

The National Museum of Australia: a submission

[NOTE; The events described in this submission are reconstructed from personal diaries kept at that time]

As I understand it, the concept of a National Museum of Australia assumed reality as a result of the Pigott report of 1975. Its findings were encapsulated in the Museum of Australia bill introduced into the House of Representatives by the Hon. Robert Ellicott on 2 April 1980. The Minister confirmed that the National Museum would be planned around three interrelated themes, the Australian environment, Australian social history, and Aboriginal Australia. The content of the two former would be entirely the responsibility of the Council and the curatorial staff of the Museum. Regarding the presentation of Aboriginal content the Minister stated:

The Museum of Australia will not give mere token recognition to Aboriginal history and culture. Nor will it portray that history and culture in the way considered suitable by Europeans ... In effect Aboriginal people are invited to explain to the world their history and the richness of their culture.

These principles have continued to guide the planning of the National Museum, and to my knowledge have never been superseded. However recent difficulty has arisen over the rubric that Aboriginal history and culture need not necessarily be presented in the way considered suitable by Europeans.

Unexpected delays followed the passage of the enabling legislation.. A lakeside site at Yarramundi was selected for the Museum, but the Hawke ministry gave higher priority to the construction of the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour in Sydney. (I served on the interim council and its permanent successor between 1985 and 1991). Originally scheduled for opening in 1988, this project was not completed until 1991 at a cost of more than double the original estimate of \$30 million. It is reasonable to infer that the experience disenchanted the then Commonwealth Treasurer (Paul Keating) with museums, as during his term as Prime Minister he took no steps to advance the construction of the National Museum. It was left to the Howard government to revive the project, though with a change of site from Yarramundi to the old hospital site at Acton. This caused some local controversy, but most informed observers were delighted that at last there was progress.

My involvement with the planning of the National Museum of Australia began on 22 December 1997, when I was one of a numerous group of academics, consultants, public servants and others participating in an all-day meeting at University House, Canberra. The purpose of the meeting was a preliminary and wide-ranging exchange of ideas in the presence of three members of the American firm of consultants appointed to

the project: the principal, Ralph Applebaum, Peter Moritz and Todd Harris. The outline plan put forward by Applebaum and associates struck many of us as drawing too heavily on North American experience and suggested a need for a steep learning curve about Australian history and culture.

The interim director of the Museum, Bill Jonas, seemed reluctant to show his ideas. This gave rise to speculation among some participants that the Museum was already under some pressure to avoid presenting a 'black armband' view of Aboriginal history, but there was no hard evidence of any such pressure. Most of those present advocated a pluralism of approach, but found it hard to devise a catchphrase encapsulating this pluralism. In my recollection the most significant contribution from the Aboriginal representatives came when it was proposed that the social history component should be entitled: 'Becoming Australian'. The Aborigines pointed out that they had already been Australian for a very long time.

On 17-18 June 1998 I took part in further discussions on the Aboriginal gallery, others present including Jane Connors, Marilyn Lake, Kay Saunders, Ann Curthoys and Linda Pascoe. The question was raised whether people initially hostile to Aboriginal culture would go to the Aboriginal gallery. 'Yes', said one woman, 'but they'll mainly be under sixteen in school parties'.

During 1998 Applebaum and associates terminated their appointment, apparently leaving only some design concepts. They were replaced by another firm of American consultants, Andy Anway. His team were more willing to listen to Australian input and not to impose preconceptions. They developed good relations with the senior curators and their work contributed much to the smooth running of the project. My first sustained contact with them took place at a meeting at the Yarramundi site on 28 January 1999. Those present included Professors Marcia Langton, Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans. In contrast to the National Maritime Museum project Andy Anway expressed confidence that the deadline of 12 March 2001 could be met because all contractors had been locked into a single agreement. There was speculation that critics would object to the high profile accorded the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, but it was pointed out that 49 800 of Australia's 50 000 years of history are Aboriginal, so they could claim 99 per cent. I have no record of any discussion of ideological issues on this occasion.

On 8 March 1999 I attended the launch of the Museum siteworks at Acton. Apart from some protest by proponents of the Yarramundi site it was an uneventful occasion. The media conference was unexpectedly tame, with very few questions asked and those not forceful. By now it was known that Bill Jonas was moving on to the Human Rights Commission. Several academics, myself included, thought it would be as well to find a director who could keep the construction of the project moving, leaving the appointment of a permanent director with museological qualifications until after the opening in 2001.

The directorship went to Dawn Casey, who made an excellent start. She persuaded John Mulvaney and others who had been alienated by the decision to build at Acton to resume working as consultants to the Museum. On 24 June 1999 I went to Canberra for a Museum seminar on gold in Australian history, those present including Weston Bate, Tom Stannage, Ann Curthoys, Mark Nelson and Bill Gammage and about fifteen others. At this meeting I heard that some members of the Museum staff were uneasy about the tendency of members of the Council to intervene on details of the choice of exhibits, interpretation, labelling, etc.

On 12-15 July 1999 I attended the Negotiating Histories conference conducted by the Museum, with subsequent discussions between the design team and the academics advising the Museum, Graeme Davison, Kay Saunders, Ann McGrath, John Hirst and myself. A highlight of the conference was David Lowenthal's keynote address, emphasising the role of museums as trustees for the future, making for the preservation of cultural and social continuity. When I spoke I thought fit to make a fairly straight appeal to members of Council not to interfere with the detailed running of the Museum but to concentrate on issues of governance and finance.

On 1 October 1999 Graeme Davison, Kay Saunders and I spent the day looking at the content of planned Museum displays. In the afternoon we were invited to a meeting of the Council for the presentation of the latest designs. At this meeting a member of Council, David Barnett, expressed himself strongly against too much 'political correctness'. He received some backing from Christopher Pearson, but the latter was ready to agree when I suggested that we should refer the question of content to a small working party. This was taken up by the chairman, Tony Staley, whom I was encountering in that role for the first time and who performed firmly and fairly.

Although I can find no record of it in my diaries, I had previously encountered Pearson and Barnett as members of Council, and was aware that some academics regarded them as conservative watchdogs guarding against any hint of radicalism in the Museum's exhibits. In my experience Pearson, although making no secret of his beliefs and occasionally succumbing to the temptation to tease the 'politically correct', was always prepared to seek acceptable formulas maximising consensus and enabling the Museum's business to progress. Barnett struck me as having the veteran journalist's reluctance to give credence to anything which fell outside his own experience, and this meant that he was resistant to many recent developments in Australian and Aboriginal historiography. It was known that he was the biographer of Prime Minister John Howard who had acted as best man at his wedding, so that there was speculation about the extent to which he should be perceived as the Prime Minister's ears and eyes on the Council. My view is that most, if not all this speculation was ill founded, but it meant that Barnett seemed invulnerable to challenge even when his interventions in the day-to-day running of the Museum went well beyond what would normally be expected of a member of Council. Of his deep concern for the Museum there could be little doubt; in his entry in Who's Who in Australia he gives no details except his membership of the Council, and cites the National Museum as his address.

Accordingly on 17 November 1999 Tony Staley chaired a meeting including David Barnett, Christopher Pearson, Catherine Santamaria and Michael Sexton from the Council, Graeme Davison, Kay Saunders and myself as academics, and Dawn Casey, Louise Douglas and the relevant curators from the Museum staff. Discussion was serious and civilised, and ended with a request for management to draw up a set of guidelines for ensuring acceptable balance in presentation. The suggestion was raised that a permanent sub-committee of Council should be formed for monitoring such issues.

On 28 April 2000 these guidelines were considered by a meeting chaired by Michael Sexton, with David Barnett, Christopher Pearson, Andrew Reeves, Graeme Davison, John Mulvaney and myself, together with Dawn Casey and senior members of curatorial staff. All present, including David Barnett, participated fully and candidly in the debate. By 2 pm we thought we had an agreed formula, to which nobody dissented. Had David Barnett spoken up and informed the rest of us that he was still unhappy with the outcome, discussion would have continued. However he left us with the impression that he was prepared to accept the agreement. In subsequent months it soon became apparent that he still thought it necessary to continue meticulously questioning many aspects of the Museum's planned exhibitions. I sense that this became counter-productive with some members of the curatorial staff, so that at times they advanced ideas likely to annoy him. Eventually the situation became so notorious that by the end of February 2001 the media were phoning members of the Council and consultants inquiring about the problem.

Nevertheless the National Museum was ready for opening by the Prime Minister on the due date – Sunday, 11 March. The project had been completed on time and within budget; perhaps a unique achievement. Great credit is due to Dawn Casey and her team, as well as to the Council, for this achievement, but it has probably been underappreciated because of the continuing media controversy about the Museum's content. It is also worth noting, as the above narrative has attempted to show, that academic consultation had been widespread and drawn from a broad range of viewpoints,

What is to be done?

The above narrative suggests some of the difficulties inherent in the NMA Review Committee's terms of reference. In assessing whether the Museum has complied with its role and functions and whether the Government's vision in approving funding has been realised, it must be accepted that such judgments inevitably have a subjective dimension. Honest, experienced, and conscientious observers will disagree on points of interpretation, and it would be most unwise and undesirable for any government to impose a single orthodoxy on an organisation such as the NMA.

Another source of difficulty lies in the lines along which Australian historiography has developed during the last twenty years. Many younger historians now give priority to

the writing of 'history from below', the experience of ethnic minorities, housewives, the disabled, Aborigines, and other groups who in earlier years did not receive enough attention in Australian historical writing. Such histories can produce valuable spinoffs in museums, since there is a good deal to suggest that visitors to museums who are not scholars – the great majority – can identify with the artefacts, clothing, and other mementos of everyday life in earlier periods. Such materials can be and should be presented in museums without the necessity for ideological assumptions.

However the problem becomes particularly acute in the presentation of those chapters of the Australian past involving Aboriginal Australians. During and since the construction of the NMA strong controversy has arisen about the extent and impact of violence on the Australian frontier during the history of settlement. This controversy is not unique to Australia. It exists in North America, South Africa, South America, New Zealand and other societies where indigenous peoples have been confronted with European settlement. In designing Museum presentations it is necessary to combine a resolute commitment to balance and pluralism with adherence to the principle stated by Minister Ellicott in 1980 giving priority to Aboriginal interpretations of their past. This is further complicated because indigenous epistemology differs in important respects from the canons of Western scholarship, particularly over the credence to be given to oral histories and traditions. All these issues have to be presented in the NMA in a way which the lay public will find instructive and convincing.

A further complication which is resolving itself over time arises from the circumstance that the NMA's collection has been accumulated haphazardly over several decades, and it has only been quite recently that a systematic collecting policy has been adopted. Consequently the content of displays will be constrained by the availability of suitable material, and it would be unfair to criticise the NMA for any shortcomings arising from this factor.

It would be unreasonable to expect the Review Committee in the time available to it to resolve problems which, as my memorandum argues, have occupied many of us for several years. There is a need for creating structures which will enable these issues to be worked out thoughtfully on a long-term basis. Specifically, I strongly advocate the creation of an advisory committee with appropriate specialist representation to which the staff or Council of the NMA could refer questions of balance and interpretation. I may have sounded critical of David Barnett's interventions, but it is fair to say that at present there is no obvious mechanism by which concerns felt by him or any other member of Council can be referred for consideration. However it is undesirable that individual members of Council should intervene as he has done. A moment's reflection will suggest that at some future time a federal government may come to power with a different ideology to the present government. If it behaves like every previous Australian government it will assuredly appoint political sympathisers to bodies such as the NMA Council, and such individuals may well see David Barnett's history of intervention as

justifying them in pressing their own views with similar persistence. Some respectable buffer must be provided.

Accordingly I suggest:

- 1) A standing committee of well qualified consultants should be appointed by Council to give ongoing consideration to the issues raised in the Review's terms of reference and to any other cognate matters which may be referred to it by the Council or the Director.
- 2) In order to minimise perceptions of undue influence, the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the Australian Academy of Science should be consulted about the membership of the standing committee. Advice should also be sought from senior museum directors.
- 3) In formulating its judgments the standing committee should take cognisance of relevant international developments in museum practice.

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