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

I wish to submit the following information and comments for consideration in the above Review:

I worked as a historian for many years (at the University of Queensland and the Department of Foreign Affairs) and have also worked on social policy/social justice issues in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

One of the great virtues of the study of history is to shed light on how we have become the society we are today, and to help us examine the values we have acquired. In my own life I have also found the analytical tools of historical study enormously helpful in examining and illuminating contemporary issues.

I fully support the maintenance of the Museum's focus on Australia's social history - for its intrinsic interest and for the lessons we can all learn from it as we consider our options for the future in many areas that are vital to the well-being of the Australian community.

In my view the NMA has successfully complied with its role and functions, and fully justified the funding provided for it. Its permanent and temporary exhibitions are interesting, informative and educational, and obviously attract large attendances. Whenever I have been in the Museum the sense of excitement the exhibits have generated has been very obvious. I have also been fortunate enough to see some of the holdings that are not on show, and found their extent and quality very impressive.

On the issues around the Aboriginal exhibits, and particularly the arguments about the balance of the items in those exhibitions, I consider that the NMA has done a very good job in a particularly difficult and sensitive area.

As a historian I was well aware that both documentary evidence and oral

history have their strengths and weaknesses. Documentary evidence has traditionally been given a heavy weighting by historians, quite rightly so in many cases, but it varies greatly in quality and, because it is only as reliable as the person providing it, it can easily reflect individual prejudices rather than a more objective account. Moreover absence of documentary evidence is not proof that actions - of violence, for example - reported in oral history accounts did not take place.

Oral history can lead to distortion of details as they are retold over time, but is usually quite reliable as a broad account of events and will often give a fuller sense of the social and cultural circumstances surrounding the events in question.

Especially in regard to such matters as frontier contact and government policies in taking children from Aboriginal families, both documented accounts and oral history are necessary, and there will always be areas of uncertainty. No one historian or one school of historians has a monopoly on an understanding of the past.

The NMA should therefore be encouraged to continue to explore these issues in the open-ended way it has done so far, and with advice from a broad range of experts in the relevant fields of history.

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