

4 Denham St  
Surry Hills  
NSW 2010

**RE: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS & PUBLIC  
PROGRAMS**

Dear Dr Carroll

Please find below a submission to the National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs for the review and consideration of your committee. This submission has been drafted in response to a personal visit to the National Museum of Australia on January 17, 2003.

During a visit to the Museum, I noted a lack of substantial coverage relating to formal European-Australian governmental history, and specifically Prime Ministerial history.

From a tour of the Museum, I note that four Prime Ministers are included in permanent displays;

- Gough Whitlam (featured obliquely in a T-shirt labelled 'It's Time' in a cabinet with a potted history of Australiana. No reference made to his tenure in office)
- Bob Hawke (featured for being a prime minister that displayed the Australian Flag in his office during his period as Prime Minister – No reference to his tenure in office)
- Robert Menzies (featured for his dual awards of the Companion of Honour and Order of Australia. Note: The exhibit did not mention the Order of the Thistle; technically a higher honour and - if that was the purpose of the display - an error by omission. No reference to his tenure in office)
- Harold Holt (featured in the 'Histories Mysteries' section dedicated to Aussie phantasms and freaks. A veiled reference connects his drowning with a mummy-like curse. No reference to his tenure in office).

This submission calls for the removal of the above exhibits which offer little to an Australian understanding of the office of the Prime Minister, or the history of post-Federation government, and the formulation of a permanent and informative exhibit relating to the themes of 'Nation and People'; that is, Executive government and the personalities behind the office of the Prime Minister.

**1. Summary**

This submission recommends that the National Museum of Australia give consideration to establishing a centralised and dedicated permanent exhibition relating specifically to Prime Ministerial history from 1901, including personal biographical information and memorabilia, selected political accomplishments and notable cabinet decisions of the respective administrations.

An abridged overview of this information is currently available online through the National Museum of Australia URL as follows;

[www.nma.gov.au/education/resources/prime\\_ministers](http://www.nma.gov.au/education/resources/prime_ministers)



However I understand that no dedicated 'hardcopy' of this information is displayed in the current publicly accessible collection, and that the online resource is designated for 'years 6-12'.

The existing collection does not include a genuinely informative or intelligent record of the Prime Ministerial succession dating from Federation. The advantage of a permanent exhibition of this type is in the concise overview it offers on Australia's social, political, economic development since Federation.

## **2. Terms of Reference**

This submission responds to the terms of reference in the public call for submissions. Specifically;

*"2. Consider and make recommendations on the future priorities to be addressed by the museum, including the continuing relevance of its Act, in the development of permanent and temporary exhibitions and schools and public programs"*

## **3. Current Collection**

### **3.1 Introductory remarks**

*It should be noted that during a visit to the Museum on 17 January, 2003 three individual members of the Museum's staff could not direct me to a dedicated gallery of Prime Ministerial history, and offered the 'gift shop' as the 'best chance' of locating information on the 25 genuinely fascinating men who have held the position. It is further noted that the 'gift shop' offered books on 3 Prime Ministers; one of which was Winston Churchill.*

### **3.2 Failures of the current Collection**

During a visit to the National Museum of Australia on 17 January 2003, it appeared that Australian Prime Ministers were generally included as 'curios' or quaint anachronisms, or omitted entirely from the collection.

The exhibition on Federation omitted references to the Federation Conventions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the significant personalities of the time such as Barton, Deakin, Parkes, and Reid. The opportunity to enliven public understanding of the period was lost without reference to the characters and intrigue of a genuinely chaotic period in Australian history.

No reference to William Lyne who almost 'beat' Edmund Barton to become Australia's first Prime Minister, no imaginative coverage of the Protectionist vs Free Traders, or of the legitimate concerns over whether strong and independent colonies would truly unify in a Federated government.

Since Federation, a study of Australian political history represents a concise overview of domestic and international events. The history of executive government traces the development of these events through the challenges of successive administrations and the decisions made in response to these challenges.

These decisions have become the reality of the public realm in areas as diverse as economic management, jobs, forestry & sustainability policy, home ownership, farm subsidies, military deployment and international treaty obligations. These are the issues that have traditionally united and divided Australians and upon which they vote. And it is this story that the National Museum of Australia has a duty to assemble and exhibit.

### 3.3 Possibilities for a new and Permanent Exhibition of Prime Ministerial History

The characters and personalities that have held the office of Prime Minister include a list of flawed, ambitious, vulnerable and immense individuals who have triumphed through personal sacrifice to lead Australia; it's Nation and its people. To consider the lives and dilemmas of these men through a contemporary lens is an opportunity to re-evaluate the path of our national history and its social progress, and to activate a genuine connection with the past.

The members of the National Parliament and its party leaders provide a rich and diverse setting from which to exhibit an intimate glimpse of our nation. Consider the following characters of federated Australia and the times they represent;

- **Edmund Barton**
  - Very nearly NOT the first Prime Minister. His first cabinet comprised 6 former state premiers; characterizing the patchwork of Federation.
- **Alfred Deakin**
  - Who anonymously contributed political comment to a London newspaper while in office. Insecure self-critic or cheap stunt? Three times Prime Minister through the fluidity of parliamentary alliances.
- **John Watson**
  - Chilean-born leader of the first national Labor government *in the world*
- **George Reid**
  - The New South Wales Premier who later served as a member of the British House of Commons after his term as Australian Prime Minister
- **Andrew Fisher**
  - Along with only Barton and Menzies (and Howard?), retired at a time of his choosing. Three times Prime Minister through the fluidity of parliamentary alliances.
- **Joseph Cook**
  - A coalmining Methodist pastor who was elected to parliament within 5 years of emigrating from the UK. Exercised the first double dissolution of Federal parliament and authorized a pre-deployment of 20,000 Australian forces to Europe in 1914 (how topical).
- **William Hughes**
  - Socialist turned Labor-rat with a controversial tendency for 'wedge politics' and an aptitude for toppling governments with slim margins. At various times, led the Labor Party, National Labor Party & Nationalist Party. Although initially opposed to Federation, yet managed to spend 51 years in Federal parliament.
- **Stanley Bruce**
  - With similarities to the rise of the corporate board 60 years later, Bruce was the first PM to come from a general business background. Presided over the prosperous economic period of the late 1920's as if a 'managing director'. Remains only PM to lose his own seat at 1929 election.
- **James Scullin**

- The first Catholic PM. A socialist and fierce nationalist; both possibly influenced by the affect of the Depression on Australia. Threatened George V with a referendum on the issue if he would not assent to the appointment of Isaac Isaacs as the first Australian-born Governor-General. Scullin wins.
- **Joseph Lyons**
  - Forgotten because the parliamentary party he led no longer exists, but served longer than all but Menzies, Hughes and Hawke (even Howard at time of writing). Australia's only Tasmanian-born Prime Minister. First to die in office.
- **Earle Page**
  - First caretaker to assume office after death of Lyons, and only because Lyons' party had no elected a deputy to Lyons. Spent most of his tenure attempting to bring his old coalition partner, Stanley Bruce back from the UK.
- **Robert Menzies**
  - Towering figure of Australian politics. Twice served as Prime Minister after serving as opposition leader for 6 years. First by assuming leadership following death of Lyons. Second tenure for 16 consecutive years. Commits Australian forces to WW2. Personally drafts the constitution of the new Liberal Party.
- **Arthur Fadden**
  - Second caretaker to assume office through resignation of Menzies (first term). However holds record for most number of budgets handed down as Treasurer.
- **John Curtin**
  - Elected as deputy leader of the ALP in 1935 only after a promise to abstain from drinking. A vigorous anti-conscription campaigner during WW1, he successfully oversaw the approval of conscription by the ALP caucus. Bitter feuds with Churchill over Australian sovereignty fostered a new Australian-American alliance. Second Prime Minister to die in office.
- **Francis Forde**
  - Shortest term of any Prime Minister. Third caretaker following death of Curtin. It was at his funeral in 1983 that Hayden was convinced to stand aside for Bob Hawke.
- **Ben Chifley**
  - Famously, a former train driver. Postwar Reconstruction was Chifley's first portfolio responsibility, and the primary focus of the later Chifley administration. Migration and large infrastructure projects followed WW2.
- **Harold Holt**
  - Significantly, the first Prime Minister to be born after Federation. Third Prime Minister to die in office (and in the most famous circumstances). Holt represented a change in social attitudes, and the politics reality of the Vietnam conflict.
- **John McEwen**
  - Fourth caretaker Prime Minister following death of Holt, and deputy leader to Menzies, Holt and Gorton. Forced election of Gorton as Liberal Leader after refusing to serve in a coalition with McMahan.
- **John Gorton**
  - Larrikin soldier and farmer with unconventional tendencies as Prime Minister. Lovable rogue-womaniser and dignified in exit by voting himself out of office.
- **William McMahan**

- Widely mistrusted for leaking confidential cabinet information, McMahon was precluded from office while McEwen was leader of the coalition partner, the Country Party.
- **Gough Whitlam**
  - The only instance of a frontbench of 2 (albeit briefly), when Whitlam and Barnard wholly comprised all cabinet portfolios after the election. A manic programme of social reforms derailed by personal and financial scandals. Whitlam remains a leviathan in Australian political mythology, if not only because of the first use of the constitutional right of the Governor-General to dismiss a government.
- **Malcolm Fraser**
  - Assumed government following the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the Fraser economic agenda pre-dated the advent of 'Thatcherism' and 'Reaganomics' in the UK and the US.
- **Bob Hawke**
  - Successfully negotiated an industrial Accord with the Union movement that led to close co-operative ties between government and the ACTU. First to utilize television as a medium for daily government business. Floated the Australian dollar and de-regulated banking and transport sectors.
- **Paul Keating**
  - Assumed government after party room coup, and significant for success in the 1993 'unwinnable election'. Keating initiated the debate on a Republic and of the cause of Reconciliation.
- **John Howard**
  - From 'Lazarus with a triple by-pass' to (probably) the second longest Liberal leader after Menzies. Uses 'talk back' radio and the popular press widely to appeal directly to constituency.

Furthermore, the office of Prime Minister is yet to admit its first woman, aboriginal or significantly disabled holder. The story of executive government will continue to change as its members change, and as the challenges confronting it change.

Who could have foreseen the events of September 2001, and the consequences on Immigration law, police powers and State/Federal relationships. How else can the National Museum of Australia adequately document these social developments without a comprehensive exhibit on the face and nature of the office of the Prime Minister?

### 3.4 Conclusion & Recommendations

This submission recommends the removal of the currently inadequate exhibits outlined above, and the funding of a new exhibit dedicated to Prime Ministerial history.

This exhibit should be in the form of a 'Hall of Prime Ministers' comprising a brief biographical history and social context, including the state and region in which each holder of the office was born, and which constituency they represented. In addition, relevant and meaningful artefacts should be displayed which might add interest and familiarity to the exhibit. Note that this exhibit should aim to be more than a portrait gallery of head shots. This exhibit should seek to provide the Australian spectator with an intimate, 'warts and all' perspective on the office of the Prime Minister and the men who have held tenure in the role.

It is crucial that this display is devised as an intelligent and informative exhibit and not be specifically targeted at school groups. As a central resource for material on the lives and

professional achievement of each Prime Minister, the brief for the exhibit should have a level of sophistication and dignity commensurate with the office, and be relevant to all ages of observer.

The office of the Prime Minister represents the most significant political office under the Australian Constitution. This includes the largely ceremonial role of the Governor-General, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and State Premiers. The record of each government is currently distributed among various government agencies, and is largely inaccessible by the public. The National Museum of Australia has a responsibility to collect, collate and display a summary of this record for easy access to the Australian public.

Yours Sincerely,

Timothy Horton