

Submission to the

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

Dr Gary Morgan
Executive Director
Western Australian Museum
Francis Street
Perth WA 6000

10 March 2003

This submission to the Review Panel is made on behalf of the Western Australian Museum. The implications of the National Museum of Australia's review have significance for all Australians, but particular significance for those of us who work in national and state museums around the country.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comment for the Review. We consider it timely in light of the changing social, environmental and economic climate in which museums operate world-wide.

The Western Australian Museum

The Western Australian Museum is a multi-disciplinary organization with a brief to enhance understanding of the natural environment and cultural heritage of the State. It has had a strong social and cultural history program for many years. Indeed, the WA Museum was the first state museum in Australia to establish a history program, in 1970, so is well placed to comment on the exhibitions and public programs of Australia's first national history museum. As part of its commitment to social inclusion and building community, the Museum has worked assiduously to foster strong links with community, to develop co-operative programs with groups outside the Museum and to ensure that all voices are heard. It has done so through its key long-term exhibition programs, such as *Katta Djinoong: First Peoples of Western Australia*, *A New Australia: Post-war migration to Western Australia* and *Western Australia: Land and People*, as well as community access gallery programs, seminars, publications and community events. This has been achieved both through its metropolitan sites and three regional museums – Albany, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie.

Current Issues Affecting Museums

In Australia, the past century has seen rapid change in a number of areas. It has seen the democratisation of society and the growth of a vibrant multicultural society. Voices previously unheard have been given prominence, including those of racial and cultural minorities, women, working people, gays, the elderly and those with disabilities. We have moved considerably from a society where a privileged few held power, to a diverse society where power is shared and decisions are made after community consultation.

Understanding the past has become a vital prerequisite for addressing some of the major social, economic and environmental issues facing society. It has become a central component of debates on issues such as multiculturalism, Aboriginal reconciliation and the environment. It has become a unifying issue for events of public importance such as the 2000 Olympics.

Museums have not been unaffected by these changes. Once aloof from the public, museums are now interacting with their wider communities in more meaningful ways. Museums, as well as maintaining their traditional role of collections' stewardship have become venues for conversation and interaction with the range of issues affecting society. Museums now see themselves as contributing to the building of the social and cultural capital of their communities.

The National Museum: Principles

The National Museum was established to collect, research and present Australia's Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories and the relationship of people with their environment. It can do this through its exhibitions, education programs, and research and publications. Underpinning all should be a commitment to the following principles:

- **Social Inclusion**
Museum programs have a role in reconciliation and building community by being socially inclusive and representing all groups in society. They should acknowledge all aspects of a nation's past, including aspects which some people may not find comfortable, such as the Stolen Generations and conflict history.
- **Consultation**
Consultation with community, industry and government at all levels is fundamental to building a socially inclusive museum. Community consultation involves building trust from a grass roots level at the inception of programs. It is not sufficient to make superficial contact with an already formulated program.
- **Sound Scholarship and Research**
Integrity of scholarship is paramount to programs. This means drawing on the most recent historical research. Museum visitors have a right to expect that museum programs are based on sound scholarship and research. Scholarship should not be compromised by political influence.
- **Integrity and Objectivity**
Museums are seen as objective and independent. It is important that this respected position in society is not jeopardised through political interference or constraints. Museum programs should not be skewed by the prevailing political climate of the day.

- **Leadership**

The National Museum of Australia should have a leadership role in the Australian museum industry and global museum community. It also has an important leadership role in highlighting contemporary social issues such as reconciliation, racism, sustainability and poverty. Political interference risks compromising this role.

- **Partnerships**

As Australia's national museum, the success of the NMA depends on partnerships with other museums – overseas, state and local – industry and government at all levels. These partnerships require commitment by the NMA to develop the necessary respect and trust upon which they depend.

The Principles above do not exclude the NMA from being accountable to Government, as the elected representatives of a democratic Australia. The Museum, like all public museums, operates within a framework of Government policies. However, the credibility of the NMA will be compromised or lost if it is, or is seen to be, captive to any dogma or political persuasion.

The National Museum: Exhibitions and Programs

- **Presenting a National History**

The sign of a nation's maturity is its capacity to think, reflect and consider those parts of its national story that are regretful and challenging. An honest account of the successes and failures of a nation is a necessary part of building a community that is morally sustainable and ennobling. The practice of civic life in this country will depend on our capacity to reflect all aspects of past experiences in the national storehouses of our culture.

Museums must also recognise that history is dynamic and changing, and not a fixed or determined field. To suggest otherwise is to ignore the realities of historical perspective and temporal relativity. Exploration of instances of violence on the frontier, for instance, does not reduce or diminish the national story, but rather enlarges our capacity to understand the diversity of historical experience in this country. It naturally recognises that there is no single story, but many stories.

- **The Role of Oral History**

Historians and Anthropologists Australia-wide are concerned with the debate surrounding the use of oral history in the National Museum exhibitions. There are those who suggest that oral history has no place as historical evidence. Historians and Anthropologists are aware of the limitations of oral evidence and the care with which it has to be used – like any primary evidence – but it forms a key role in much academic research. It is particularly valid in Indigenous history, which lacks written evidence due to the nature of the culture and where more formal evidence supports

only one view. To suggest that oral evidence is invalid is tantamount to suggesting that Indigenous evidence *per se* is also invalid.

- **Contesting Viewpoints**

Debates have always surrounded, and will continue to surround, various issues such as frontier conflict and the occurrence of massacres. Any attempt to resile from these debates and represent a homogeneous national view would be outdated and unscholarly. Museums should embrace heterogeneity and diversity as key principles in representing the past. Where significant debate exists, then its existence should be made transparent in museum exhibitions and other work.

The NMA should represent the best contemporary practice in museology. To suggest that it is possible to cull or select out history that some find unpalatable or challenging risks losing authority and public recognition of the Museum's leading role in the nation's cultural life.

In the case of the very public debate surrounding conflict history in the NMA, it is difficult to ignore the wealth of evidence indicating the existence of massacres - newspapers, court records, oral history, letters and diaries. However, it is important for the Museum to acknowledge that debate will be ongoing. Debates like this encourage museum visitors to be more reflexive about social issues. From our experience visitors want to be challenged and respond to ideas that question their own understandings.

- **Celebration of being Australian**

None of the above means that the National Museum cannot recognise and celebrate the great achievements of Australians, of all backgrounds, in forging a vital and unique modern society. It can and should do so. Knowing ourselves requires us to know our achievements and failures. It is only through considering both that we can use that knowledge of the past to inform our way forward to a wise and sustainable future.

Once again, the Western Australian Museum appreciates the opportunity to submit to this review.

Yours sincerely

Gary Morgan