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NMA Review Secretariat
Dear Sir/Madam

I wish to provide the following submission to the NMA review. I have been away from my office for the past two weeks and have been unable to refresh my memory of the NMA's exhibitions. These may have changed since my last visit to the museum. If so, my comments may be out of date. I will be checking in the next week and will comment further if necessary.

Yours faithfully

Peter Edgar

cc the Hon Tony Staley

Submission to the NMA Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

The National Museum is a blatantly political museum although this may not be clear to those who do not understand the context. It is a propaganda museum with a political agenda. (The copying of the 'Holocaust' design of the Berlin museum is just one sign of this).

Among those who control the Museum and work in it there are undoubtedly many who do not understand this and they are probably hard working and sincere. There are others who quite clearly know what they are doing and the effect that they wish to convey. These people and their displays should be cleared out of the museum.

The Museum needs to start again so that it represents all Australians and displays the true history of the country, which is overwhelmingly positive. Australia is a wonderful country and a society second to none. The proof of this is that six million migrants have chosen to make it their home since World War II.

Where there are negatives, and all societies have them, by all means display them truthfully but place them in the context of what many of us regard as the best country in the world.

Before turning to the aims and content of the museum's exhibitions, it is necessary to set the museum in a world political context and to define some terms.

Context

Propaganda is one-sided information, usually presented emotionally, designed to sway the views of those subjected to it. The point of propaganda is not to attack the enemy's army but to attack his ideas, including his idea of himself. Attack his banner, his flag.

Associated with this is the science of signs, semiotics. A society's history may, for instance, be encapsulated symbolically in its flag. The symbols and colours of the flag are all important in signifying what the nation stands for. The propagandist therefore plays on these 'hidden' signals to change the enemy society to his liking.

International socialism

In the last century two political movements were master propagandists. I refer to national socialism (nazism) and international socialism (communism). The nazis were defeated in 1945 but the Soviet Union did not collapse until 1989. There still exist many nations which are communist (such as China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba) and many more which were influenced by international socialism, such as many of the newly independent nations of Africa. These societies are often ruled by one-party dictatorships.

A constant of communist societies is 'agitprop', agitation and propaganda. Agitation is when people take to the streets to express a political point of view. (By contrast, the Australian way is to decide on their representatives by secret ballot. This is the only way for people to express their views without fear of intimidation. It is the only legitimate way to measure the view of 'the people').

There are still many, even in Australia, who believe in international socialism and wish to impose it on this nation. Many more blindly follow them. Last week *The Australian* newspaper carried a photograph of three blonde schoolgirls protesting about a possible war with Iraq. They carried a placard of the International Socialist Organisation. This kind of agitation has become endemic in our society.

Under our system, socialists are entitled to put their view and to seek to persuade a majority to their point of view. If they succeed, they are entitled to rule. They are not entitled to gain their objective by subversion, propaganda and agitation. They are not entitled to monopolise a government, tax-payer-funded institution, such as the National Museum of Australia.

It was the Italian communist leader, Antonio Gramsci (jailed by Mussolini) who understood that the most powerful way to subvert a nation is through its culture. His theories led to the theory of the 'long march (cf Mao Tse Tung) through the [cultural] institutions'. Propagandists know the importance of gaining control of the media and the cultural institutions of a country. These include the churches, the universities and schools, the newspapers and television programs, the sports and the more obvious 'cultural' institutions such as the arts and, to be sure, the museums.

(In Australia, ANZAC Day is the most important of our cultural fixtures. Have there been attempts to 'capture' this day? You bet!)

In the past half century, socialist theory has been prominent in the process of de-colonisation. This is not a bad idea in itself. Every nation is entitled to be self-governing. Unfortunately, unless self-government is accompanied by democracy, the result is likely to be vicious one-party dictatorships, torture and large-scale slaughter. This is the tragic history of, among other countries, Africa since 1950. One so far relatively bright exception has been South Africa. Here rule by a tiny minority was overthrown relatively peacefully and a democratic system was introduced.

Many are imbued with the vision of Australia as an Aboriginal nation. There is no secret about this. The 'Aboriginal Embassy' in front of old Parliament House carries the sign that 'sovereignty [was] never ceded'. In this vision, Australia would be handed back to its 'original owners', who would rule. Australia would be liberated like South Africa. There is only one problem. Aboriginal people are a tiny minority in this country and a great many with Aboriginal ancestry also have British or other European ancestry. Each Aboriginal person is entitled to the same rights as any other Australian but the idea of rule by people of Aboriginal descent is nothing but reverse apartheid. It is a racist notion.

The Content of the exhibitions of the National Museum of Australia

Turning now to the museum itself, it is clear to anyone conversant with the developments outlined above that the museum sees itself as a decolonising propaganda display.

Aboriginal ownership of Australia is a concealed theme of the museum. Throughout, the people (the British) who settled this country in 1788 and who built the society we live in, are subtly denigrated. Their institutions are mocked. I cite below simply a few items which come to mind. The Review Panel should scour the museum for similar items and themes.

The 'flag of empire' display.

This purports to give a history of colonialism and its relation to Australia. It does not properly describe the purpose of the Union Flag, which symbolised the Union of England, Ireland and Scotland as the United Kingdom. This flag is important to Australia as the ideas on which our society is based are British, going back to Magna Carta and beyond. Any good museum would emphasise this. The display is disparaging, both to the UK and to Australia. At the end of World War II, Australia's population was overwhelmingly British in origin. Even today, three in every four Australians have ethnic links to Britain. This applies, for example to many prominent Aboriginal Australians. The display is compounded in its unpleasantness by being accompanied by a loudspeaker voice purporting to convey the 1788 message of a British official in Australia. The words of the message may be accurate but the accent is certainly designed to be offensive.

This display ties in with the aims of many who want to cut off the union flag from the corner of the Australian flag. They want to cut off the British heritage of this country. You can't, anymore than you can cut off our glorious and unique Aboriginal heritage, our fighting Irish Catholic VC's, our Chinese, German, Greek, Italian and many other influences. People who try to do so may wind up cutting off their nose to spite their face.

The Whitlam dismissal display.

This caricature shows Gough Whitlam declaiming arrogantly. Behind him a drunk Sir John Kerr, in top hat and tails, raises a bottle to brain Whitlam. Behind Kerr kneels Malcolm Fraser. Fraser has parted Kerr's tails and has his tongue out. The display would be offensive in its own right but its main purpose, I suggest, is to denigrate our Parliamentary democracy. After all, wasn't it Trotsky who described parliamentary democracy as a bourgeois fraud?

The Aboriginal hanging display

This display purports to illustrate the conflict between Aborigines and white settlers. It is symbolic rather than factual. It shows six black dolls hanging from a gibbet. It has no factual basis but is the artist's reaction to stories told to her by her mother. It is extremely bad museum practice. What is required in a museum is knowledge, not this deliberate propaganda. Where there are known massacres, let the museum enumerate them, including the massacre, torture (castration) and rape of white settlers by Aborigines, as at Hornet Bank.

The constitutional convention display.

This display purports to show the events of 1999. In a glass box are a photograph of Ms Kerry Jones of the Australians for Constitutional Monarchy waving victoriously, a NO REPUBLIC T-shirt and a weapon captured from an East Timorise militia member, all events of 1999. What the viewer sees, however, is an AK-47 pointed at the heart of the NO REPUBLIC T-shirt. This is quite deliberate. The facts of the Republic referendum are that the proposed amendment was defeated in a landslide in all States. Translated into parliamentary terms, it would have resulted in the biggest majority by the winning party ever recorded.

The Australian Jesus

This display shows, essentially, a long-haired, three-eyed hippy. It is simply a denigration of the Christian religion, which has been, and still overwhelmingly is, the basis of Australian ethics and morality since 1788.

Many other items could be cited. On one floor there is a large placard with an offensive white racist comment. This certainly implies that all Australians are white racists. The comments on refugees could have come direct from the Greens political platform. The Greens have a right to their views but they are a tiny minority in the Australian political spectrum.

The plausible alternative explanation

In all of the above cases, any enquirer will be met with what I call the 'plausible alternative explanation'. The obviously offensive item will be 'explained away'. The Panel should listen with interest to these 'explanations' but should not be misled by them. A man selling the Sydney Harbour Bridge would always be ready with a 'plausible alternative explanation' to calm any doubts a prospective investor might have. Some would believe him.

The difficulty of obtaining scholarly advice

What is needed in a museum is knowledge, not propaganda. Exhibitions should be based on the best advice available from historians and anthropologists among others. Unfortunately, the history profession (and I think it is also true of anthropology) today is in a parlous, I would say corrupt, state. There are clever and articulate people working in the field but the majority are certainly ideologically incapable of forming a judgement at odds with the 'politically correct' line already so evident in the museum. This is borne out by the reaction among the profession to the criticisms of recent historical scholarship by Keith Windschuttle. Keith Windschuttle is simply applying the rules of scholarship which every historian learnt, at least when I completed my original honours degree some forty years ago. (I recently refreshed my qualifications with an MA (Hons) degree). The decision not to have a historian on the Review Committee was a wise one, because the committee would certainly have been 'white-anted' otherwise.

Non-scholarly ways of dealing with criticism

The issues raised in this paper should be seriously considered. Unfortunately, some purveyors of propaganda use certain methods to avoid coming to terms with criticism. First, they laugh it off, or otherwise dismiss it with an airy wave of the hand. If that fails, they froth at the mouth with indignation. 'What! How dare you insinuate...' etc. If that fails, they turn to personal denigration of the messenger. All of the above techniques were tried with Keith Windschuttle. Another example is the boycotting (technique three, after one and two had failed to silence him) of Professor Geoffrey Blainey in the mid-1980's.

The Museum's public programs

I am not in a position to comment on this. Nor have I attended more than a couple of Museum functions. I would not be surprised to learn, however, that they are characterised by 'agitprop' as outlined above.

Conclusion

In my view, for the reasons set out above, the Museum has not complied with its role and functions and the Government's vision has not been realised. Drastic and ruthless surgery is required.

Peter Edgar
7 March 2003