implicit in the Act;
- formal provision for liaison between committees and Council;
- provision for close liaison between Committees and relevant curatorial staff.

Council already has provision for sub-Committees on collection and administrative matters. These further Committees therefore have precedent in function and structure. However they differ in being additional to Council membership, not sub-Committees of Council members. The concentration on the three strands in the Museum's focus is reflected here in the suggestion of three committees. I am conscious of an absence of advice on educational aspects. There could be benefit in having on each Committee one member with experience in this field.

A Committee structure of this kind could give invaluable support to Council in technical matters and on questions such as those now put before a Review Panel. In my view their input could obviate the need for such reviews which can be destabilising and a distraction from the on-going operation of the Museum. Consistent, continuing expert advice on difficult issues could offer far more constructive assistance to Council than constant reviews.

3.3 Council membership relevant to the issues under consideration

Above I referred to the Museum Council as perhaps being rather too small to provide the range of perspectives and experience appropriate to the broad mission of the Museum. It would seem that expansion could well be beneficial, especially in terms of meeting the wording and intent of Act and Charter. Certainly I see great need for inclusion of an Indigenous member. The absence of provision for this, or action to make such an appointment, seems curious to me. It denies representation of important perspectives that are explicitly targeted in the Charter and Act. The present Director and her predecessor Dr Jonas of course are sensitive to all these concerns for 'voice'. But as Directors they would feel properly bound to act in that capacity and as executive officers to Council. Their advice on this matter should be sought.

The end of Dr Reeves' term on Council also leaves a significant gap in expertise and experience (history and museum studies). Nor do I identify an ecologist/ natural historian among current membership.

3.4 Continuing relevance of the Act

The 1980 Museum Act is an enabling instrument. It is an important document, reflecting the milieu and needs of its time. It reflects then current concern for the value of the concept of a national museum and the value of national collections as heritage. It also reflects acceptance of two significant landmark documents:

- Stanner's arguments for a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia; and
- the Pigott Report on the status of Australia's museums and collections – arguing that this constituted an area of national need.

These documents of course are products of their time and its issues/ circumstances. However the principles they lay down are still current, still significant. So value and continuing relevance remains. The Act which encapsulates these principles must still be seen as relevant.

This does not dismiss arguments that its terminology could be modified to meet current sensitivities (e.g. use of 'man') or that sections such as 6(2) and 9A could be clarified in the light of experience since 1980. Statements on role and functions, for example those in the Charter accepted in 1985, could well be incorporated in any future amendment.

However, given that the Charter exists as a guiding document it would seem premature to engage in amendment of the Act, which is (sensibly) a generalised document, at this early stage of the Museum's operation on Acton Peninsula. At this time I would see continuity and consolidation after long periods of uncertainty and change as very important. The last two years have shown what excellent results have already come from this.

4. THE REVIEW PROCESS

In conclusion I should like to make a few comments on the Review process. This may seem to go beyond the brief of addressing the Frames of Reference but has relevance to their assessment and so may have its own relevance.

4.1 The necessity for a Review

There has been considerable public comment on the Review, especially its necessity and ultimate purposes. These issues are not clarified in publicly available materials or the Frames of Reference. Reviews are usually seen as normal components of maintaining the accountability and transparency of performance and management of public institutions. However in this case the necessity for a review of this aspect of the Museum's activities hardly seems apparent. Three points could be made here:

- First there is the clear success of policies and procedures in the areas under consideration, as discussed in earlier sections. It is also demonstrated in the supportive response from both public and professionals over the last two years.
- Secondly, one could refer to the previous, and recent, review focused on related issues chaired by historian Professor Graeme Davison. Professor Davison is eminently qualified to chair such a panel, and present the report on its findings. He specialises in the Australian field, but also has direct and long-standing experience in heritage education, conservation and in museum affairs.
- My third point relates to timing of the Review. Not only is this Review close on the heels of that which Professor Davison chaired. At only two years into the operation of the Museum at Acton one also surely has to ask whether this is the appropriate time for an assessment of Exhibitions and public programs. Would not a period of at least five years have been more appropriate, and in addition avoid the destabilising impact of such a review at an early stage of development of programs?

4.2 Composition of the Review Panel

Given the thrust of the Review the panel appointed seems both small and lacking the input of members with valuable museum and disciplinary expertise and experience. Dr Jones presumably has to speak for history, anthropology, archaeology, ethnohistory and museum technical concerns. An excessive tier of hats? Similarly Professor Vickers-Rich, a highly respected palaeontologist, has to speak for the entire environmental field and its interactions with human cultures. I am seriously concerned that your Panel with its focus on interpretation and representation does not include a social historian, or an archaeologist. Nor does it include an ecologist, or someone skilled in museum presentations, or in primary and secondary educationist, to speak on the schools' programs. Above all it is both curious and discriminatory that no Indigenous member is included to speak from the cross-cultural

perspective. There are many highly qualified, experienced Aboriginal people who could address not only an Indigenous perspective but, as expert professionals, contribute significantly on a number of the fields mentioned above.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Isabel McBryde", written in a cursive style.

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