

Professor John Carroll

Chair

Review of the National Museum of Australia's Exhibitions and Public Programs

NMA Review Secretariat

Canberra

FAX 02 6271 1553

7th March 2003

Dear Professor Carroll,

As a former member of the Pigott Committee and past director of the Australian Museum I have been a strong supporter of the NMA. Recent material in the press about the Museum has been deeply disturbing, and the setting up of a Review Committee before the Museum has had a time to settle down also suggests that something is badly wrong.

As a museum professional I have had some minor criticisms, but the Museum has been outstandingly successful. It is still in its infancy and I look forward to seeing it evolve further. It is clearly fulfilling the aspirations expressed in the Museum Act, and the Board and Director have functioned effectively. The exhibits have been supported by the highest current scholarship.

The review is premature after 2 years and with the virtual firing of its Director suggests something fundamentally wrong. There have been reports that two members of the Board have objected to the aboriginal displays, though the information in these displays has sound scholastic backing. Geoffrey Blainey and Graeme Davidson (a conservative and a moderate historian respectively) have checked them and suggested only minor changes of fact.

Something deeper is clearly underway, and from what I have read and been told I am forced to the conclusion that this is a political attempt to sanitize our history: to hide away the brutal aspects of colonization perpetrated by both invading and invaded populations.

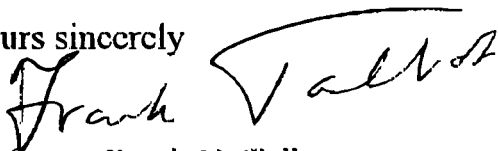
A museum that follows the political line of whatever group happens to be in power is not a museum... it is a disaster, and becomes part of public propaganda. One is reminded of museums, art and science being deformed in communist Russia. We do not want our museums to be playthings in the

political arena. Scholarship and understanding continually develop, and the Museum must be permitted to wrestle with evolving issues without political interference. Otherwise we lose a valuable educational asset in helping Australians to understand themselves and their history.

Museum professionals face a difficult line when newly revealed information poses a questioning of deeply held public myths. Yet a vital part of their task is to encourage the public to question and to rethink. The NMA has trod this line carefully, and the general public and the museum profession have supported the institution.

This places a very great burden on your committee, and I do hope you consult widely among museum professionals and the best academic scholars, particularly in the aboriginal history area, and remain unaffected by the unfortunate origins of this inquiry. I wish you well.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank Talbot". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish over the name.

Professor Frank H. Talbot

Director Emeritus, US National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

Past Director, Australian Museum

48 Kallaroo Road, Lanc Cove, NSW 2066