

**Submission to the**

**National Museum of Australia  
Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs.**

**Andrew Reeves  
17 Mason Street  
Hawthorn  
VIC 3122**

**4 March 2003.**

## **Introduction**

This submission is made in a private capacity.

However, it is based on more than twenty years involvement in Australian museums, including as a Deputy Director at the Museum of Victoria and later a Director of the Western Australian Museum.

More specifically, I worked as senior curator in Australian social history at the National Museum of Australia during the mid-'eighties, and subsequently served two terms as a member of the Museum's Council, between 1996-2002.

As such, I have had a long association with the National Museum of Australia.

## **The review**

Since a review of exhibitions at the Museum was first proposed in the wake of its opening in 2001, I have supported the concept. My reasons for a review of exhibitions were perhaps more prosaic than those of others, but significant nevertheless. Many of the key items on display were, in fact, on loan from other institutions and following their return would need to be replaced. Similarly, it is the nature of exhibitions, particularly when so many are opened simultaneously, that some work better than others- for the public, for the institution, for critics.

In other words, there is a need for a review that takes stock of the Museum's situation, and materially assists it in addressing the range of key issues that it will need to resolve during these important initial years following its opening .

However, to achieve this outcome may require an interpretation of those terms of reference perhaps not envisaged by those who framed them.

If this review is to go to the heart of the National Museum's condition, then its brief needs to be refracted through the following questions:

- What does the Museum need to achieve in order to be able to "speak with authority" as a national museum. In other words, what is the nature of a national museum?
- What steps does the Museum need to take to establish research (both by its staff as well as commissioned) as the key driver of exhibition quality as well as of the character of the museum itself?
- In the aftermath of its successful opening, what decisions does the Museum need to take in order to identify its position as a key museum within the constellation of national and state museums and what will be its particular contribution?

- Perhaps most importantly of all, what steps does the Museum need to take to create a vibrant, lively, inquiring, sustainable internal culture - a culture that is all too evidently missing and which lies at the heart of the Museum's problems?

The questions I pose assume an important future cultural and museum role for the National Museum and suggest, as an interim answer, that it will be difficult to meet these challenges.

### **Current concerns**

Before I address these issues, I would like to provide my perspective on a number of episodes that have been publicised to a degree and which I firmly believe lie, in part, behind this review and the particular questions asked.

To the degree that the concerns of a number of Council members has informed public concern at the condition of the museum, and by extension, this review I wish to place on record that I do not accept, and never have accepted, the premise advanced by individual council members that museum exhibitions display a concerted- or concealed- revisionist agenda, or that the museum is systematically advancing an agenda at odds with the temper of the nation.

I recall the admonition of the Prime Minister, at the opening of the Museum, that it should, and inevitably would, pursue issues of debate and contention in our history. This is a sentiment that I agree with. It is, at a general level, a fair prescription for a museum in contemporary society- that is, concerned to engage with community debate; willing to give voice to a range of opinions, unwilling to sanction one particular view over another. (In parenthesis, it is interesting to read in today's press (4 March 2003) of Tony Abbot's revised views on multiculturalism. Perceptions, both public and political do change, and it would be folly for any national cultural or educational institution to be subject to whims rather than principles.)

### **Limitations of design and experience**

In this instance, though, what is at stake is the public perception that museums, like universities and a limited range of other public institutions, can speak with the truth, can speak with authority, and can provide the public with information and options that can be depended on.

More specifically, I do not believe that the accuracy of individual captions or text panels reveals any deliberate attempt to mislead, especially following the review of this material by Graeme Davison. Nor do I accept the premise that the current exhibitions reveal a concerted agenda of historical misrepresentation or partisanship.

Like the Council members whose concerns are referred to, I also sat through all these debates. The difference is that I saw these events through the eyes of a practicing historian who has worked in museums, developing and

commissioning a large number of exhibitions. The point I wish to make in this respect is that the faults of these exhibitions (which I will describe when I speak to the Review committee) stem not from a minority political agenda but rather from inexperience, from a lack of skill in the development of exhibitions and from the use of external exhibition designers who, without pressing the issue, failed to comprehend Australian history or our particular social or cultural characteristics.

Two problems arise: the disengagement of the exhibition designers from the museum itself (in fact, their work was both commissioned and managed by an external, departmental managed authority) and secondly, the lack of skills and experience within the museum itself. The effects of these problems are evident in the current exhibitions. Many of the exhibition galleries are too cramped, too small, too disjointed for optimum exhibition space. In this respect, the Museum inherited a building whose design and construction had been externally managed.

Two problems stem from this. Firstly, the building elevates a concern with external image above requirements of internal functionality.

Equally importantly, though, the fact that the design and construction was managed externally through a departmental-led team denied the Museum the opportunities that such a major project offers in terms of building the culture and cohesiveness of the organisation.

There can be no argument that effective budgetary management is an essential requirement for such a project. But the construction of a museum of this nature is more than a bricks and mortar process. If a museum of this scale is built solely to a price, to the detriment of other considerations, including the development of the Museum as an effective cultural institution, then there can be no doubt that an opportunity has been lost.

This is a problem all too familiar to museums in contemporary Australia. It is also relevant to this review. Due in part to its own dislocated history of development, the National Museum has suffered from a lack of experience, from a lack of skills, as well as maintaining an isolation from existing sources of museological skills in Australia.

### **Autonomy and the culture of the museum**

I have earlier referred to the urgent need to establish a strong research-based, collaborative culture within the Museum. This is patently lacking, and insufficient attention has been placed on such a priority. In place of such a robust cultural identity, the museum has suffered instead from a culture of dependency- to its parent Department.

The comparative history of the National Library, the National Gallery and the National Museum is illuminating. In contrast to the acceptance of cultural autonomy by the Library and the Gallery, the Museum obviously remains tied to the Department and subject, to some degree, to its agendas and concerns.

In one respect, this is evident in the role of the departmental representatives on the Council (and some of the exchanges between those representatives and different directors has provoked considerable comment from Council members at different times).

It is equally evident in the directors who have represented the Gallery, Library and Museum. Both the Gallery and the Library have a history of recruiting widely, attracting leading practitioners from their respective fields, both nationally and internationally. In contrast, decisions made by successive governments have ensured that the Museum has relied for its directors almost exclusively on recruitment from the ranks of the Federal Public Service (either current or recently employed) and particularly heavily from the ranks of DOCITA (or its predecessors.)

Such introspection reinforces the dependency that I have referred to, and feeds back directly to the character and depth of the exhibitions. The Museum needs to be opened up- not to the political correctness feared by some but rather to a range of skills and experience already available in Australia but, in large part, hitherto resisted by the Museum.

### **The Museum's Act**

In this respect, the review has been asked to consider the future relevance of the Museum Act. If such a consideration leads to any reduction in the role or significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage in the constellation of museum priorities, or alternatively to any prescription on the ways in which history can be practiced within the museum, then the museum will be the loser.

It will be gutted and will face a next to impossible task in maintaining either public confidence or professional respect.

Alternatively, if the review, in commenting on the Act, were to recommend that it be amended to allow for the appointment of the Museum director by its Council, rather than by the relevant Minister which is currently the case, then it would have initiated a major reform.

Similarly, if it were to recommend that the Museum adopt a code of cultural autonomy and conduct, then it will have served the Australian public well.

### **The political/cultural balance**

In contemporary Australian society, all museums must balance two competing forces- the obligations stemming from being created and funded by government with a public perception and need for institutions that can and do provide social, scientific and cultural information that can be relied on.

It is a delicate balance. In my estimation, based on Council events of the past four years, it is a compact more at risk from the actions of Councillors than from museum staff, whether acting either individually or collectively.

My comments should not be taken to suggest that the Museum is nothing more than a victim of circumstances. It is true that the Museum has been (and continues to be) subject to external bureaucratic pressures. But there are other issues that are internal to the museum, and which the review could well comment on in its efforts to strengthen the museum as a cultural institution.

It takes time for any new such institution to develop its own identity and internal culture. These are formative years for the National Museum, and as I have suggested previously insufficient attention has been placed on the need to create a robust internal culture. Without trying to develop this comment fully, I will identify what I believe to be a few key points:

- Cultural institutions should be free of political direction in their programs. It is the responsibility of councils, appointed to manage statutory authorities such as museums, to develop policies that reflect cultural need as well as observe political proprieties,
- Museums need to reflect the societies that support and sustain them. In other words, in a pluralistic, open society such as ours, museums need to recognise the importance of presenting our history honestly, recognising that different groups or communities will be less comfortable than others with a number of the issues addressed. The response to this is to deal with such issues with sensitivity, rather than seek to ignore or censor them,
- Overarching such an approach is the need for exhibitions to reflect recent scholarship and to be based on such research, undertaken by the museum or commissioned on its behalf. In this respect, it is legitimate to draw on a full range of historical source material, including oral history, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of different categories of material.
- The lack of experience in the Museum has also, in a number of instances, led to an over reliance on new media, to the detriment of adequate research. This is not an argument against new media *per se*, rather a caution against viewing it as a panacea or a stand alone, universal approach to interpretation and display.

## **Conclusion**

This submission has sought to canvas a number of key issues rather than fully resolve them. I look forward to expanding on them when I meet the Committee in April.

In conclusion, though, let me reiterate three central issues:

- The need to develop a robust culture at the Museum, based firmly on scholarship, research and operational autonomy, managed within the perimeter of accepted political discourse,

- The need to reaffirm the principles of honest, open research and interpretation, leading to a program reflecting the diversity of our society rather than a single viewpoint, however firmly held, and
- The urgent need for the Museum to clearly develop its strategic, cultural and programmatic priorities for the next five years, and systematically recruit the necessary skills at all levels to achieve these aims.