

Central Land Council and Northern Land Council

Submission to the Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs of the National Museum of Australia

8 April 2003

Introduction

The Central and Northern Land Councils welcome this opportunity to provide a submission to the Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs of the National Museum of Australia. The main point of this joint submission is to argue strenuously against any proposal that the *National Museums of Australia (NMA) Act 1980* be amended in a manner that would diminish the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their diverse histories and cultures. Indeed, the National Museum of Australia's exhibitions and collections should make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories and cultures – both before and after 1788 – a priority.

Thus, this submission is directed mainly to the second of the Terms of Reference. It does not make any attempt to analyse the content of the NMA's exhibitions or collections. This submission is restricted to an endorsement of the legislative priority already given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the NMA Act.

Please note that neither Land Council is in a position to closely address the first of the Terms of Reference on the question of the compliance of the NMA with the NMA Act, its charter or other relevant documents, or whether the NMA has realised the "Government's vision".

The Land Councils – Who We Are

The Central and Northern Land Councils are statutory authorities established under the *Lands Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. Under the Act the Land Councils are formed as elective representative bodies with a range of statutory and administrative responsibilities. Among the principal tasks of the Land Councils has been the recovery of Aboriginal Land and more recently to perform as Representative Bodies under the Native Title Act. The Land Councils further undertake a range of activities relating to land management, mining, community and economic development.

Our Land, Our Life

The Land Councils grew out of the struggle for land rights, and out of the Commonwealth Government's desire to both address the injustices of the past, and to provide a framework for the future. The antecedents of the land rights in northern and central Australia reach back at least as far as 1963 in the fight for justice and recognition of land ownership. In that year the Yirrkala petition was presented to the Commonwealth Parliament. In 1966 the Gurindji stockmen and their families walked off Wave Hill Station and the modern land rights movement was born. The mass movement for Aboriginal rights, the 1967 Referendum, the Tent Embassy and the Land Rights Act, then the Mabo judgement, the Native Title Act and the Wik judgement followed in succession.

These historic moments have been profoundly important in the lives of Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory and Australia. They have also been of profound importance to the nation as a whole, as the story of these events is central to understanding modern Australia.

In recent years there has been a deeper public understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been in possession of this continent for tens of thousands of years. In comparison, non-Aboriginal people have been here for over two hundred years. In that context the Aboriginal connection to land in relation to the European occupation of Australia since 1788 is surely of major cultural and historical significance, and of major national and international importance.

Our Stories, Our Sharing

The Land Councils would expect that the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, of people's connections to their land and their ancestors, and of the relationship with non-Aboriginal Australia, to be told by the National Museum of Australia in depth.

In making a submission the Land Councils note that the NMA has figured heavily in recent media commentary – especially in regard to the presentation of Aboriginal history and the debate between those dubbed the 'black armband' school and their opponents the 'white blindfold' school.

We note that some of the debate has turned on the value of oral history as compared with documentary history.

Such divisions of course are crude simplifications of a highly complex and always current story of the developing relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The challenge for the NMA, and for other museums, is to present faithfully the history of contact and interaction, conflict and cooperation, reconciliation and adversity, and of misunderstanding and enduring political struggles.

Importantly, the events and stories of the post-1788 period have not diminished the importance of the stories of tens of thousands of years of occupation and use of this continent.

The NMA has a statutory obligation to present the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history of Australia. In the lengthy experience and expert opinion of the Land Councils, as derived from massive and detailed research into eventually successful Land Claims, not all history is contained in the documentary record. The willingness of the NMA and all museums to use oral history is crucial to any rudimentary argument about a historical 'balance'. The experience of the Land Commissioner's hearings and of the Native Title process, even as bound by the Commonwealth Evidence Act, has allowed for oral history to be admitted. To deny the historical power of oral evidence in relation to Aboriginal people would be self evidently absurd.

A Commitment to All Australians

We note that under section 5 of the NMA Act the Museum is obliged to establish and maintain a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia and a collection of historical material relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We also note that the Act requires a policy to be pursued by the Museum to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Central Land Council and the Northern Land Council strongly support those objectives and would be deeply concerned by any suggestion that the National Museum of Australia Act may be amended to alter those requirements with the purpose of diminishing their force.

Nor should the exhibitions at the NMA or any other museum isolate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander component to a specific gallery. We would argue that a dedicated gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is fundamental to the integrity of a National Museum of Australia; yet the other galleries ought represent Aboriginal Australia as part of the land, and the people, and the society, and the nation as a whole. In other words, the history of Aboriginal people since European contact was first made – which well predates British settlement in 1788 – should infuse all areas of the national story and not be isolated to presentation in a dedicated gallery.

The contemporary experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is also worthy of representation in museums. To limit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material to the remote historical experience is a disservice. The exhibitions and collections about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories should not be limited to ethnographic collections. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is contemporary and political, and it is saturated in the everyday life of the nation as a whole. The exhibitions of the National Museum ought to reflect that experience. The tendency of too many museums to present a ‘classical’, ‘primitive’ or romanticised picture avoids the more troubling yet enriching aspects of the historical and current experience.

While the presentation of that broad aspect of Australian history in the Museum should remain a matter for the professionalism of the curators, there should be a proviso that consultation processes with Aboriginal communities are maintained and strengthened.

Conclusion

In sum, the review of the NMA exhibitions and programs must not diminish the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the NMA. Indeed, the NMA should more comprehensively present the stories, cultures, histories and contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and of their inter-relationships with non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.