

Review of the National Museum of Australia
Submission from the School of History
University of New South Wales

The School of History at the University of New South Wales comprises over 20 full time academic staff, two research fellows and two emeritus professors. We are one of the largest History Schools in Australia and our students and alumni number several thousand. The School's expertise embraces many diverse fields and disciplines and we field particularly successful teaching programs in Australian, European, American, Asian and World History. Whatever our research field and whatever our area of teaching, we are united in our concern over the proposed changes to the National Museum of Australia. The School wishes it to be noted that

- Any review of the National Museum should seek the full and active involvement of members of the historical profession. We note that the Review Committee has declined an offer by the Australian Historical Association to nominate suitable representatives. Nor does the Committee include any history educators, despite the Museum's mission to further both public education and school education. In our opinion, this seriously compromises the value of any review and its recommendations are unlikely to merit much respect within or beyond the Academy. It should further be noted that the Museum's exhibits are not confined to the province of Australian history. An informed Review would seek comment from the widest possible cross section of the historical community.
- The terms of reference of this review are inappropriate and pose a serious threat to the intellectual integrity of the Museum's exhibitions, school programs and displays. We have every confidence in the staff of the National Museum of Australia. As suitably qualified historians and curators they should enjoy a high measure of professional autonomy, subject (of course) to widely accepted procedures of financial accountability. To question (as the Review puts it) the 'aim and content' of the Museum's exhibitions suggests a

political intervention in the way historians and curators present and interpret the past. Such an intervention is unacceptable and against the public interest.

- In recent years, the School has organised several excursions to the National Museum of Australia. The quality of the Museum's exhibitions and the expertise of its staff have more than justified the (substantial) time and cost involved in organising such visits. Our students have frequently commented on the Museum's innovative and thought provoking presentation of the past. As teachers and as active researchers we have found the Museum equally stimulating. Its curators, researchers and designers have succeeded in that most difficult task of successfully presenting national history to the widest possible audience in a most complex, meaningful and engaging way. It is regrettable that so successful a Museum, established at such great public expense and with wide consultation, should now have its successful work assessed by a committee that is not as well qualified as it should be.
- We believe that undue interference in the work of the Museum staff could preclude genuine, truthful and sophisticated accounts of the nation's past- the sorts of approaches we know capture the imagination of young people. If the Museum's direction and content changes in any retrograde way, the School will have to reassess the Museum's suitability as a future teaching site.

This letter of protest has been endorsed unanimously by a Special Meeting of the School of History held on 5 March 2003.