

>
> 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.

Professor John Gascoigne
Head
School of History
UNSW.

Professor John Gascoigne
School of History
University of New South Wales
Sydney 2052
.AUSTRALIA

Phone 61-2-9385-2341 (with answering machine)
Fax 61-2-9385-1251