

National Museum of Australia: Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

Submission to Review Panel

From Bill Gammage

1 Hackett Gardens

Turner, ACT. 2612. ph 02) 6247 7451; email bill.gammage@anu.edu.au

I state my distrust of this review and my dismay at the composition of its panel.

The review terms ask the panel to find whether the Museum's aims and content conform with the National Museum of Australia Act 1980 [Term 1(i)] and with the "vision" of the government in 1980 or now (it is not clear which) [Term 1(ii)], and if it finds that the Museum has conformed to the Act but not to the current government's views, to recommend changes to the Act [Term 2]. These are terms self-evidently partial and self-serving. They set lows in subverting the public domain to personal bigotry. They should alarm every public body in Australia, for if the National Museum can be treated in this way, the rest might as well drop their duds and bend over.

Despite its window dressing, the review is essentially into the Museum's content. It is instigated by politically motivated people with no expertise on content, despite more than two decades of expert content assessment from inside and outside the Museum. I ask the panel to take into account the frequent public attacks in recent years on Museum content and staff in such publications as *Quadrant*, and the minutes and other records of councillors' attempts to influence the work and knowledge of curators. These go far beyond the general oversight rightly expected of a board or council, and they have continued despite expert reports from Council-initiated reviews that they are unwarranted. They are a denial of evidence and an interference in the work of Museum experts. Those responsible will of course deny this, but I ask the panel to recognise that a public perception, that political and non-expert prejudice instigated this review, is so widespread that any report the panel might make has been compromised.

The composition of the panel is itself evidence of a hostility to expertise by those who appointed its members. Social history has long been accepted as at the core of the Museum, and SS 3 & 6(1) of the Act require a museum of Australian history, yet no panel member is a historian. The excuse Council's Chair offers for this, that there are no historians without prior Museum involvement (see for example *Canberra Times* 28/2/03), is untrue and gratuitous. Panel members have been appointed to assess content outside their expertise, and I ask how they would feel if their own disciplines were treated in this way - as this precedent now allows. I do not predict that the panel will necessarily report adversely on any part of the Museum, but I do say that whatever the panel reports is inevitably tainted, and on this ground alone I trust the panel will report with all possible restraint and brevity.

Panel members might be tempted to claim expertise on the basis of experience in state museums, and even to use this expertise to justify changing the Museum's focus under reference term 2. I remind the panel that the Museum seeks not to duplicate what state museums do, so to a large extent state museum experience is not relevant. The word "museum" masks a considerable difference between these institutions; for this reason in 1997-8 Council unsuccessfully sought an alternative word to describe the national museum.

I now address principally the expertise and degree of autonomy necessary for museum staff.

I am a historian of Australia, and was on the Museum's Council in 1995-8, its deputy chair in 1996-8, and briefly its acting chair in 1996. I was among 30 or so historians and IT experts attending a Museum-led conference in Canberra in about 1982, which for 2-3 days discussed the future museum's aims and content, and endorsed and refined the three-part content concept on which the Museum is now based. During my Council term I was among 40 or so historians who attended an intensive 2 day review of the Museum's proposed content and approach at the Exhibition Centre in Canberra, at which curators were thoroughly grilled on the concepts they proposed and the content they envisaged. I took part in and knew of a great number of other reviews and workshops on the balance of the Museum as a whole, on its three broad content areas, its separate exhibits, its IT programs, and its provision for schools, temporary exhibitions, facilities and location. I have shared public discussions on detail with Museum staff, and am one of many whom curators have interrogated individually. Over many years I witnessed an exhaustive consultative process and numerous training courses frequently involving outside expertise from Australia and elsewhere, yet I took part in only a fraction of the consultations Museum staff undertook. I doubt that staff in any institution in Australia so thoroughly prepared themselves over so long a time as did staff at the Museum. I ask the panel to take into account the wide range and great number of the Museum's consultations large and small over many years, and the expertise of those involved.

In every institution curators are appointed on the premise that they have expertise or the skills to soon acquire it. If a curator does not meet these expectations, he or she should be reviewed and appropriate action taken. The premise behind the present review, that all or almost all curators have not met adequate expertise criteria, despite the efforts outlined above, is outrageous. From my own knowledge the curators generally worked and work much harder and longer than their terms require, and many show a dedication I have rarely seen matched anywhere. They can rarely defend themselves, and it must be galling to them, and corrosive of their morale, to find their work criticised by people unaware of what they have put into it, and then endlessly reviewed, even when such reviews commend them. Of course, as does every writer and presenter, they make mistakes, including in captions, but not many, and I caution the panel against casting stones. Obviously curators have also displayed evidence and opinion which does not suit all who see it, but while all museums should take seriously complaints about content, in the end none can be controlled by them. That would subordinate expertise to ignorance, make curators superfluous, expose exhibits to minor vagaries of circumstance and prejudice, put museums in a concept and policy vacuum which no public institution could defend, and reduce museums to storehouses, unfit to make any contribution that matters to our country's past or future. I ask the panel to recognise and accept that the expertise of curators should in the normal course be accepted and respected, and that this review exceeds the normal course.

I ask the panel to recommend that the Director be re-appointed for a normal term. A one year term debilitates policy and morale throughout the Museum. Panel members will learn how greatly staff take the one year term as adverse criticism of them all. Panel members will also know that every institution and committee has two or three people especially crucial to its effectiveness, and that this is not often apparent to outsiders. Ms Casey is such a person. In my time on Council she attended from DOCA. Her contributions invariably showed a diplomatic restraint, but I recall several critical occasions on which she nudged Council discussion back to a focus on key long-term needs and objectives. People with such vision are rare and valuable.

Bill Jamnag